

Armenian Assembly of America

Testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

“Averting All-Out War in Nagorno-Karabakh: The Role of the U.S. and OSCE”

October 18, 2017

Washington, D.C.

Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Smith, and distinguished Commissioners, the Armenian Assembly of America (Assembly) welcomes the opportunity to provide testimony for today’s briefing.

For more than twenty years, the Armenian Assembly has urged Congress to provide funding for confidence building measures (CBMs) to help reduce tensions and build a path toward a just and peaceful resolution to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Throughout the years, Congress responded by making funds available and also outlining various CBMs. While Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) have repeatedly agreed to confidence building measures, Azerbaijan has consistently rejected such initiatives. Earlier this year, despite U.S. objections, Azerbaijan unilaterally forced the closure of the OSCE office in Yerevan, Armenia because of its humanitarian de-mining activities.

Instead of negotiating in good faith, Azerbaijan’s president has made it clear that he intends to continue to escalate hostilities in order to force concessions. International Crisis Group’s Europe & Central Asia Program Director Magdalena Grono noted in her recent article, “Baku in particular shows public readiness to use force to achieve its goals.” Such an approach is not only dangerous, but undermines the efforts of the United States Congress and the role of the U.S. Co-Chair.

Since 2014, according to official sources, Azerbaijan has violated the cease-fire along the Line of Contact more than 77,000 times with over 1.4 million shots fired (see attached map highlighting the 2014-2015 violations). The breadth and scope of the violations demonstrate a systematic pattern that must be addressed, and that is the reason why the Assembly strongly supports the agreements brokered by the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and reached by the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan to reinforce respect for the 1994 cease fire agreement signed by the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh. President Aliyev has plainly not abided by what he and his country agreed and we are grateful that this year the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs in two statements already have begun to identify Azerbaijan as the cause for the loss of innocent lives. The false equivalency that so many observers and actors try to apply to this conflict does not square with effective conflict resolution or American values.

It is important to note that the above statistics do not include the ongoing violations along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border wherein Azerbaijan continues to fire at several kindergartens in Armenia’s Tavush region. The targeting of young children by Azerbaijan is beyond outrageous and must be stopped. We urge the Helsinki Commission to use all available tools at its disposal to hold Azerbaijan accountable and help ensure that young school children in the Tavush region of Armenia are no longer subjected to sniper fire.

In addition to targeting kindergartens, in April 2016, with the support of Turkish military, personnel, and equipment, Azerbaijan launched a 4-day war against Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia. According to reports by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Chatham House, and *RFE/RL*, Azerbaijan admitted to launching the offensive, which came hours after President Aliyev's meeting with then-Secretary of State John Kerry in Washington, D.C.

During this 4-day war, Azerbaijan committed heinous acts, including the killing of a 12-year-old boy, the gruesome mutilation of an elderly couple, the use of a kamikaze drone, and the beheading of a young Yezidi Armenian military officer and of two Armenian soldiers. These atrocities were also broadcast online in an ISIS-style video to incite further violence against Christian Armenians. President Aliyev rewarded the Azeri serviceman who showcased the beheaded Yezidi Armenian officer, and gave him a special medal following this shocking act of criminal violence.

Regrettably, this was not the first time an Azeri soldier was rewarded for committing unspeakable crimes. Azerbaijan pardoned an Azeri officer, Ramil Safarov, who was convicted of brutally murdering an Armenian officer, Gurgen Margaryan, during a NATO Partnership for Peace training program in Hungary in 2004. Margaryan was murdered in his sleep with an axe. In 2012, the Hungarian authorities released Safarov into Azerbaijani custody, wherein he was immediately pardoned and promoted, received back pay for time spent in jail in Hungary, given a new condo residence in Baku, and heralded as a national hero.

The blatant disregard for the rule of law exhibited by Azerbaijan not only runs counter to American and European values, but also adversely affects the Nagorno Karabakh peace process. The United States, as a Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, has a vested interest in advancing peace and bringing stability to the region, and a key to stability is respect and adherence to the fundamental tenets of the rule of law and human rights.

We continue to urge the United States to hold Azerbaijan accountable for these crimes, and welcome OSCE statements that clearly identify the aggressor as opposed to employing a false equivalency between Azerbaijan's actions and Armenians' self-defense.

Preventing deadly violence and enforcement of the 1994 cease-fire agreement must be a top priority of the U.S. Co-Chair. Moreover, given Azerbaijan's continued aggressive and hostile actions as outlined in an article (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/preventing-deadly-violence_b_9657078.html) by David Phillips and Van Krikorian, "the US must not soft pedal Azerbaijan's aggression" and should "implement Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, imposing economic and diplomatic sanctions on Azerbaijan to punish its aggression." Further, the U.S. Co-Chair should underscore the importance of Artsakh's right to self-determination, which having defeated Azerbaijan's 1991-94 military campaigns against it, has earned the right to be free from Azeri rule.

Azerbaijan relies on a combination of oil revenue, caviar diplomacy, and government crackdowns on fundamental freedoms to maintain absolute power. This behavior stems from the ever-tightening authoritarianism of the Aliyev regime and its suppression of democracy, which destabilizes the region and endangers particularly America's ally, Armenia. What little remains of Azerbaijan's civil society after years of repression, continues to oppose the regime's widespread incarceration of journalists and human rights advocates. Igniting a war with Armenia aims at distracting the Azeri people from the regime's abuses and economic mismanagement since the recent oil price crash.

As Co-Chairman Smith stated last month, “The Azerbaijani regime continues to use torture, politically-motivated criminal charges, harassment, international kidnapping and other forms of intimidation to silence human rights defenders, independent journalists and religious freedoms.”

Azerbaijan, according to a report published by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), also “bought silence” from decision-makers in Europe responsible for upholding the standards of democratic institutions by operating a secret \$3 billion slush fund labeled the “Azerbaijani Laundromat” with money laundered through numerous shell companies. This latest news on Azeri corruption follows previous reporting in the United States, including an article by *Bloomberg News* in January 2017 entitled “Azeri Oil Money Got a Pass from This Ethics Committee.” The article highlighted the fact that in May and June of 2013, the Azeri Laundromat was actively undermining the integrity of our institutions when 11 Members of Congress and 32 congressional staffers visited Azerbaijan to attend a conference, which was supposedly hosted by two nonprofits. “While in Baku, all the U.S. legislators received ‘rugs of various sizes and value’ as gifts, and some legislators and staffers also for crystal tea sets and silk scarves.” However, the nonprofits were merely a storefront as they received funds for the trip from Socar, the Azerbaijani state-owned oil company controlled by Aliyev.

We should not turn a blind eye to Azerbaijan’s out of bounds and corrupt influence on American democracy. Congress is familiar with the reasons why the Aliyev autocracy is trying to whitewash its human rights record, resolve the Nagorno Karabakh conflict by wiping out the Christian Armenian population, and ally itself against U.S. values. We must ensure that Azerbaijan’s rampant corrupt practices do not compromise U.S. policies and objectives.

In conclusion, Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Smith, and distinguished Commissioners, we commend you for holding this briefing, and look forward to working with the Commission to strengthen peace and security in the South Caucasus and hold Azerbaijan accountable for its actions.

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