

ARMENIAN ASSEMBLY OF AMERICA – FISCAL YEAR 2020

TESTIMONY BY VAN KRIKORIAN, BOARD OF TRUSTEES CO-CHAIR

Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers, 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 \$100 million in democracy and 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 robust assistance to Christian and other minority communities at risk in the Middle East, as well as to the nearly 25,000 refugees in Armenia, and urges the allocation of \$20 million to support Armenia's efforts to serve as a regional safe-haven. In addition, the Assembly urges not less than \$25 million in assistance to Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh).

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 have a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2020

ASSISTANCE TO ARMENIA – The Assembly's non-partisan approach and support for democracy was enhanced last year as the world witnessed a watershed moment in Armenia's history with the remarkable democratic transformation that took place. In fact, *The Economist* named Armenia "Country of the Year" for its peaceful and democratic change of government. Armenia's new prime minister Nikol Pashinian told *TIME* that "I believe Armenia will be one of the world's strongest democracies." *TIME* called Pashinian a crusader who is "keeping the dream of democracy alive."

Given these remarkable advances, we urge the allocation of \$100 million for Armenia's continued democratic and economic development. By doing so, Congress will loudly signal that America strongly supports and invests in democracy, which will have a profound effect across the globe. It will also help counter the perception that the U.S. is retreating from much of the world and from the principles which make America great.

Armenia has remarkably and uniquely been a point of shared - rather than competing - interests between the United States and Russia. Armenia has and continues to serve U.S. interests in the region. Armenia's actions also stand in sharp contrast to their increasingly authoritarian neighbors, Turkey and Azerbaijan. Whether it is Turkey's practice of harassing, jailing and targeting journalists, attacking U.S. citizens on American soil, lobbying against and denying the Armenian Genocide, or the \$530,000 paid to a firm to secretly lobby for Turkey, and, most jarringly, Azerbaijan's \$3 billion slush fund to whitewash its human rights record as exposed by

the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), we are deeply troubled by Turkey and Azerbaijan's surreptitious influence and attempts to undermine western democratic values and institutions. We cannot think of any reason why any Member of Congress would want to be associated with these types of corrosive actions and authoritarian regimes through their membership on the Congressional Caucuses on Turkey and Azerbaijan. Whatever the reasons were in the past, we urge all Members to withdraw from these Caucuses and send a strong message that America stands for democracy and justice, as opposed to repression and intolerance.

ENDING THE DUAL BLOCKADES IMPOSED UPON 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. According to the World Bank, since independence "Armenia's economy has undergone a profound transformation" and "sustained growth, ambitious growth, as well as inflows of capital and remittances that have created a market-oriented environment." Imagine the impact of Armenia's democratic and economic reforms if it was not blockaded. Paid agents for Azerbaijan and Turkey have criticized Armenia for maintaining an open border and economic relations with Iran yet fail to mention the fact that Armenia is blockaded on its western and eastern borders by Turkey and Azerbaijan. They also fail to mention the centuries-old Armenian presence in Iran and other realities that leave Armenia no choice. It is ironic to hear criticism from countries like Turkey, which flaunt U.S. sanctions policy, with impunity, on a massive scale. Armenia, meanwhile, continues to work with the U.S. government as evidenced by the extradition of the former head of a Turkish American lobbying group that ran the Texas-based Turquoise Council of Americans and Eurasians as well as the Assembly of the Friends of Azerbaijan. In 2015, it was reported that an all-expenses-paid trip to Azerbaijan for 10 Members of Congress and 32 staffers by these groups was "secretly funded by Azerbaijan's state-owned oil company" to the tune of \$750,000 and in violation of U.S. congressional rules.

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 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. While Azerbaijan does not qualify for and is not a WTO member, Turkey is and its barriers to Armenia trade including the blockade completely contradicts and undermines WTO principles let alone what is expected from a supposed U.S. ally. **Therefore, the Assembly recommends report language urging the U.S. to pursue trade actions beyond the recent and overdue lifting of GSP status for Turkey in both U.S. and Armenia's interests. In addition, the Assembly also urges report language requiring a full accounting of the steps the Administration is taking and the responses therein to eliminate the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades. Finally, we believe that the provisions of the Humanitarian Corridor Act (which blocks assistance to countries that block U.S. humanitarian aid) should be broadened to preclude any and all assistance to**

Turkey and Azerbaijan so long as they blockade Armenia.

ASSISTANCE TO NAGORNO KARBAKH (ARTSAKH) – 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 last 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. 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 \$25 million be allocated in the FY 2020 Bill, especially as disbursement of aid has lagged behind congressional intent over the years.** For a relatively small investment, America has the opportunity to make a significant difference in the everyday lives of the people of Artsakh.

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 efforts to prioritize 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.

SECTION 907 OF THE FREEDOM SUPPORT ACT – The United States took a principled stand against Azerbaijani 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 have only skyrocketed, and include the inexplicable and repeated targeting of kindergartens in

Armenia's Tavush Province border region as well as other civilian areas, not to mention the continual acts of vandalism, such as the destruction of centuries-old Armenian cemeteries noted for their historic monuments. In a March 1, 2019 article, *The Guardian* highlighted "a damning report [that] details an attempted erasure by Azerbaijan of its Armenian cultural heritage, including the destruction of tens of thousands of UNESCO-protected [artifacts]." **The United States should directly condemn such actions.** We should not turn a blind eye to Azerbaijan's undue influence and attempts to whitewash its human rights record, while trying to resolve the Nagorno Karabakh conflict by wiping out its Christian Armenian population.

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 (which, according to The Jamestown Foundation, "Russia has long been Azerbaijan's main arms supplier") and excesses over arms control commitments, and the unconscionable pardon of an Azerbaijani officer (Ramil Safarov) who brutally axe-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. The Assembly also 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.**

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. In fact, I testified before the U.S. Helsinki Commission on this very issue in 2005. The Assembly remains 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 (NEF) – 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 NEF's 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.

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 some 100 years later descendants of genocide survivors in Iraq and Syria are facing similar genocidal atrocities today. Armenian de-miners and medics, serving in Syria with Russian forces to provide much-needed assistance to all Syrians, are to be commended. In the case of the Kurds, who have been assisting our forces in defeating ISIS in Syria, they should be guaranteed American protection and not left exposed to Turkish threats.

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 \$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.

ASSISTANCE TO THE SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETI REGION OF GEORGIA – Building on U.S. assistance already provided to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of the Republic 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 Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers, 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.

###