

Testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
"The Security, Economic and Human Rights Dimensions of US-Azerbaijan Relations"

U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearing
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Room 432 of the Russell Senate Office Building

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We want to thank the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe for convening this timely hearing and for giving the Armenian American community an opportunity to share our thoughts on this important matter.

Far too often the international community's well-deserved scrutiny of Azerbaijan's deeply flawed human rights record fails to focus sufficient attention on the truly alarming escalation of state-driven anti-Armenian incitements, intolerance, and acts of violence. Baku's policies and practices violate international human rights principles, abrogate Azerbaijan's own treaty obligations, destabilize the region, and create a dangerous environment conducive to the renewal of full-scale hostilities. In light of Azerbaijan's increasingly fatal pattern of cross-border ceasefire violations - including attacks just this past week - we hope the Commission will echo the calls by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Armenia and the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh to pull back snipers.

It is in the spirit of our shared search for peace that the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), an organization that speaks for many U.S. citizens who fled pogroms and massacres in Azerbaijan, which the U.S. condemned,¹ welcomes this opportunity to shed more light on the real-world implications of Azerbaijan's anti-Armenian policies.

¹ On July 27, 1988, the U.S. Senate unanimously passed Amendment 2690 to H.R.4782 - the FY1989 Commerce, Justice State Appropriations Act. This measure, introduced by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) along with Senator Pete Wilson (R-CA) and Bob Dole (R-KS), called on the Soviet government to "respect the legitimate aspirations of the Armenian people" and noted that "[d]ozens of Armenians have been killed and hundreds injured during the recent unrest." On May 17, 1991, the Senate again condemned the ongoing violence against Armenian civilians, passing S.Res.128, which stated, "Whereas the Government of the Soviet Union and Government of the Azerbaijan Republic have dramatically escalated their attacks against civilian Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, and Armenia itself. . . Resolved, That it is the sense of the Senate that the Senate -- condemns the attacks on innocent children, women, and men in Armenian areas and communities in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and in Armenia."

Azerbaijan's patently hateful and xenophobic policies toward Armenians directly and dramatically undermine the OSCE's efforts, through the Minsk Group, to bring about a fair and lasting resolution of outstanding security and status issues related to the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh. This policy of ethnic intolerance is driven, openly and unapologetically, by Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev, the son of a KGB general, who has become a billionaire on a civil service salary. He is often listed as among the most corrupt and undemocratic leaders in the world.

As is well known, Azerbaijan has been run by the Aliyev family for the better part of the past half century, making it highly difficult for domestic voices of tolerance to challenge their government's anti-Armenian policies. In fact, Azerbaijani citizens have been detained simply for promoting U.S.-backed dialogue with Armenians.² In the case of Leyla Yunus who was detained in May 2014, a police colonel publicly justified her mistreatment because he claimed that Ms. Yunus was not Azerbaijani, but Armenian.³

It is particularly alarming that the same President Aliyev who claims the right to govern over Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh has made such a high national priority out of demonizing Armenians simply because of their ethnicity. In a toxic racial rant reminiscent of WWII-era Europe, he said that Azerbaijan's "main enemies are Armenians of the world."⁴ This type of incitement poisons the entire region and hinders the already challenging search for peace.

It is in this context that we ask the Commission to turn its attention to the following considerations:

Celebrating an Axe-Murderer: As the *Associated Press* reported, "in a frenzy of ethnic hatred," Ramil Safarov, an Azerbaijani officer, brutally axed and nearly decapitated a sleeping Armenian NATO Partnership for Peace participant to death in Budapest in 2004.⁵ A Hungarian court convicted him for murder and sentenced him to life in prison. He never showed remorse for the murder, acknowledged that he attempted to kill another sleeping Armenian NATO participant, and wished he had killed *more* Armenians. Nevertheless, on August 31, 2012, in violation of its international obligations, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev immediately pardoned the convicted axe-murderer upon his transfer to Azerbaijan from Hungary. Immediately after his pardon, Safarov received a promotion in the Azerbaijani military, an apartment, and years of back pay for his time spent in prison.

The pardon was condemned around the world, including by President Obama, the European Parliament, OSCE, Council of Europe, and NATO.⁶ Assistant Secretary of

² <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/28/dispatches-harassed-azerbaijan>

³ <http://www.panorama.am/en/society/2014/05/20/leyla-yunus/>

⁴ <http://en.president.az/articles/4423>

⁵ <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/azerbaijani-ax-killers-pardon-raises-war-fears>

⁶ <http://anca.org/safarov/>

State for Europe at the time Phil Gordon said that the **United States was “appalled” by the glorification** of the axe murderer and viewed his pardon as “a real provocation.”⁷ The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights’ spokesman stated, “The crime was very clearly and, by his own confession, ethnically motivated. . . Ethnically motivated hate crimes of this gravity should be deplored and properly punished – not publicly glorified by leaders and politicians. . . .”⁸ Amnesty International declared that “By pardoning and then promoting Ramil Safarov, President Aliyev has signaled to Azerbaijanis that violence against Armenians is not only acceptable, but rewarded.”⁹

Nevertheless, Azerbaijan’s Minister of Culture and Tourism, Abulfas Garayev stated, “I . . . am very proud with the decision of Mr. President to pardon Ramil Safarov. . . . [It] certainly makes our enemies worry. However, we do not care, because the goal of every Azerbaijani is to fight their enemies, no matter where he is.”¹⁰ MP Ganira Pashayeva, an Azerbaijani delegate to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe astonishingly claimed, “**Ramil is one of the heroes of our people.** I congratulate our people and his relatives. I believe that Ramil was always beneficial for his people. . . .”¹¹ After international condemnation, Aliyev defended Safarov’s release again in September 2013, claiming his pardon had “restored justice.”¹² He remains free to this day.

Bigoted State Policies: Azerbaijan denies visas to any citizen including Americans of Armenian ancestry¹³ or people, who are married to an Armenian.¹⁴ In May 2014, Azerbaijan denied a visa to an athlete even though he was from Turkey, Azerbaijan’s ally, because he was *perceived to be Armenian*.¹⁵ The State Department warns Americans of Armenian ancestry to remain “particularly vigilant,” if they travel to Azerbaijan, since the government of Azerbaijan has explained that it is “unable to guarantee your safety.”¹⁶ Also dozens of Azerbaijani citizens were brought in for questioning by the national security ministry, simply because they voted for Armenian artists during a European song contest.¹⁷ In a related move, just this month, Azerbaijan prohibited the inclusion of a famous classical piece the “Sabre Dance” by world-

⁷ <http://www.armenialiberty.org/archive/english/20120921/1089/1089.html?id=24715578>

⁸ <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2012/09/release-of-an-azerbaijani-soldier-who-killed-an-armenian-causes-concern/>

⁹ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR55/015/2012/en/592a6e51-3848-4f43-948e-e99e54505403/eur550152012en.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.news.az/articles/politics/67644>

¹¹ <http://news.az/articles/politics/67405>

¹² <http://www.news.az/articles/official/82721>

¹³ American journalist for *Bloomberg Markets* was denied entry into Azerbaijan, because of her Armenian ethnicity. <http://cpj.org/2011/07/citing-ethnicity-azerbaijan-bars-photojournalist.php>

¹⁴ <http://www.panorama.am/en/society/2013/08/14/anna-sahakyan/>

¹⁵ <http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/25404877.html>

¹⁶ <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/country/azerbaijan.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/aug/18/azerbaijan-authorities-interrogate-music-fans>

renowned composer Aram Khatchadurian at an international sporting competition, because the composer was Armenian.¹⁸

Inciting Hate: President Aliyev announced “our main enemies are Armenians of the world,” during a national address that is posted on his official website.¹⁹ In a November 2012 Twitter tirade, President Aliyev stated, “Armenia is a country of no value. It is actually a colony, an outpost run from abroad . . .” In September 2013, Aliyev extolled the “clearing” of Armenians from Baku and announced Azerbaijan’s preparedness to do it again.²⁰

Destruction of Holy Site: Azerbaijan demolished an over 1,300 year old sacred cemetery with thousands of Armenian tombstones in Djulfa, Nakhichevan. This act of desecration was videotaped,²¹ condemned by the international community,²² and documented by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.²³ Azerbaijan has prohibited both the current and former U.S. Ambassadors to Azerbaijan from visiting the sacred site,²⁴ which has reportedly been turned into a shooting range.²⁵

Attacking a Novelist for Expressing Sympathy for Armenians: In February 2013, President Aliyev stripped an Azerbaijani writer of his state honors and pension, because he wrote sympathetically about Armenians in his *novel*. His wife and son were also fired from their government jobs, before a political party supportive of President Aliyev rescinded its bounty of over \$12,000 for anyone, who **would cut off the novelist’s ear**.²⁶ An aide to Azerbaijan’s President Aliyev insisted, “The Azerbaijani people must express public hatred towards these people.”²⁷

During this hearing and in your subsequent work in promoting human rights, fostering democracy, and advancing the peaceful resolution of conflicts, we respectfully call upon the Commission to focus additional attention on Azerbaijani government policies that demonize an ethnic group and reward the most gruesome forms of violence against them. We would also ask, in the context of the Nagorno Karabakh peace process, that Commissioners remain acutely aware that Azerbaijan’s leadership encourages violence against Armenians, designates the “Armenians of the world,” whether soldiers or children, as its “main enemies,” punishes Azerbaijanis who support dialogue with

¹⁸ <http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/179477/>

¹⁹ <http://en.president.az/articles/4423>

²⁰ <http://www.news.az/articles/official/82721>

²¹ <http://www.djulfa.com/film/>

²² <http://www.archaeology.org/online/features/djulfa/>

²³ <http://www.aaas.org/news/releases/2010/1208azerbaijan.shtml>

²⁴ http://www.rferl.org/content/us_envoy_bryza_barred_from_ancient_armenian_cemetery_in_azerbaijan/9502346.html;

<http://www.armenianweekly.com/2012/11/05/anca-calls-on-amb-morningstar-to-reject-bakus-ban-on-djulfa-cemetery/>

²⁵ http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/world_report/2006-2007/pdf/H@R_2006-2007_09_National_Report_Azerbaijan.pdf

²⁶ <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2013-02-13/azeri-party-offers-13-000-bounty-for-cutting-off-writer-s-ear>

²⁷ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/12/azerbaijan-stop-harassing-writer>

Armenians, demolishes religious monuments of immense cultural importance, and bans people from entering the country based on their real or perceived Armenian ancestry.

As Americans, proud citizens of a nation founded by people who fled persecution and lit the flame of freedom that burns today in the hearts of the people in Nagorno Karabakh, we cannot continue to look away and ignore Azerbaijan's destructive and hateful policies towards Armenians. Neither the U.S. government nor our OSCE partners should ever, in any way, acquiesce to Baku's anti-Armenian policies or increasingly violent efforts to subjugate the people and government of Karabakh to despotic foreign rule.

Again, thank you very much for providing this opportunity to present the concerns of American Armenians.