

Armenian Assembly of America

Testimony by Talin Yacoubian, Co-Chair

House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs – April 2, 2025

Chairman Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member Frankel, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, the Armenian Assembly of America (Assembly) welcomes the opportunity to provide the following testimony regarding U.S. assistance and policy for the South Caucasus region generally and to Armenia and the Armenian people specifically for Fiscal Year 2026.

On behalf of the Armenian Assembly of America, I thank this Committee for its long-standing support to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) and the aspirations of the Armenian people. The work of this Committee and Congress has been instrumental and helped save lives and certainly helped the first Christian nation in the world survive.

Today's testimony comes at a very pivotal and crucial time. On March 14, Secretary of State Marco Rubio commended "Armenia and Azerbaijan for concluding negotiations on a historic peace treaty," and further stated that: "This is an opportunity for both countries to turn the page on a decades old conflict in line with President Trump's vision for a more peaceful world. Now is the time to commit to peace, sign and ratify the treaty, and usher in a new era of prosperity for the people of the South Caucasus."

While we remain hopeful about the prospects of peace, we must acknowledge the difficult reality that Armenia has been negotiating under extreme duress with Azerbaijani soldiers illegally occupying Armenia and with Azerbaijan still unjustly holding Armenian hostages. Azerbaijan's autocratic ruler, Ilham Aliyev has even boasted that "we have destroyed Armenia," and warned Armenia to "never forget that the iron fist is in place and always will be."

We urge Congress to help keep President Donald J. Trump's promise to "restore PEACE between Armenia and Azerbaijan" and "to stop the violence and ethnic cleansing" of Christian Armenians. Of course, true peace cannot be achieved until Azerbaijan ceases its sham trials and immediately releases all Armenian hostages, which includes the political leaders of Artsakh. In that regard, we welcome National Security Advisor Mike Waltz' call for Azerbaijan to "release the prisoners" and urge Congress and the Administration to use every tool at its disposal to secure their freedom.

SECTION 907 OF THE FREEDOM SUPPORT ACT – Congress took a principled stand against Azerbaijani aggression with the adoption of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act in 1992. Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act states that U.S. funds "may not 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." In the aftermath of the

September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on American soil, a national security waiver was added to Section 907. The exercise of the waiver is valid so long as it “will not undermine or hamper ongoing efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement” to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, or “be used for offensive purposes against Armenia.” Given Azerbaijan’s 44-day War against Artsakh in 2020, its repeated failure to abide by its international commitments, including a 2020 Agreement reached during the first Trump Administration, the 2023 military offensive against Artsakh driving the entire indigenous population from their ancestral homeland, Azerbaijan’s ongoing destruction of Armenian cultural and religious heritage sites and the unjust holding of hostages, the **Assembly urges that Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act continued to be enforced and that no U.S. taxpayer dollars be used to support Azerbaijan, including any U.S. military or security assistance.** Additionally, we strongly supported the bipartisan March 27, 2025 letter spearheaded by Congressman Mike Lawler to Secretary of State Marco Rubio signed by 60 of your colleagues calling for the continued enforcement of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act, and which read in part: “Amid the persistent threat of authoritarian expansionism throughout the region and across the world, it is imperative that the Trump Administration makes clear to governments that undermine U.S. interests that their actions will not be met with impunity – much less material financial support.”

SECURITY ASSISTANCE TO ARMENIA – (Not Less Than \$50 Million)

As Armenia continues to deepen relations with the West while still under great threat and peril, it is paramount that the U.S. provide defensive weapons to further assist Armenia in protecting its people and defending its borders against ongoing Azerbaijani aggression. Last Congress, the Assembly strongly supported a bipartisan request of 66 of your colleagues to include not less than \$20 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and \$10 Million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) to bolster Armenia’s security and increase defense cooperation between the United States and the Republic of Armenia, and we certainly support this and more for Fiscal Year 2026. Last March during his visit to Armenia’s capital, then NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg praised Armenia for its long-standing partnership and contributions to NATO stating: “For nearly 20 years, Armenia has been a key partner in NATO’s KFOR peacekeeping mission, helping to ensure a safe and secure environment for all communities in Kosovo.” Further, Secretary-General Stoltenberg also reiterated that “NATO supports Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and your peaceful aspirations.” More can be done to protect and defend Armenia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO ARMENIA – (Not Less Than \$250 Million)

On September 6, 2023, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission convened an emergency hearing, sounding the alarm on the impending catastrophe in Artsakh. The Commission heard expert testimony from Professor David L. Philips, Director of Columbia University’s Artsakh Atrocities Project, and Luis Moreno Ocampo, former Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court. Mr. Ocampo testified that “there is a reasonable basis to believe that a genocide is being committed against Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023,” and spoke of “the ongoing genocide by starvation.” On September 14, 2023, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a

hearing on Nagorno-Karabakh wherein a State Department Official stated, “the United States will not countenance any action or effort—short-term or long-term—to ethnically cleanse or commit other atrocities against the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The current humanitarian situation is not acceptable.”

Despite these and similar warnings, just days later, on September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan - with the support of Turkey and in coordination with Russia - launched a military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in the death and injury of innocent civilians and the forced displacement of some 120,000 indigenous Christian Armenians, including 30,000 children who fled to Armenia. This assault was the culmination of Azerbaijan’s genocidal campaign against the Armenian people that started with the illegal blockade of the Lachin Corridor in December 2022 - during which regrettably the Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act was not enforced - and placed the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh under siege and threat of starvation. Section 620I of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 USC 2378-1), also known as the Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act, states that: “No assistance shall be furnished under this chapter or the Arms Export Control Act to any country when it is made known to the President that the government of such country prohibits or otherwise restricts, directly or indirectly, the transport or delivery of United States humanitarian assistance.” **To address the ensuing humanitarian crisis caused by Azerbaijan’s ethnic cleansing, and to facilitate the right of return, the Assembly urges the Subcommittee to allocate not less than \$250 million, of which funds should be made available to Armenian American private voluntary organizations that have proven most cost effective. U.S. assistance can also play a role in preventing further genocide.**

THE RIGHT OF RETURN – Ignoring the long-standing international peace process under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Minsk Group (co-chaired by the United States, France, and Russia), of which the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh was to be determined, and violating the 1994 ceasefire agreed upon by Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan ignited a full-scale war against Artsakh and the Armenian people in September 2020. As a result, Armenians, having already faced a genocide in the 20th century, were forced yet again to rebuild in the wake of serious human losses and structural devastation. Upwards of 100,000 people - mainly children, women, and the elderly - were forcibly displaced from their homes, while hospitals, schools, and churches were destroyed by missiles, cluster and white phosphorus munitions, and drone strikes. The 2020 War, followed by the September 2023 offensive, upended decades of U.S. efforts and support for a peaceful resolution to the conflict on the basis of the Helsinki Principles.

Last November, Freedom House released a report “Why Are There No Armenians In Nagorno-Karabakh?” that examined “the situation for ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh for the period starting with the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and through the Azerbaijani military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 and its aftermath.” Through an international fact-finding effort that included hundreds of witness interviews and open-source data, the Report “documents how people in Nagorno-Karabakh were intentionally subjected to regular

attacks, intimidation, deprivation of basic rights and adequate living conditions, and forced displacement. The evidence demonstrates that the Azerbaijani state acted upon a comprehensive, methodically implemented strategy to empty Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population and historical and cultural presence.”

Sam Brownback, the former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, during a June 2023 Congressional hearing on “Safeguarding the people of Nagorno-Karabakh,” put it this way: “This is a question of the rights of the Armenian Christians of Nagorno-Karabakh: does this religious minority have a right to survival in their ancestral homeland? The only just answer is yes, they have the right not to be driven out, starved out or blockaded by the government of Azerbaijan.”

The Assembly urges Congress and the Administration to help ensure that the fundamental right of return as well as the fundamental principles of democracy, the right to self-determination, and the universal human rights of the people of Artsakh are upheld. Additionally, the United States can and must do more to hold Azerbaijan accountable for its gross human rights violations.

The Assembly also previously welcomed a House-passed amendment to the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act that authorized “the President to impose sanctions on individuals accused of committing human rights abuses or engaging in corruption.” The level of corruption and repression of the Aliyev regime in Azerbaijan is widely reported, whether the “Azerbaijani Laundromat” scheme with a \$2.9 billion slush fund to whitewash its human rights record, or the “Pandora Papers” revelations exposing even further its wide-ranging scope. Further, based on credible reports that Azerbaijani forces committed gross human rights violations during and after the 44-day war, the Leahy Law and Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act should be implemented to hold Azerbaijan accountable. Azerbaijan should not be rewarded for its blatant and ongoing violations against the Armenian people. **The Assembly strongly urges the inclusion of report language calling for the immediate release of all hostages held by Azerbaijan, including Artsakh’s leaders who are being subjected to sham trials.**

CONCLUSION – As Ambassador Brownback testified last Congress, Armenia is the “first Christian nation on Earth. Persecuted over several millennia by multiple empires, yet they remain. Their tenacity and sheer pluck inspire every religious minority around the world.” History has shown that appeasing dictators only serves to further embolden them. In this instance, the lack of sanctions, the lack of support for self-defense, and the immediate enforcement of Section 907, as well as the failure to implement Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act allowed - instead of prevented - ethnic cleansing and genocide. Christians are among the most persecuted religious minorities around the world and are disappearing from the Middle East and other regions. The United States has taken a strong stand in support of justice and the Armenian people. The Assembly’s position is clear: stand up for freedom and liberty; oppose genocide and hold Azerbaijan and its accomplices accountable.