

Testimony before the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

“Update on the OSCE: Religious Freedom, Anti-Semitism, and Rule of Law”

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Chairman Smith, Co-Chairman Wicker, distinguished Commissioners, the Armenian Assembly of America (Assembly) welcomes today’s important hearing. We share the concerns of the Commission with respect to threats to religious freedom and the rule of law as well as the specter of anti-Semitism, whether in Europe or beyond.

The Assembly especially appreciates the Commission’s ongoing vigilance in shining a bright light on human rights violations in an effort to bring about much needed change and to protect religious and minority communities. In particular, we remain deeply concerned about the safety and well-being of Christians and other minorities at risk in the Middle East and elsewhere. As ISIS continues its brutal targeting of innocent civilians, images of which evoke the horrors of the Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide, and other crimes against humanity, it reminds us all about the urgent challenges before us and the need to redouble our efforts to prevent atrocities from occurring.

We also appreciate the work of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), as well as the OSCE Minsk Group which seeks to find a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. We welcome the introduction of the Azerbaijan Democracy Act of 2015 by Chairman Smith, which sends a strong message that the United States takes the defense of human rights and fundamental freedoms seriously.

As the Commission is aware, the Assembly remains deeply concerned about the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan, its jailing of journalists and abandonment of democratic values, and the impact it has on the region, particularly for America’s ally Armenia. Unfortunately, these authoritarian trends have spilled over into the OSCE-mediated Nagorno Karabakh peace process wherein the Azerbaijani government continues to violate the 1994 cease-fire agreement at an alarming rate and with more powerful weaponry.

According to reports filed with the United Nations (UN) and the OSCE, there were over 11,500 cross-border violations committed by Azerbaijan against Armenia from 2014 through 2015, constituting an estimate of more than 200,000 shots fired. In Armenia’s Tavush region, a kindergarten has been the repeated target of sniper fire. This is an outrageous violation. The targeting of innocent civilians and children must end.

With respect to the line of contact between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan, there have been over 54,000 cease-fire violations committed by Azerbaijan during the same period. These violations constitute an estimated total of nearly 1 million shots fired.

Some of the weapons used by Azerbaijan in its attacks against Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh in 2014-2015 include: grenade launchers, large caliber machine guns, large caliber sniper weapons, mortars, and howitzers. Not surprisingly 2014 and 2015 have been marked by increased civilian deaths and casualties. The OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs in a Joint Statement in December 2015 said “there is no justification for the death and injury of innocent civilians.” “We especially condemn the use of mortars and other heavy weaponry,” the joint statement highlighted “and regret deeply the civilian casualties these weapons have caused.”

These violations constitute a clear disregard for the rule of law and pose a direct threat to fundamental freedoms. Given these egregious violations, the Assembly welcomed last year’s initiative by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce and Ranking Member Eliot Engel to address the dramatic increase of deadly cease-fire violations. In their letter to Ambassador James Warlick, U.S. Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, they called for three concrete steps to be taken. These include: (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 letter was signed by 85 Members of Congress.

We hope that these recommendations are implemented to help ensure the safety and security of the people of Armenia and Karabakh. Further, we strongly urge the Commission to support this important initiative by convening a special hearing to examine the scope and nature of these violations as well as review steps needed to bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The United States has a vested interest in advancing peace and bringing stability to the region – and a key to stability is respect and adherence to the fundamental tenets of the rule of law and human rights.

Chairman Smith and Co-Chairman Wicker, we commend you for holding this hearing and look forward to working with the Helsinki Commission on these and other pressing issues as we pursue shared values in promoting democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law.

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