

FISCAL YEAR 2017 TESTIMONY

ARMENIAN ASSEMBLY OF AMERICA

SUBMITTED BY BRYAN ARDOUNY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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

The Armenian Assembly stands in solidarity with the people of Belgium and expresses its deepest sympathies to the victims and families of the latest terrorist attacks, which serves as a painful reminder of all those lost in other senseless acts of terror.

The Armenian Assembly urges the Subcommittee to allocate not less than \$40 million in assistance to Armenia, including at least \$1.7 million in Foreign Military Financing, and \$600,000 in International Military Education Training assistance to Armenia. The Assembly also requests not less than \$5 million in assistance to Nagorno Karabakh, especially for the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Center, as well as directing funds to the largely Armenian populated Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia. The Assembly also urges enhanced assistance to Christian and other minority communities at risk in the Middle East, with a particular focus of concern regarding the continued unrest in Syria, particularly the battleground city of Aleppo where Armenian churches and other institutions have come under attack (see: <http://aaainc.org/index.php?id=1040>). The Assembly also supports the request letter spearheaded by Representatives Frank Pallone, Jr. and Robert Dold and signed by 31 of their colleagues outlining seven key priorities regarding U.S.-Armenia/U.S.-Karabakh relations.

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 as well as strengthen the U.S. relationships with Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. We represent Armenian Americans and those who share our goals. We strongly encourage Members to travel to Armenia to see first-hand the realities on the ground and the impact of U.S. policy as well as the consequences of the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2017

I. ASSISTANCE TO ARMENIA – The Assembly urges the Subcommittee to allocate not less than \$40 million in U.S. assistance to Armenia. As you know, despite the dual blockades imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia continues to show its resilience, and was ranked 54th out of 178 countries rated by the Wall Street Journal-Heritage Foundation 2016 Index of Economic Freedom – well above other countries in the region. Armenia has also met the FY 2014, 2015 and 2016 eligibility requirements for the Millennium Challenge Corporation, of which we strongly support a second U.S.-Armenia compact.

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 with Armenia, 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.

As both former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and current Secretary John Kerry have indicated, the ball is in Turkey's court. Instead of moving forward, no concrete steps were taken by Turkey, which sought to add new conditions, including with respect to the Nagorno Karabakh peace process. Working in tandem with Turkey, Azerbaijan torpedoed the Protocols signed with Armenia. Azerbaijan also continues its blockade of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh 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 Nagorno Karabakh.** We must and can do more to ensure that the last closed border in Europe is open. Continued and robust assistance helps to offset the impact of these blockades, and reflects America's values.

II. ASSISTANCE TO NAGORNO KARABAKH – The Assembly appreciates and welcomes the ongoing support that the U.S. provides to Karabakh as it rebuilds from the war launched against it by Azerbaijan and further strengthens its democratic institutions. **Given the ongoing humanitarian and development needs facing the people of Nagorno Karabakh, including health, transportation infrastructure, education, de-mining, drinking water, and sanitation projects, the Assembly urges not less than \$5 million be allocated in the FY 17 Bill.** The Assembly also supports assistance for the Lady Cox Rehabilitation Center in Stepanakert and reiterates the Pallone-Dold request for funds to support “rehabilitation and regional clinics, which serve over 1,000 children and adults with physical and cognitive disabilities every year.” Due to Azerbaijan's aggressive stance, the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, which has maintained a high level of democratic development, does not enjoy the benefit of international assistance and investment programs available to other former Soviet countries. For a relatively small investment, the U.S. has the opportunity to make a significant difference in the everyday lives of the people of Karabakh.

III. SECTION 907 OF THE FREEDOM SUPPORT ACT – The U.S. took a principled stand against Azeri aggression by adopting Section 907. Unfortunately, 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 Nagorno Karabakh. Despite the signed 1994 cease-fire agreement, Azerbaijan's president has said he will continue firing on Nagorno Karabakh 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 to over 30,000 in 2015, and include the inexplicable targeting of a kindergarten in Armenia's Tavush border region and 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 and avoid engaging in false equivalency between the aggressor and those defending themselves.** Thus, the Assembly urges the Subcommittee to suspend the waiver authority 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 reinstate Section 907. Further, given Azerbaijan’s military expenditures, which are reported to exceed the entire national budget of Armenia, and 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.

IV. THE NAGORNO KARABAKH 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. The governments of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh 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 as evidenced by Azerbaijan's counterproductive stance to the Armenia-Turkey Protocols.

In view of the escalation of the deadly cease-fire violations by Azerbaijan and the increasing number of casualties, the Assembly applauds the bipartisan initiative of House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce and Ranking Member Eliot Engel to de-escalate tensions and promote peace through several concrete steps, including: 1) an agreement from all sides not to deploy snipers along the line of contact; 2) the placement of OSCE-monitored, advanced gunfire-locator systems and sound-ranging equipment to determine the source of attacks along the line of contact; and 3) the deployment of additional OSCE observers along the line of contact to better monitor cease-fire violations. The U.S. OSCE Co-Chair along with Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh support this approach. **The Assembly requests funding be made available for these and other such confidence-building measures to help facilitate a peaceful resolution of the Karabakh conflict.**

In addition, the Assembly strongly believes that Nagorno Karabakh’s participation in direct negotiations should be restored as any solution to the conflict requires the consent of the people and leadership of Karabakh. 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 that the U.S. Department of State remove any official or unofficial restrictions on U.S.-Karabakh relations.

V. 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 its impact on minority populations caught in the middle fleeing for their lives and seeking refuge in new lands. Armenians, like all people of goodwill sincerely hope that the truce in Syria holds. 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,” said

UNHCR Representative in Armenia Christoph Bierwirth. Armenia hosts six Syrian refugees per 1,000 nationals – a ratio much higher than many European countries or the US, especially noteworthy given the country’s economic circumstance.

In addition to U.S. funding to support NEF in Armenia, we urge the Subcommittee to direct the State Department and USAID to allocate \$15 million to Armenia from the FY 17 funds made available for refugee assistance and resettlement as Armenia seeks to absorb those fleeing from Syria, as well as implement measures to ensure that gaps in distribution of relief aid are addressed so that all those in need of urgent humanitarian assistance are reached.

Further, having discussed the importance of H.Con.Res. 75 with House Speaker Paul Ryan this month, which condemned the atrocities committed by ISIS as genocide against Christian, Yezidi, and other religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria, we applaud its passage and urge the inclusion of report language that makes it clear that minority communities, wherever they may reside, shall be afforded protection and safeguarded. Simply stated, there has to be a place for Christians to live safely in the Middle East. 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.

VI. U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE – The Assembly supports the Administration’s FY 17 request of \$1 million in Foreign Military Financing, and \$600,000 in International Military Education Training assistance to Armenia and also urges additional funding for FMF at the FY 15 level of \$1.7 million. Earlier this month, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg thanked Armenia for its contributions to NATO’s missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo. The Secretary General also highlighted Armenia’s sustained cooperation with NATO in the areas of defense reform, enhanced interoperability, defense education reform, and civil emergency planning. NATO desk officer for the South Caucasus Steffen Elgersma also stated this month that Armenia’s contribution to international security is “very impressive.”

VII. 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.

VIII. 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 Nagorno Karabakh 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.**

VIX. AFFIRMING THE U.S. RECORD ON THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE – Last April, Representatives Anna Eshoo, Frank Pallone, Jr., Jackie Speier, and David Trott joined the presidential delegation led by U.S. Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew to commemorate the centennial of the Armenian Genocide in Yerevan. As we commemorate the Armenian Genocide this April 24th, Congress will have another opportunity to adhere to its long-standing values by reaffirming America’s proud chapter in history in helping to save the survivors of the first genocide of the twentieth century. **We also strongly urge President Barack Obama to fulfill his campaign promise wherein he stated: “America deserves a leader who speaks truthfully about the Armenian Genocide and responds forcefully to all genocides. I intend to be that President.”**

President Obama, like former president George W. Bush, expressed sympathy and support for those individuals within Turkey trying to come to terms with the past and create a brighter future for their country. Until the United States leads, by unequivocally acknowledging its own record affirming the Armenian Genocide, it puts those people at risk. Further, Turkey’s treatment of the broader Kurdish issue as one of terrorism should be of concern to all Americans as the Kurds are an indispensable ally in Iraq and Syria in the fight against ISIS. The fact there is evidence that Turkey has served as a life-line for ISIS also needs to be taken into account.

CONCLUSION – Chairwoman Granger, 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 the Nagorno Karabakh Republic. 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 Karabakh’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 U.S. and Armenia are readily apparent in Armenia’s ongoing support for America. Armenians in Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh 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 of America 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.