

## **FISCAL YEAR 2016 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](http://www.aaainc.org)) submits the following testimony regarding U.S. assistance and policy in the South Caucasus region.

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 at least \$5 million in assistance to Nagorno Karabakh, as well as directing funds to the largely Armenian populated Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia and ensuring 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, including the attack on the predominantly Armenian populated town of Kessab and the destruction of the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church in Der Zor.

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. Last Congress, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce along with Ranking Member Eliot Engel led a delegation to Armenia, and we strongly encourage Members to travel to the region this Congress, the Centennial year of the Armenian Genocide, 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) 2016**

**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, Armenia continues to implement important market-based reforms, and in terms of economic freedom ranked 52<sup>nd</sup> out of 178 countries rated by the Wall Street Journal-Heritage Foundation 2015 Index of Economic Freedom – well above other countries in the region. Armenia also met the eligibility requirements for the Millennium Challenge Corporation, of which we strongly support a second U.S.-Armenia compact and urge its timely implementation.

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.

The ball, as both former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and current Secretary John Kerry, have indicated, is in Turkey's court. Instead of moving forward, no concrete steps were taken with Turkey seeking to add new conditions, including with respect to the Nagorno Karabakh peace process. Within Turkey, last year's banning of Twitter, YouTube, along with the jailing of journalists, including Turkish writer and publisher Ragıp Zarakolu, as well as its tacit support of terrorist elements that have attacked Armenian communities in Syria, and the ongoing failure to return confiscated Armenian churches and properties, remains a troubling trend. The *Wall Street Journal* in its September 15, 2014 Review & Outlook entitled "Our Non-Ally in Ankara" stated that the Turkish government "long ago stopped acting like an ally of the U.S. or a friend of the West. Former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone declared...that the Turkish government 'frankly worked' with the al-Nusra Front—the al Qaeda affiliate in Syria—along with other terrorist groups. Ankara also looked the other way as foreign jihadis used Turkey as a transit point on their way to Syria [including the attack on Kessab] and Iraq. Mr. Ricciardone came close to being declared persona non grata by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government last December." With respect to the U.S.-led coalition to destroy ISIS, the article indicated that regarding Turkey's "bugging out" from the anti-ISIS coalition that "the U.S. military will no doubt find work-arounds for its air campaign, just as it did in 2003 when Turkey also refused requests to let the U.S. launch attacks on Iraq from [Incirlik Air Base on] its soil in order to depose Saddam Hussein. Turkey shares a 750-mile border with Syria and Iraq, meaning it could have made a more-than-symbolic contribution to a campaign against ISIS. So much for that."

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. Despite Azerbaijan's continued attempts to whitewash its record here in the United States, the *Washington Post* issued a blistering critique in its March 1, 2015 Editorial: "The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, is showing signs of a frantic despotism. Journalists, bloggers, lawyers, human rights activists and others who speak out for individual liberty are arbitrarily being swept up in a wave of arrests and detentions. Mr. Aliyev, suffering decline in the oil revenue that has propped up his regime for years, seems to be striking out at anyone who opposes him." **We, therefore, urge Members of the Subcommittee to adopt 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 strongly urges that the Subcommittee allocate at least \$5 million for Nagorno Karabakh. The Assembly appreciates the Subcommittee's consistent support for humanitarian and development assistance to Nagorno Karabakh. **Given the ongoing humanitarian and development needs facing the people of Nagorno Karabakh, including healthcare, transportation infrastructure, education, demining, drinking water, and sanitation projects, the Assembly urges that at least \$5 million be allocated in the FY 16 Bill.** In addition, the Assembly strongly urges the Subcommittee to ensure that continued funding be provided to rehabilitate damaged infrastructure and encourage development. 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 in Karabakh.

### **III. ASSISTANCE TO CHRISTIAN MINORITIES AT RISK IN THE MIDDLE EAST –**

The Assembly has consistently raised the alarm on this issue long before it garnered world attention for the crisis that it is. We remain deeply concerned about the ongoing unrest and violence in Syria, including the attack on the predominately Armenian Christian town of Kessab, as well as the destruction of the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church in Der Zor. While we welcome America’s humanitarian assistance to help meet the acute needs of people inside Syria and refugees across the region, with many Syrian-Armenian families forced to flee to Armenia, **we urge the Subcommittee to direct the State Department and USAID to allocate additional funds to Armenia as it seeks to absorb refugees 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.**

The Assembly would like to remind the Subcommittee that in March of 2010 over 100,000 Armenians living in Turkey were threatened with peremptory deportation. In addition, pursuant to the 2014 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report, “human rights has deteriorated significantly [in Turkey] during the past year...with troubling implications for freedom of religion.” We, therefore, urge the Subcommittee to include 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.

### **IV. SECTION 907 OF THE FREEDOM SUPPORT ACT –**

Given Azerbaijan’s increasingly anti-Armenian rhetoric and growing number of cease-fire violations, the Assembly urges this Subcommittee to suspend the waiver authority it granted and to fully reinstate Section 907. As the Subcommittee is aware, in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, pursuant to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell’s request for flexibility to counter terrorist elements and organizations operating in Azerbaijan, Congress granted a conditional and limited waiver to Section 907. Since that time, Azerbaijan has continued its unrelenting war rhetoric against Armenia. **Given Azerbaijan’s military expenditures, which are reported to exceed the entire national budget of Armenia, continued war mongering, cease-fire violations, and an inexplicable 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 Subcommittee to reinstate Section 907 and cease military assistance to Azerbaijan.**

We also support additional certification language in the House Report to accompany the Bill as follows: “In the last fiscal year, Azerbaijan has not taken hostile action, either through military force or incitement, including but not limited to threatening pronouncements by government officials, toward Armenia or Nagorno Karabakh, and has both stated and demonstrated its commitment to pursuing a lasting peace with Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh through solely non-violent means.”

### **V. THE NAGORNO KARABAKH PEACE PROCESS –**

The Assembly requests funding for confidence-building measures to help facilitate a peaceful resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Every year that the Nagorno Karabakh conflict continues without a solution, the risk of resumption of hostilities remains. The cease-fire violations have become more frequent and more deadly, with

Azerbaijan's downing of a helicopter along the cease-fire line last November and its refusal to allow the bodies to be retrieved for a proper burial was called "the worst incident of its kind in more than 20 years of the truce that ended the war of the early 1990s" by Thomas de Waal at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. With social media rants that "Armenia is not even a colony, it is not even worthy of being a servant" as well as declarations by Azerbaijani President Aliyev that "our main enemies are Armenians of the world" and repeated threats to launch a new war in Karabakh, such cease-fire violations should not come as a surprise.

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. In fact, promoting regional cooperation and economic integration in the South Caucasus is a strategically important goal for the United States. 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 statements, and attempts to isolate Armenia as evidenced by Azerbaijan's counterproductive stance to the Armenia-Turkey Protocols, and pardon of the axe murderer Safarov.

This continued pattern of aggression raises serious questions about Azerbaijan's commitment to reaching a peaceful and lasting solution to the Karabakh conflict. The OSCE Co-Chairs should directly and publicly condemn such statements emanating from Azerbaijan and call upon the government of Azerbaijan to desist from making further threats against Armenia and Karabakh. In addition, the U.S. government should carefully review its policies in the region and seek measures that increase regional cooperation while at the same time address Azerbaijan's actions that thwart U.S. objectives. Failure to do so can have negative repercussions on an already fragile cease-fire.

In order to facilitate peace, the Assembly requests that funds for confidence-building measures continue to be made available for increased cooperation among the parties to the conflict: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh. In particular, the Assembly recommends that the Subcommittee urge Azerbaijan to support the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)-sponsored confidence-building measures that facilitate interaction among the parties.

**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.**

**VI. U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE** – The Assembly supports the Administration's FY 16 request of \$1.7 million in Foreign Military Financing, and \$600,000 in International Military Education Training assistance to Armenia. Armenia continues its strategic partnership with the United States in the region extending its full support for U.S.-led peace-keeping deployments in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo. In addition, earlier this year, the President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan met with James Appathurai, the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, wherein continued cooperation and further deepening of relations

was reaffirmed.

**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** – As we commemorate the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide on April 24<sup>th</sup> of this year, 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 urge Members to participate in the Congressional Observance of the Armenian Genocide scheduled for April 22<sup>nd</sup> in the Cannon Caucus Room. It was Congress that acted – chartering the Near East Relief in 1919, and providing over \$100 million in humanitarian aid to help save the survivors – an extraordinary and unprecedented effort at that time. **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.”** Finally, a presidential visit to Armenia and the region this year would not only serve as a powerful reminder regarding America’s resolve to prevent genocide, but also reinforce America’s commitment to democracy, human rights and peace in the region.

**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 World War I 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. 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 114th Congress.