

ARMENIAN ASSEMBLY OF AMERICA – FISCAL YEAR 2019 TESTIMONY

SUBMITTED BY BRYAN ARDOUNY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Lowey, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, the Armenian Assembly of America (Assembly) submits the following testimony regarding U.S. assistance and policy in the South Caucasus region.

The Armenian Assembly urges the Subcommittee to allocate not less than \$40 million in economic assistance and not less than \$10 million in military assistance (Foreign Military Financing and International Military Education Training) to Armenia. The Assembly also urges enhanced assistance to Christian and other minority communities at risk in the Middle East, as well as nearly 25,000 refugees settling in Armenia and urges the allocation of \$20 million to support Armenia’s efforts to serve as a regional safe haven. The Assembly also urges not less than \$8 million for Artsakh and \$4 million to implement the Royce-Engel peace proposals.

Established in 1972, the Armenian Assembly is the largest Washington-based organization promoting public understanding and awareness of Armenian issues. The Assembly’s extensive experience in Armenia, working closely with key government agencies, officials, and charitable organizations, provides us with unique insight on how U.S. assistance can best advance policy goals in the region. We seek to maximize the effectiveness of U.S. assistance and strengthen the U.S. relationship with Armenia and Artsakh. We were pleased to see that Representatives Anna Eshoo, Tulsi Gabbard, Frank Pallone, Jr., Jackie Speier, Jim Sensenbrenner, and David Valadao travelled to Armenia last September with several Members also visiting Artsakh. We strongly encourage Members to travel to Armenia and Artsakh this year as well, which is not only the 100th anniversary of the First Republic of Armenia, but it is also the 2,800th anniversary of Armenia’s capital city, Yerevan.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2019

ASSISTANCE TO ARMENIA – The Assembly urges the Subcommittee to allocate not less than \$40 million in U.S. assistance to Armenia. A centuries-old nation, Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as its official state religion in 301 A.D. Throughout the centuries, Armenians have maintained their faith, even during 70 years of oppressive Soviet rule. Today, despite the dual blockades imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia continues to show its resilience, as seen in the economic sphere. According to the World Bank, “Armenia’s economy has undergone a profound transformation since independence. Sustained growth, ambitious growth, as well as inflows of capital and remittances have created a market-oriented environment.” As stated in a bipartisan letter to this Committee in March 2018, “U.S. economic and military assistance plays a vital role in strengthening Armenia’s independence, providing this pro-Western republic with a greater range of strategic options in standing up to regional powers.”

The United States has spoken clearly about the need for Turkey to lift its more than 20-year blockade of Armenia and establish diplomatic relations, both of which are also required under international treaties. Despite Turkey’s public commitment to normalize relations without preconditions, as evidenced by the signing of the Protocols between Turkey and Armenia under international auspices

in October of 2009, the Turkish government failed to do so. Instead of moving forward, Turkey delayed consideration and sought to add new conditions. Moreover, working in tandem with Turkey, Azerbaijan torpedoed the Protocols signed with Armenia. Azerbaijan also continues its blockade of Armenia and Artsakh in lock-step with Turkey. **We, therefore, urge the adoption of new report language requiring a full accounting of the steps the United States has taken and the responses therein to eliminate the Turkish and Azeri blockades of Armenia and Artsakh.** We can and must do more to ensure that the last closed border from the Cold War is open. Continued and robust assistance helps to offset the impact of these blockades and reflects America's values. **The Armenian Assembly also strongly supports a second compact between America and Armenia.** Finally, the Assembly welcomes the initiative of Senators James Lankford and Jeanne Shaheen with respect to the unjust imprisonment of Pastor Andrew Brunson, as well as the efforts of the House and Senate to hold Turkey accountable for its egregious actions last year in our nation's capital, wherein Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's bodyguards viscerously attacked American citizens on American soil who were exercising their constitutional rights.

ASSISTANCE TO ARTSAKH (Nagorno Karabakh) – The Assembly appreciates and welcomes the ongoing support that the United States provides to Artsakh as it rebuilds from the war launched against it by Azerbaijan and further strengthens its democratic institutions. President Bako Sahakyan's visit this March to Washington, DC, both in substance and spirit, demonstrates Artsakh's commitment to a peaceful accord as well as their commitment to our shared democratic values. We especially appreciate the leadership of Representative David Valadao for spearheading an amendment in FY 2018, along with his colleagues Frank Pallone, Jr., Jackie Speier, Ed Royce, and Adam Schiff, to ensure continued funding for de-mining projects in Artsakh.

Given the ongoing humanitarian and development needs facing the people of Artsakh, including health, transportation infrastructure, education, de-mining, drinking water, and sanitation projects, **the Assembly urges not less than \$8 million be allocated in the FY 19 Bill.** For a relatively small investment, America has the opportunity to make a significant difference in the everyday lives of the people of Artsakh.

SECTION 907 OF THE FREEDOM SUPPORT ACT – The United States took a principled stand against Azeri aggression by adopting Section 907, which stated that no U.S. funds may be “provided to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President determines, and so reports to the Congress, that the Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.” Instead of complying with Section 907, Azerbaijan has shown its willingness to flaunt U.S. and international law, and continues to violate Section 907 by taking military action against Armenia and Artsakh, including April 2016's unprecedented offensive that started with the killing of a 12-year-old boy and continued with the gruesome ISIS-style beheading of a soldier and the mutilation of an elderly Armenian couple. Despite the signed 1994 cease-fire agreement, Azerbaijan's president has said he will continue firing on Artsakh and Armenia. Azerbaijan's rhetoric has been left unabated for far too long and is now matched by its deadly cease-fire violations. In fact, Azerbaijan's violations skyrocketed, and include the inexplicable and **repeated targeting of kindergartens** in Armenia's Tavush border region as well as other civilian areas, not to mention the continual acts of vandalism, such as destroying centuries-old Armenian cemeteries noted for their historic monuments.

The United States should directly condemn such actions. In addition, given Azerbaijan’s military expenditures, which are reported to exceed the entire national budget of Armenia, the major discrepancy between Azerbaijan’s arms purchases and excesses over arms control commitments, and the unconscionable pardon of an Azeri officer (Ramil Safarov) who brutally murdered an Armenian officer (Gurgen Margaryan) at a NATO Partnership-for-Peace training exercise, **the Assembly urges the cessation of U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan does not need it, and America cannot afford it.**

We also remain deeply troubled by Azerbaijan’s attempts to undermine western democratic values and institutions as evidenced by the nearly \$3 billion slush fund it operated as reported last year by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). According to the OCCRP report, Azerbaijan’s money “bought silence.” For example, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which consists of 47 member states, voted down a human rights report criticizing Azerbaijan following efforts by Azeri officials to win the “hearts and minds” of the Council’s members by giving luxurious gifts. Azerbaijan’s caviar diplomacy is also amply documented in the December 2016 European Stability Initiative (ESI) report, wherein expensive watches, jewelry, computers, and large sums of money, among other gifts, were provided to several politicians from European countries. ESI stated that “the ease with which democratic institutions and safeguards can be undermined has emerged as a fundamental threat to European democracy.” We are also deeply concerned with recent news reports that there were attempts to sell attack and surveillance aircraft to Azerbaijan in violation on U.S. law.

We should not turn a blind eye to Azerbaijan’s undue influence and attempts to whitewash its human rights record and trying to resolve the Nagorno Karabakh conflict by wiping out the Christian Armenian population. **Thus, the Assembly urges the Subcommittee to suspend the waiver granted in the aftermath of 9-11 pursuant to then- Secretary of State Colin Powell’s request for flexibility to counter terrorist elements and organizations operating in Azerbaijan – and to fully enforce Section 907.**

THE 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. We appreciate the work of U.S. Co-Chair Andrew Schofer to bring about a peaceful and lasting resolution in what has been a tense and tenuous environment. The governments of Armenia and Artsakh have consistently indicated their desire to peacefully resolve the conflict, and have offered confidence-building measures to help reduce tensions and build trust. Azerbaijan, however, has chosen a different path – one of blockade, bellicose rhetoric, deadly cease-fire violations, and attempts to isolate Armenia.

In view of the escalation of the deadly cease-fire violations by Azerbaijan, including Azerbaijan’s April 2016 military offensive, **the Assembly supports the bipartisan request to ensure not less than \$4 million to support the implementation of the Royce-Engel peace proposals**, prioritizing the placement of OSCE-monitored, advanced gunfire locator systems and sound-ranging equipment to determine the source of attacks along the line of contact. The Assembly also supports funding for confidence-building measures to help facilitate a peaceful resolution of the Artsakh conflict. In addition, the Assembly strongly believes that Artsakh’s participation in direct negotiations should

be restored as any solution to the conflict requires the consent of the people and leadership of Artsakh. The Assembly also urges the U.S. Co-Chair to the OSCE Minsk Group to uphold the fundamental principles of democracy, the right to self-determination and other basic human rights. Finally, the Assembly urges the U.S. Department of State to remove any official or unofficial restrictions on U.S.-Artsakh relations.

ASSISTANCE TO CHRISTIAN MINORITIES AT RISK IN THE MIDDLE EAST – The Assembly has consistently sounded the alarm on this issue long before it garnered world attention for the crisis that it is today. We remain deeply concerned about the ongoing unrest and violence in Syria and throughout the region, and its impact on minority populations caught in the middle fleeing for their lives and seeking refuge in new lands. We applaud the Near East Foundation – the successor to the congressionally chartered Near East Relief organization, which helped save tens of thousands orphaned by the Armenian Genocide – for its important work today in helping resettle those fleeing from persecution and war. The Near East Foundation’s (NEF) work represents America at its best, and its programs in Jordan and Lebanon should be expanded with U.S. assistance to include Armenia, which according to *The Economist* has taken on the third largest number of refugees in Europe as a proportion of its population. “As a host country, Armenia has been absolutely exemplary in terms of the ratio of welcomed Syrian-Armenian refugees to the number of native inhabitants,” according to the UNHCR Representative in Armenia. Armenia hosts six Syrian refugees per 1,000 nationals – a ratio much higher than many European countries or the United States, especially noteworthy given the country’s economic circumstance.

We support the bipartisan request of ensuring not less than \$20 million is appropriated to support Armenia’s efforts to serve as a regional safe haven for at-risk populations fleeing violence in the Middle East, including funding to support NEF in Armenia. We also urge the Subcommittee to ensure that gaps in distribution of relief aid are addressed so that all those in need of urgent humanitarian assistance are reached.

The Assembly strongly believes that Christian and other minority communities must be afforded protection and safeguarded wherever they happen to reside. Armenians, having been targeted for annihilation in the twentieth century, are deeply troubled that 100 years later descendants of genocide survivors in Iraq and Syria are facing similar genocidal atrocities today.

U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE – Given Armenia’s ongoing support to America before and after 9-11, and including Armenia’s participation in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Lebanon, and Mali, the Assembly supports the bipartisan request from 25 Members for \$10 million in military assistance to Armenia. Such assistance not only further strengthens Armenia’s NATO Partnership for Peace (PFP) activities, but also supports NATO interoperability and modernization of Armenia’s Peacekeeping Brigade. Last year, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed Armenia’s president to NATO headquarters wherein the Secretary General thanked Armenia for its contributions to NATO’s missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo. The Secretary General also praised Armenia for its participation in NATO’s Building Integrity Programme to counter corruption in the armed forces, and its progress on implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to promote the role of women in peace and security.

ASSISTANCE TO THE SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI REGION OF GEORGIA – Building on U.S. assistance already provided to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia through the Millennium Challenge Compact, the Assembly strongly supports targeted assistance for economic development and job-creation programs in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

ENERGY SECURITY – During the past decade, strategic energy projects, launched with U.S. support in the South Caucasus, have created long-term development opportunities for most of the nations in the region. However, these initiatives have not benefited Armenia, due to Turkish and Azerbaijani attempts to isolate Armenia and Artsakh through blockades and other measures. Such actions to exclude Armenia from regional projects run counter to stated U.S. policy goals of regional cooperation and economic integration. The Assembly, therefore, urges the Subcommittee to utilize all the tools at its disposal to pave the way for Armenia’s full involvement in and integration with existing and future energy and development projects in the region.

CONCLUSION – Chairwoman Rogers, Ranking Member Lowey, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Armenian American community, I would like to express our sincere gratitude to Congress for its assistance to Armenia and Artsakh. Armenian Americans gratefully remember the support the U.S. provided after the 1988 earthquake in Armenia, as Armenia moved boldly toward independence in 1991, during Artsakh’s struggle for freedom and democracy, and America’s proud record of humanitarian intervention during the 1915 Armenian Genocide. The enduring and natural bonds that exist between the United States and Armenia are readily apparent in Armenia’s ongoing support for America. Armenians in Armenia and Artsakh consider the United States a close friend and ally. This is a relationship that spans families and generations across the three countries. Given its central location, Christian heritage, entrepreneurial spirit, and western value system, Armenia is poised to play a pivotal role in helping the United States achieve its stated policy objectives in the region. The Armenian Assembly greatly appreciates your attention to these policy matters and looks forward to working with the distinguished Members of the Subcommittee throughout the remainder of this Congress.