

Statement of James C. O'Brien
Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs
Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
November 15, 2023

Chairman Kean, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today about the Administration's efforts in the South Caucasus, especially with respect to Azerbaijan's most recent military actions on September 19 in Nagorno-Karabakh. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about our efforts to bring peace to a region that has seen conflict predating the fall of the Soviet Union.

Throughout these decades of conflict and instability, ordinary people in both Armenia and Azerbaijan have suffered. The history of Nagorno-Karabakh, an area internationally recognized as Azerbaijani territory, but for centuries home to more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians, has been particularly tragic.

Azerbaijan's use of force in September 2023 prompted a mass exodus of more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh into

neighboring Armenia. People left behind their homes, their livelihoods, their communities, and their culture. Now uprooted, they face the enormous challenge of making difficult choices on their path ahead. We recognize the pressure on the government of Armenia to provide for a large population of displaced persons and refugees. I would say the Armenian government has done a remarkable job in providing initial, critical assistance to the ethnic Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh. We will continue providing assistance to help Armenia support displaced persons and refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh. We have urged Azerbaijan to ensure all ethnic Armenians who have departed Nagorno-Karabakh are guaranteed a safe, dignified, and sustainable return, should they so choose, with their rights and security guaranteed. We have asked Azerbaijan to facilitate visits to allow those who have left to check on their properties and belongings. We have also called for Azerbaijan to respect and protect the cultural heritage of the many groups who have lived in the region throughout the millennia. On September 26, the United States announced more than \$11.5 million in humanitarian assistance to provide emergency food, protection, shelter, and other urgent support to displaced persons and refugees across

the South Caucasus, including those from Nagorno-Karabakh. The U.S. has identified additional funding on top of this amount to scale up ongoing support for new arrivals to Armenia. Separately, State is supporting efforts to interview those who fled Nagorno-Karabakh to learn more about what they experienced.

Our message to Armenia and the displaced has been unambiguous: The United States will support Armenia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democratic institutions.

We also want to support the Armenian government's efforts to diversify trade and expand its commercial ties with Europe and the United States in promising sectors such as agriculture and technology. We are supporting the government's initiatives to build accountable institutions, through initiatives like community-based policing. In short, we will help build Armenian economic security and resilience.

Finally, we will continue to work towards a durable and dignified peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For decades, the international community worked to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh issue through the

OSCE Minsk Group process. Like many regions in the former Soviet Union, it was an area exploited by Russia as a frozen conflict—ready to be thawed and weaponized as a means of perpetuating Russian influence. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the people of Armenia and Azerbaijan have suffered a cycle of violence that has killed, injured, or displaced hundreds of thousands. The First Nagorno-Karabakh War took place from 1988 to 1994, with numerous skirmishes thereafter. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War erupted in 2020 and ended with a November 9, 2020, ceasefire brokered by Russia between Armenia and Azerbaijan that resulted in the deployment of Russian “peacekeepers” to the region for a term of five years. These “peacekeepers” proved to be ineffective.

Beginning in 2022, following another round of conflict, the United States and the EU stepped in to try to build momentum toward a durable and dignified peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan—a peace that included resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. As part of that effort, the Secretary has repeatedly dispatched his Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations to the region to attempt to facilitate talks between Azerbaijani

officials and representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh—efforts that yielded a breakthrough arrangement for the delivery of humanitarian supplies to Nagorno-Karabakh on September 18 after nearly 10 months of Azerbaijani efforts to block the flow of supplies along the Lachin Corridor roadway connecting the region to Armenia. That breakthrough promised to create space for further negotiations. However, Azerbaijan chose to use force just one day later to summarily assert control over the region.

Azerbaijan's use of force in Nagorno-Karabakh has eroded trust and raised doubts regarding Baku's commitment to a comprehensive peace with Armenia. Given this new reality, the Department has made it clear to Azerbaijan that there cannot be "business as usual" in our bilateral relationship. The United States has condemned Azerbaijani actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, canceled high-level bilateral meetings and engagements with Azerbaijan, and suspended plans for future events. We will continue to call on Azerbaijani authorities to facilitate the return of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians who may wish to go back to their homes or visit cultural sites in the region, as well as restore unimpeded commercial, humanitarian, and

pedestrian traffic to the region via the Lachin Corridor. We will also work to monitor the rights and security of those who choose to do so, along with those few who have remained in Nagorno-Karabakh.

At the same time, what has happened in Nagorno-Karabakh has underlined that a negotiated peace is necessary and urgent. The United States is therefore redoubling its support towards achieving a durable and dignified peace that provides the foundation for regional prosperity, economic connectivity, and freedom from outside malign influence – a goal that the leaders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan say they seek. This has also long been the United States' strategic goal for the region.

A durable, dignified peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan would benefit the entire South Caucasus. Open transport and trade routes will end the region's isolation and allow countries to diversify economic and security ties connecting Europe and Central Asia. It would end the decades-long cycle of violence in the region for good, providing an environment for greater stability and investment for all countries in the region. We will continue to offer our good offices to achieve a dignified, durable peace that would end

the cycle of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan and herald a more secure and prosperous future for both peoples and the region.