

ARMENIA'S AI DATA FACTORY: THE ROLE OF AFEYAN AND VARDANYAN - DAILY SABAH - 08.07.2025

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Armenia, under the leadership of Firebird.ai and in collaboration with NVIDIA and the Armenian government, has taken a significant step toward becoming a technology hub in the South Caucasus through a $500 million artificial intelligence (AI) data factory project. From the perspective of Türkiye and Azerbaijan, this initiative is notable for being financed and driven by two figures known for leveraging World War I events against Türkiye: Noubar Afeyan and Ruben Vardanyan. Afeyans financial and strategic support, combined with Vardanyans assertive activities, aims to position Armenia as the AI hub of the South Caucasus. However, this development warrants careful evaluation from the standpoint of Turkish foreign policy, considering regional power dynamics, technological competition, and Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. This analysis examines the projects implications, the diaspora-focused roles of Afeyan and Vardanyan, their impact on Türkiyes foreign policy interests, and Türkiyes potential strategies in response to these emerging dynamics.

Armenias AI data factory, slated to become operational in 2026, is claimed to have the potential to transform the technological and geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. According to a June 12, 2025, JAMnews article, the project, backed by a $500 million investment, aims to establish a 100-megawatt infrastructure utilizing NVIDIAs Blackwell GPUs[1]. Led by Firebird.ai in partnership with the Armenian government and NVIDIA, this initiative seeks to position Armenia as a regional technology hub. Prominent Armenian diaspora figures Noubar Afeyan and Ruben Vardanyan play pivotal roles in the projects

financing and strategic vision. Afeyan supports the initiative through the Afeyan Foundation, while Vardanyans past regional activities have strengthened diaspora networks supporting Armenias technological ambitions[2].

The Role of Noubar Afeyan and Ruben Vardanyan in Diaspora Activities

Noubar Afeyan

Noubar Afeyan, globally recognized as the co-founder of Moderna and CEO of Flagship Pioneering, is a prominent figure in the biotechnology sector. His strong ties with the Armenian diaspora are shaped by his birth in Lebanon and his heritage as the grandson of an individual present in Anatolia during World War I[3]. Afeyans engagement with the diaspora is evident through several notable initiatives.

The Aurora Humanitarian Initiative, established in 2015 with Vardanyan and Vartan Gregorian, aims to globalize activities related to World War I events. The Aurora Awards have been portrayed in international media as a platform for promoting propaganda concerning these events[4].

Other initiatives include the IDeA Foundation and UWC Dilijan. Afeyan has channeled diaspora resources into economic development and educational projects in Armenia. UWC Dilijan aims to strengthen cultural ties by attracting diaspora youth to Armenia[5].

His latest venture is Firebird.ai. The Afeyan Foundation, led by Noubar Afeyan, is the primary investor in Firebird.ai, with Afeyan serving as the companys strategic advisor and co-founder[6]. This project exemplifies the diasporas contribution to Armenias technological ambitions.

Afeyans activities against Türkiye manifest indirectly through cultural and humanitarian projects rather than overt political lobbying. The Aurora and 100 LIVES projects have framed World War I-related claims in a global context, indirectly supporting the U.S. recognition of these claims in 2021.

Ruben Vardanyan

Ruben Vardanyan, a Russian-Armenian billionaire businessman, is recognized as the founder of Troika Dialog and for briefly serving as the State Minister of the so-called state in Karabakh (2022 [illegible][7]. His detention in Azerbaijan since 2023 has become a significant issue for the diaspora. Vardanyans engagement with the diaspora and his contributions to claims regarding World War I events can be illustrated through several examples.

The IDeA Foundation and Aurora, co-founded with Afeyan, have mobilized diaspora resources for Armenia and engaged in propaganda efforts aimed at distorting the events of World War I[8].

Ruben Vardanyans role as State Minister in the so-called state in Karabakh, driven by the diasporas use of the events of World War I as a tool for provocation, led to his capture by Azerbaijan in the Lachin corridor and subsequent detention in 2023[9].

Afeyan and Vardanyan have mobilized diaspora networks to support Armenias development while engaging in propaganda activities related to World War I events. Aurora consolidates diaspora donors around these claims, while the IDeA Foundation and UWC Dilijan focus on identity construction for diaspora youth in Armenia, particularly through World War I narratives. Firebird.ai, as a technological extension of this shared vision, channels diaspora capital into positioning Armenia in the global AI race[10].

Analysis from the Perspective of Turkish Foreign Policy Regional Power Dynamics

The proposed AI data factory in Armenia could intensify the technological competition in the South Caucasus. According to JAMnews, the project is set to fundamentally transform the regions technological landscape and establish Armenia as a regional technology hub.[11] Türkiye, as Azerbaijans closest ally in the South Caucasus, must assess this development from a geopolitical perspective. Armenias ambition to become a technology hub could heighten competition with Azerbaijans energy-focused economy. Following its victory in the 44-day Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has solidified its military dominance in the region, but there is now a growing need for it to prioritize technological advancements. Azerbaijan has already initiated digital transformation efforts[12].

Türkiye is accelerating its own investments in AI and data centers. Armenias partnership with NVIDIA necessitates a recalibration of Türkiyes regional technological leadership goals. In response to this competition, Türkiye could strengthen technological cooperation with Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Process

The Firebird.ai project must also be evaluated in the context of Azerbaijan-Armenia peace negotiations. Afeyans calls for the release of Vardanyan, portrayed as a prisoner in Azerbaijan, highlight the political dimensions of Armenias technological ambitions. From a foreign policy perspective, claims that Vardanyan is a prisoner rather than a war criminal are seen as a clear example of a biased pro-Armenian stance. Afeyans appeal to Donald Trump for Vardanyans release could signal increased U.S. involvement in the peace process[13]. Türkiye, while supporting Azerbaijans position, plays a constructive role in peace negotiations, contributing to regional stability.

The diaspora networks of Afeyan and Vardanyan provide international support for Armenias technology projects. The Armenian diasporas lobbying efforts regarding World War I events represent an attempt to exert historical pressure against Türkiye.

Economic and Technological Competition

Setting aside World War I-related claims, evaluating this current regional initiative, Firebird.ais 100-megawatt infrastructure and NVIDIAs Blackwell GPUs could position Armenia as a player in the global AI market. To contextualize the scale of this initiative, a comparison is appropriate. As mentioned, Firebird.ais investment aims to strengthen Armenias technology ecosystem and support its goal of becoming a regional innovation hub. AI Consultant Melih Özbek has emphasized that this data center will offer incentives for companies, potentially becoming a cost-effective location for renting offices and training proprietary AI models.

The aforementioned center, by focusing on AI and high-tech production, could boost local employment and strengthen Armenias position in the global technology market. However, regional geopolitical tensions must also be taken into account. AI Consultant Melih Özbek has compared Firebird.ai with xAIs Colossus to provide perspective on the scale of Armenias initiative. Firebird.ais planned $500 million AI cloud infrastructure in Armenia and xAIs Colossus supercomputer differ in purpose and scale, embodying distinct geopolitical and technological dynamics. Firebird.ai, utilizing NVIDIA Blackwell GPUs, aims to establish a scalable 100-megawatt AI factory by 2026, not to position the Caucasus as a technology hub, but rather to strengthen the local ecosystem, create jobs, and support regional economic growth through a public-private partnership with the Armenian government. In contrast, xAIs Colossus, located in Memphis and equipped with 200,000 NVIDIA H100/H200 GPUs (with plans to scale to 1 million), is the worlds most powerful AI training system, reinforcing U.S. technological dominance in the global AI race. While Colossus trains models like Grok to accelerate universal scientific discovery, its energy consumption (150 MW) and environmental impact have sparked local criticism.

Firebird.ais project focuses on regional development and technology transfer, while Colossuss massive scale and rapid construction (completed in 122 days)[14] bolster xAIs ambitions in the global AI market. Firebird.ai seeks to create a regional niche with Armenias limited resources, whereas xAIs investment reinforces U.S. economic and technological hegemony. Although both projects underscore the strategic importance of AI infrastructure, Colossuss financial and technological superiority far surpasses Firebird.ais locally focused vision.

Armenias project is significant for local and regional development, while xAIs initiative holds global potential to create a paradigm shift in AI infrastructure. Both investments reflect national pursuits of technological independence, but xAIs resources and global reach bolster U.S. geopolitical dominance, whereas Armenias project focuses on regional stability and economic diversification. Considering this comparison, the conclusion is that, although Firebird.ais initiative in Armenia is smaller in scale compared to Colossus, it

represents a transformative development for the region.

From an ethical perspective, Firebird.ais planned $500 million AI cloud infrastructure in Armenia should be evaluated in light of the manipulative potential of AI, as demonstrated by the ethically controversial AI research conducted by the University of Zurich on Reddits r/changemyview subreddit. The study, involving 34 fake accounts and over 1,500 posts, analyzed user demographics (gender, ethnicity, political views) without consent, concluding that personalized AI responses were more persuasive than human content. However, the use of deceptive identities (e.g., posing as Black individuals or sexual assault survivors) violated Reddits rules and raised concerns about data misuse, leading to accusations of ethical violations. Moderators and users demanded the studys suspension, prompting the university to halt publication and issue a warning to a researcher. This incident highlights AIs potential for social manipulation and the lack of ethical oversight, raising concerns about how sensitive historical issues, such as the events of World War I, could be addressed on digital platforms. Given the critical importance of the events of World War I to Armenia and its diaspora in terms of identity and memory, AI-generated manipulative content poses a risk of distorting such historical narratives[15].

Firebird.ais Armenia project, while supporting economic development with the goal of establishing a regional technology hub, is underscored by the Reddit scandal, which highlights the risks of AI infrastructure misuse in the context of historical sensitivities. Controversial topics, such as the events of World War I, could be reshaped by misinformation or manipulation on AI-supported platforms, posing risks to Armenias geopolitical position and the global perception of its historical narratives. The ethical violations in the University of Zurichs experiment demonstrate that projects like Firebird.ai require transparency, data privacy, and adherence to ethical standards; otherwise, AIs potential to distort historical truths or undermine societal trust could increase.

Türkiyes response to this development should be informed by the strategies of regional states. To maintain a competitive edge, Türkiye must prioritize accelerating its own data center investments, such as projects in Istanbul and Ankara. Georgias low-cost electricity tariffs[16] for cryptocurrency mining could serve as a model for Türkiye. There is also a pressing need to professionally strengthen and enhance the visibility of T3AI, the language model developed by the T3 Foundation. In light of regional developments, fostering joint technology projects with Azerbaijan to bolster the technology sector emerges as a key area of focus.

Türkiye has launched the Sectoral Adaptation Project Call for the Turkish Large Language Model to strengthen its technological independence. Announced by Minister of Industry and Technology Mehmet Fatih Kacır on June 16, 2025, this call offers grants of up to 50 million TRY and aims to enhance the representation of the Turkish language in AI, develop sector-specific large language models, and position Türkiye as a leading nation in the new digital era[17].

Claims on the Events of World War I and Diplomacy

As previously highlighted, Afeyan and Vardanyans Aurora and 100 LIVES projects promote claims related to World War I events as a global humanitarian issue, aiming to increase international awareness. The potential success of Firebird.ai could further amplify diaspora resources, potentially strengthening anti-Türkiye lobbying efforts.

The AI data factory, set to commence operations in Armenia under the leadership of Firebird.ai, shaped by the diaspora networks and vision of Afeyan and Vardanyan, holds the potential to establish Armenia as a technology hub in the South Caucasus. Türkiye must respond to these emerging dynamics by accelerating its technology investments, strengthening cooperation with Azerbaijan, and effectively leveraging diplomatic channels. While Afeyan and Vardanyans diaspora-driven projects aim to enhance Armenias global standing, Türkiyes strategic, dynamic, and innovative initiatives have the potential to maintain regional balance.

For the simplified version of the article, please click here: https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/armenias-ai-data-factory-the-role-of-afeyan-and-vardanyan

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