

September 26, 2024

The Honorable Antony Blinken
U.S. Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

As we approach the 29th Conference of the Parties (COP29) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), hosted by Azerbaijan in November, we recognize a significant opportunity for the United States to strengthen regional ties and clean energy cooperation in the South Caucasus. As COP29 approaches, we request that the State Department press Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and the Government of Azerbaijan to take tangible measures that support regional peace, uphold human rights protections, and adhere to international laws and norms.

We urge the State Department to press for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, hostages, and POWs, including ethnic Armenians, to enable a more conducive environment for successful diplomacy at COP29. Azerbaijan's record on human rights remains deeply concerning, with no improvement noted by watchdogs. Human Rights Watch has consistently reported Azerbaijan's "appalling human rights record," with abuses escalating unabated through 2023.¹ Freedom House ranks Azerbaijan with a "democracy percentage" of 1%² and a "global freedom score" of 7 out of 100.³

The State Department's most recent Human Rights Report corroborates these findings, detailing unlawful killings, torture, and severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association.⁴ The increase in political prisoners, from 122 in December 2021⁵ to at least 303 as of June 2024,⁶ underscores a worsening situation. Further, Azerbaijan's deadly attack in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, the 10-month blockade of the Lachin Corridor, and the September 2023 cleansing of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh blatantly violated international law and led to significant and continued human suffering. The sustained blockade violated a February 2023 order by the International Court of Justice requiring "unimpeded

¹ Human Rights Watch, "Azerbaijan, World Report 2019: Events of 2018," 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/azerbaijan>.

² *Azerbaijan*, in NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2023, FREEDOM HOUSE, May 24, 2023, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/nations-transit/2023>.

³ *Azerbaijan*, FREEDOM HOUSE, accessed July 24, 2024, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan>.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, "2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Azerbaijan," April 22, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/azerbaijan/>.

⁵ List of Political Prisoners on 10 December 2021, Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/EnpolitzeK10December.pdf>.

⁶ *New List of Political Prisoners Published in Azerbaijan, Which Includes 303 People*, 1Lurer.am, June 14, 2024, <https://www.1lurer.am/en/2024/06/14/New-list-of-political-prisoners-published-in-Azerbaijan-which-includes-303-people/1142421>.

movement . . . along the Lachin Corridor.”⁷ Despite overwhelming evidence and international condemnation, Azerbaijan has not faced meaningful consequences for the ethnic cleansing and other actions. Additionally, as of the end of 2023, Azerbaijan had detained several of Nagorno-Karabakh’s political leaders and at least 23 prisoners of war; many others were unaccounted for or captured, some of whom were extrajudicially killed by Azerbaijani soldiers or law enforcement.⁸

Azerbaijan must take immediate action to address its poor human rights track record ahead of COP29. Additionally, we urge the State Department to condemn Azerbaijan’s harmful rhetoric criticizing Armenia’s right to self-defense. Civilians who have been displaced should have the right to return, with international protections. Azerbaijan has made false and inflammatory allegations that Armenia is preparing for war against Azerbaijan.⁹ Such provocative statements run the risk of undermining peace negotiations and jeopardizing stability at a time when all eyes will be on the region. Additionally, the U.S. should use all opportunities presented during COP29 to promote a just, durable and dignified peace in the region—particularly in light of Azerbaijan’s recent refusal to sign a preliminary peace treaty with Armenia.¹⁰ Support for human rights, the promotion of regional security, and the preservation of Armenia’s sovereign integrity are crucial not only to upholding our own commitment to democratic ideals, but also to executing an effective multilateral climate conference.

The backdrop of COP29 provides a pivotal platform to advance energy security and foster economic resilience in the South Caucasus, especially as countries such as Armenia seek to pivot away from Russian energy dependence. Armenia faces geographic and political challenges from being landlocked and blockaded by Turkey and Azerbaijan, significantly hindering its economic potential. The State Department could use this opportunity to facilitate discussions related to opening the border between Turkey and Armenia. But these discussions must be paired with acknowledgement of the Ottoman-era Armenian Genocide, consistent with U.S. policy,¹¹ and with robust security assistance for Armenia, given Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan’s military assault on Nagorno-Karabakh.¹² These efforts will further COP29’s underlying goals of

⁷ Order of February 22, 2023, *Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan)*, INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE, at ¶ 67, available at <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/180/180-20230222-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf> (requiring Azerbaijan to “ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions”).

⁸ “Video Shows Azerbaijan Forces Executing Armenian POWs.” Human Rights Watch, October 14, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/14/video-shows-azerbaijan-forces-executing-armenian-pows>; “Azerbaijan: Armenian POWs Abused in Custody.” Human Rights Watch, March 19, 2021.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/19/azerbaijan-armenian-pows-abused-custody>; Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. “Azerbaijan 2023 Human Rights Report.” U.S. Department of State, March 2024. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/azerbaijan>.

⁹ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan. “Statement of Azerbaijan Defense Ministry.” July 25, 2024. <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/statement-of-azerbaijan-defense-ministry-52454.html>.

¹⁰ Ruzanna Stepanian. “Azerbaijan Accused of ‘Torpedoing Peace Process.’” Azatutyun, September 3, 2024. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33104312.html>.

¹¹ “Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day.” The White House, April 24, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/24/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-armenian-remembrance-day/>.

¹² Andrew Roth and Sam Jones. “Nagorno-Karabakh: Erdoğan praises Azerbaijan as thousands flee to Armenia.” The Guardian, September 25, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/25/nagorno-karabakh-refugees-pour-into-armenia-after-military-offensive-azerbaijan>.

enhancing regional energy security and economic cooperation, which can only be achieved through ensuring Armenia's sovereignty and security and securing a peace in the region that will uphold fundamental human rights.¹³ The Joint European Union-United States-Armenia High-Level Meeting on April 5, 2024 emphasized collaborative efforts to enhance economic and energy resilience, with the United States supporting Armenia's development of a transport strategy to boost regional trade and connectivity aligned with its "Crossroads of Peace" vision for sustainable peace.¹⁴ COP29 should serve as a platform to endorse and promote regional cooperation initiatives, thereby enhancing energy security and economic prosperity for Armenia and the broader region.

To that end, as the United States continues to deepen its bilateral relationship with Armenia, we ask the State Department, in consultation with the United States Department of Energy, to identify opportunities for greater U.S.-Armenia clean energy cooperation to reduce Armenian reliance on Russian energy. As the United States delegation prepares to participate in COP29, it is key to explore and enhance the clean energy partnership with Armenia, a democratic and strategic partner in a region facing increasing authoritarianism from its neighbors. The Armenian government's proactive approach, exemplified by the approval of the Energy Saving and Renewable Energy Program for 2022-2030, demonstrates a significant commitment to sustainable energy practices, especially relating to increased solar energy development and the safe use of other zero-emission generation.¹⁵

The upcoming COP29 in Azerbaijan offers a unique opportunity to promote clean energy and regional cooperation, but it is critical for the United States to address the significant challenges posed by ongoing human rights violations and unresolved territorial conflicts in Azerbaijan. By taking these steps to address Azerbaijan's detention of political prisoners, hostages, and prisoners of war, as well as deescalate inflammatory accusations against Armenia, the State Department can help ensure that COP29 focuses on sustainable development and genuinely aids clean energy, climate, and economic progress in a region marked by complex diplomatic challenges and untapped potential.

Sincerely,

[[SIGNATURES]]

¹³ Aslı Ayıntaşbaş and Richard Giragosian, "Acts of Normality: The Potential for Turkey-Armenia Rapprochement," European Council on Foreign Relations, March 15, 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/acts-of-normality-the-potential-for-turkey-armenia-rapprochement/>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Joint U.S.-EU-Armenia High Level Meeting in Support of Armenia's Resilience," April 5, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/joint-u-s-eu-armenia-high-level-meeting-in-support-of-armenias-resilience/>;
U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement on U.S.-Armenia Strategic Dialogue Capstone," June 11, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-u-s-armenia-strategic-dialogue-capstone/>.

¹⁵ Government of the Republic of Armenia, "Decision N 298-L: Approving the Program on Energy Saving and Renewable Energy for 2022-2030, The Action Plan Ensuring Implementation of the First Phase (2022-2024) of the Program on Energy Saving and Renewable Energy for 2022-2030," March 24, 2022. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ahjtde6IX4g32VKxUcA8azW6ZgGR9-KZ/view>.