

ARMENIAN ASSEMBLY OF AMERICA

TESTIMONY BY BRYAN ARDOUNY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS AND RELATED PROGRAMS

Chairman Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member Lee, 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 2025.

ASSISTANCE TO ARMENIA – A landlocked and centuries-old Christian nation, Armenia continues to face existential threats from autocratic Azerbaijan and Turkey with Azerbaijan’s president boasting that “we have destroyed Armenia,” and warning Armenia “that the iron fist is in place.” In lockstep with Azerbaijan, Turkish parliamentarian Mustafa Destici publicly threatened Armenia: “I remind you once again that the Turkish nation has the power to erase Armenia from history and geography, and that they stand at the limit of our patience.”

Security Assistance & Democratic Reforms (\$50 Million) – As Armenia continues to deepen relations with the West while still under great threat and peril, we were encouraged by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg’s visit to Armenia last March and his statement that “NATO supports Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity.” In addition to NATO, the United States is uniquely positioned to ensure that Armenia has the necessary tools and resources to protect its people and defend its borders. **Therefore, the Assembly strongly supports the 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.** In addition, the Assembly also supports the bipartisan request for \$10 million in International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funding “to support ongoing law enforcement and internal security reforms in Armenia.” Per the bipartisan request to assist Armenia “in advancing ongoing executive branch reforms, government transparency programs, reducing corruption, and supporting public administration reforms in e-governance,” the Assembly also supports \$10 million in funding within USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) account “to support democratic reforms in Armenia.” **Further, the Assembly strongly urges Congress and the Administration to provide defensive weapons to further assist Armenia in protecting its sovereignty. We are sure Americans would stand behind the United States providing Armenians with the means to defend themselves to prevent another Armenian Genocide.**

Humanitarian Assistance (\$250 Million) – On September 6, 2023, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission convened an emergency hearing, sounding the alarm on the impending catastrophe in Nagorno-Karabakh. 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 Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Yuri Kim 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 (HACA), 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, the Assembly urges the Subcommittee to allocate not less than \$250 million under the Assistance to Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia (AEECA) account, 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. American Enterprise Institute Senior Fellow Michael Rubin laid bare Azerbaijan’s public disdain for the United States in a May 9, 2024 article: “In December 2020, just a month after President Ilham Aliyev completed the first phase of Azerbaijan’s conquest

of Nagorno-Karabakh, Andrew Schofer, the lead U.S. diplomat on the crisis, traveled to Yerevan and Baku. Aliyev humiliated Schofer on live television, bragging about how Azerbaijan's military prowess achieved what American diplomacy did not and then asking, "Why are you here?" Former Ambassador Sam Brownback 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 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 should do more to hold Azerbaijan accountable for its gross human rights violations.

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, and needs to do so again. 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." In exercising the waiver, Congress required a report within 60 days "specifying in detail the following: (A) the nature and quantity of all training and assistance provided to the Government of Azerbaijan [pursuant to the waiver]; B) the status of the military balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the impact of United States assistance on that balance; and (C) the status of negotiations for a peaceful settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the impact of United States assistance on those negotiations." A 2022 U.S. Government Accountability Office Report found that the State Department did not "provide Congress with all required information – such as the impact of aid on the military balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia."

The 44-day War against Artsakh in 2020 resulted in a death toll of thousands of soldiers, some brutally beheaded according to Human Rights Watch, and as documented by Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights and its "Project on Atrocities in Artsakh." In addition, Azerbaijan's ongoing destruction of Armenian cultural and religious heritage sites has been condemned by the European Parliament and thoroughly documented by the Caucasus Heritage Watch (a research program in heritage forensics led by archaeologists at Cornell and Purdue Universities). **The Assembly therefore urges that no U.S. taxpayer dollars be used to support Azerbaijan, and that starts with upholding the letter and spirit of Section 907 of the**

FREEDOM Support Act, and ensuring that Azerbaijan does not receive any U.S. military or security assistance. We also fully support H.R.7288, the Armenian Protection Act of 2024, introduced by Congressman Michael Lawler, and urge that its language be incorporated into the Bill.

Additionally, we support the bipartisan request by 66 of your colleagues for a report by the Secretary of State to the appropriate congressional committees on “how the Department of State coordinates with the Department of the Treasury and other relevant Federal departments and agencies to achieve behavioral change through sanctions on individuals from the Republic of Azerbaijan that are involved in corruption [and] human rights abuses...”

The Assembly 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 POWs and captive civilians held by Azerbaijan, including Artsakh’s leaders who are being subjected to sham trials.**

CONCLUSION – As Ambassador Brownback testified last June before Congress, “Armenia is the Israel of Christendom. 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 and the immediate enforcement of Section 907, as well as the failure to implement HACA allowed - instead of preventing - ethnic cleansing and genocide. The United States has taken a strong stand in support of democracy in Ukraine and should do the same for the Armenian people who also face existential threats. The Assembly’s position is clear: stand up for democracy and human rights; oppose genocide and hold Azerbaijan accountable by imposing sanctions.