



Armenian National Committee of America

1711 N Street NW | Washington DC 20036 | Tel: (202) 775-1918 | Fax: (202) 775-1918 anca@anca.org | www.anca.org

Armenian American Policy Priorities



In the wake of Azerbaijan's genocidal ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) in 2023, and amid fraught peace talks, the ANCA is urging Congress to support measures to promote a just, durable and dignified peace in the South Caucasus predicated on accountability, justice, and respect for the fundamental rights of Nagorno-Karabakh's forcibly displaced Armenian population.

Despite ongoing negotiations, Azerbaijan's aggression against Armenia continues to this day. Azerbaijan continues to occupy close to 100 square miles of Armenian territory – threatening Armenia's security, and destabilizing peace talks. In February 2026, Azerbaijan sentenced 16 Armenian POWs and civilian hostages to life in prison – in violation of international law, and inconsistent with the spirit and intent of regional peace efforts. And in April 2026, it was confirmed that Azerbaijan had destroyed two Armenian cathedrals in Artsakh's capital of Stepanakert – part of a systematic campaign to destroy Armenian cultural heritage and civilian property intended to deny the right of return to Artsakh's 150,000 forcibly displaced Armenians by leaving them with nothing to return to.

Furthermore, amid the growing threat facing Armenian and Christian minorities throughout the region – the ANCA urges the U.S. take tangible steps to protect the rights of vulnerable minority communities across the Middle East.

1. Prohibiting U.S. Military Assistance to Azerbaijan and Supporting Armenia's Security

Under Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act, the U.S. is prohibited from providing military aid to Azerbaijan. This measure was adopted by Congress in response to Azerbaijan's assault and blockade against Armenia and Artsakh during the First Nagorno-Karabakh war (1988-1994). In 2002, Congress amended Section 907, providing the President with the authority to waive these prohibitions on an annual basis when determined to be in the U.S. national security interest. Section 907 was waived every year from 2002-2023, until President Biden upheld prohibitions on military aid to Azerbaijan in 2024 – following the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh's Armenians in 2023, and in response to considerable bipartisan and bicameral pressure.

In 2025, 60 U.S. Representatives signed a bipartisan letter urging the Administration to enforce Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act. Despite this, the Trump Administration reauthorized Section 907 in August 2025, following a White House summit with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. President Trump extended the waiver of Section 907 in August 2026 – despite Azerbaijan's recent sentencing of unlawfully detained Armenian POWs, continued destruction of Armenian heritage, and ongoing occupation of sovereign Armenian territory.

ANCA Request: Sign a bicameral and bipartisan letter led by **Sen. Peters (D-MI)** and **Rep. Bilirakis (R-FL)** raising concern over the decision to waive Section 907 – and urging the Administration to withhold U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan until demonstrable progress has been made toward ensuring the release of all Armenian POWs, the protection of Armenian cultural heritage, and the withdrawal of Azerbaijani forces from Armenian territory. For more information, contact Sari Cureton (sari_cureton@peters.senate.gov) in Sen. Peters' office.

2. Securing the Release of Unjustly Detained Armenian POWs and Political Prisoners

In February 2026, Azerbaijan sentenced 16 unlawfully detained Armenian prisoners of war – including the former political leaders of Artsakh – to extended prison terms ranging from 15 years to life. These sentences followed a year-long sham trial process, during which Armenian detainees were subject to torture and abuse, denied due process, deprived of their fundamental legal rights, and charged on politically and racially motivated grounds.

ANCA Request: The ANCA urges Senators to call on the Administration to use all diplomatic means at its disposal to pressure Azerbaijan to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all unjustly detained Armenian prisoners of war – including the enforcement of Global Magnitsky Sanctions against Azerbaijani officials responsible for their unlawful detention and abuse in custody.

3. Ensuring Accountability for Azerbaijani Human Rights Violations & War Crimes

During and since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and 2023 ethnic cleansing of Artsakh, Azerbaijan perpetrated grave human rights violations including the torture of POWs and civilian captives, the extrajudicial killing of civilians, the summary execution of unarmed Armenian service members, the genocidal forced displacement of Artsakh's entire population and other war crimes. Azerbaijan has faced no repercussions for its violations of international law, and continues unabated in its human rights abuses today – including the unlawful detention of Armenian POWs, and the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage and civilian property in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Congress can exercise its oversight authority over U.S. military assistance by requesting a report into Azerbaijan's human rights practices pursuant to Section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act – which prohibits U.S. security assistance to “any country the government of which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violation of internationally recognized human rights.”

ANCA Request: The ANCA calls for the introduction of a resolution pursuant to Section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act (1961) requiring the State Department to provide a report on Azerbaijan's human rights practices, and a determination as to whether Azerbaijan's conduct would disqualify it from receiving further U.S. assistance.

4. Guaranteeing the Right of Return for Forcibly Displaced Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) Armenians

Under international law, the 150,000 Armenians forcibly displaced from Artsakh by Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the genocidal ethnic cleansing of the region in September 2023 have the right to return to their homes under safe and secure conditions free from the threat of persecution. Azerbaijan continues to deny and violate this right through its ongoing destruction of Armenian cultural heritage, civilian property, and public infrastructure – intended to leave the region's Armenian population with nothing to return to.

ANCA Request: The ANCA calls on Congressional leaders to urge the Administration promote the right of Armenians to return to Nagorno-Karabakh during ongoing negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan – and to call for the protection of Armenian cultural heritage and civilian property in Nagorno-Karabakh.

5. Promoting Armenian Genocide Education

In 2019, the U.S. House and Senate formally recognized the Armenian Genocide with near unanimous support, overcoming decades of Turkey's efforts to thwart honest remembrance, recognition, and justice of this crime against humanity. This resolution, in addition to recognizing historic truth of genocide, called for the promotion of genocide education – with an understanding that genocide prevention can only begin through education.

ANCA Request: Support the introduction of a Senate companion to the **Armenian Genocide Education Act** – to allocate funding to the Library of Congress to support education on the Armenian Genocide in schools across the U.S., including through teacher training, and development of curricula material.

6. Delivering Robust Humanitarian Assistance to Armenian Refugees

Since 2020, Azerbaijan's genocidal ethnic cleansing of Artsakh displaced over 150,000 Armenians, who are now refugees in the Republic of Armenia. Artsakh Armenians have faced challenges in access to housing, employment, social services, medical and psychological care, and other basic needs. A USAID-funded needs assessment determined the humanitarian response would require up to \$2 billion in assistance. U.S. and other foreign assistance to date has not come close to meeting the needs of Artsakh's refugees.

ANCA Request: The ANCA continues to urge members to prioritize humanitarian aid to Artsakh refugees in its foreign assistance to Armenia, and allocate robust assistance to help meet the basic needs of the 150,000 forcibly displaced Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians who still require urgent humanitarian support.

7. Blocking U.S. Military Sales to Turkey

In light of Turkey's destabilizing conduct in the region, its violation of the security and sovereignty of its neighbors, and its egregious domestic and international human rights record, the ANCA strongly opposes Turkey's readmission to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program – which would risk emboldening Ankara's belligerent behavior and reward conduct fundamentally inconsistent with its international obligations.

ANCA Request: The ANCA urges members to support bipartisan and bicameral efforts to assert robust Congressional oversight over U.S. military sales to Turkey – including **S.5205** to hold Turkey accountable for systemic political repression, censorship, transnational repression, and violations of international law.

8. Supporting an End to the War in Iran

The ANCA has long called for robust Congressional oversight and scrutiny of U.S. foreign policy, and urges members of the U.S. Congress to uphold their constitutional war powers authority to end the conflict with Iran. This conflict has already resulted in intolerable civilian casualties and reports of grave war crimes. Iran is home to over 100,000 Christian Armenians, a community dating back centuries – the largest Christian community in Iran, and the largest Armenian community remaining in the Middle East. Additionally, the ANCA is deeply wary of how regional spillover will impact the security of the Republic of Armenia, and the well-being of Armenian communities across the region – including Lebanon and Syria.

ANCA Request: The ANCA calls for de-escalation and a return to negotiations, reiterates our longstanding calls for robust legislative oversight over U.S. foreign policymaking, and urges Members of Congress to assert their constitutional war power authority to end the conflict with Iran.

9. Protecting the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem

The Armenian Quarter is an integral part of the Old City of Jerusalem, with its Armenian presence dating back to the 4th century, when Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity. The Armenian Quarter has long been a place of pilgrimage and refuge, particularly in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide.

Since 2024, land developers and settlers have launched armed attacks to seize the Armenian Quarter from its local residents to construct luxury hotels and other buildings that would result in the eviction and displacement of Armenian Christian families that have lived in the Old City for centuries. Municipal authorities have further pressured the Armenian Patriarchate through tax disputes and foreclosure proceedings.

ANCA Request: The ANCA urges the U.S. to protect Jerusalem's Armenian Christian Quarter from mounting legal, political, and physical threats – and to condemn violent attacks targeting Armenian institutions, oppose unilateral actions that disrupt the cultural and religious balance of the Old City, and engage diplomatically to ensure the survival of Jerusalem's historic Christian community.

10. Safeguarding the Rights of Vulnerable Minority Communities in Syria

Following the fall of the Assad regime at the hands of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), it is imperative the U.S. takes measures to safeguard the rights of vulnerable minority groups in Syria. This includes Armenians, Alawites, Druze, Yezidis, Kurds, and historic Christian communities (including Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian, and Melkite peoples), among others, integral to the cultural lineage of Syria.

ANCA Request: The ANCA urges members to promote efforts to guarantee the rights of Syria's vulnerable communities, particularly during the transition period. The ANCA also calls on members to demand the removal of Turkish forces occupying Northern Syria, and hold Turkey accountable for its assault on Kurdish populations, and harboring of terrorist forces in Syria.



Armenian National Committee of America

1711 N Street NW | Washington DC 20036 | Tel: (202) 775-1918 | Fax: (202) 223-7964 | anca@anca.org | www.anca.org

ANCA Policy Memo: Letter Urging Enforcement of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act

TO: Members of Congress / Congressional Staff
CONTACT: Alex Galitsky, Policy Director; Tereza Yerimyan, Government Affairs Director
legislative@anca.org; (202) 775-1918
DATE: September, 2026

In July 2026, the Trump Administration notified Congress of its intention to extend the waiver of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act – reauthorizing U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan. President Trump had previously waived Section 907 in August 2025, following a White House summit with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Since the Administration last waived Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act, Azerbaijan has continued unabated in its violation of international law and hostility toward Armenia. In February 2026, Azerbaijan sentenced 16 unlawfully detained Armenian hostages to extended prison terms ranging from 15 years to life following sham trials that were widely condemned by international human rights organizations and legal experts as a grave miscarriage of justice. Armenian detainees have also suffered torture and abuse in custody – and been deprived of their fundamental legal rights. In September 2025, Azerbaijan expelled the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the only organization authorized to visit the Armenian detainees – further endangering their safety and wellbeing.

In further violation of international law, in April 2026 it was reported that Azerbaijan had destroyed two Armenian cathedrals in Nagorno-Karabakh's capital city of Stepanakert – part of an ongoing systematic campaign of Armenian Christian cultural heritage destruction since the 2020 war against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan also continues to militarily occupy approximately 100 square miles of sovereign Armenian territory – where it has maintained an entrenched presence since illegal incursions into Armenia in 2021 and 2022.

In light of Azerbaijan's ongoing hostility and sustained violations of international law, it is clear that the decision to waive Section 907 following the 2025 White House Summit has not induced Azerbaijan's good faith engagement with the peace process. Azerbaijan's ongoing detention of Armenian POWs, destruction of Armenian heritage, and occupation of Armenian territory continue to undermine trust and confidence in the prospects of a durable peace. The ANCA remains deeply concerned that the continued waiver of Section 907 will only further encourage and embolden Azerbaijan amid its destabilizing conduct that threatens to undermine efforts to ensure lasting peace in the region.

Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act is a critical tool at the disposal of the U.S. government to hold Azerbaijan accountable to the ongoing peace process with Armenia – and to compel Azerbaijan to ensure the release of unlawfully detained POWs, cease the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh, and withdraw its military forces from sovereign Armenian territory. The ANCA believes that the Trump Administration should withhold U.S. security assistance to Azerbaijan until meaningful steps have been taken to resolve these ongoing human rights and security challenges – which would represent a critical confidence and security building measure in the effort to ensure a just, durable, and dignified peace in the region.

ANCA Request: Sign Letter Urging Enforcement of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act

In response to President Trump's reauthorization of the waiver of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act, the ANCA is urging members to support a bicameral and bipartisan letter led by Senator Peters (D-MI) and Representative Bilirakis (R-FL) raising concern over the decision to waive Section 907 – and calling on the Administration to withhold U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan until demonstrable progress has been made toward ensuring the immediate release of all Armenian prisoners of war, the protection of Armenian cultural heritage sites from further destruction, and the expedited withdrawal of Azerbaijani military forces from sovereign Armenian territory.

For more information, please contact Sari Cureton (sari_cureton@peters.senate.gov) in Sen. Peters' office, or Nathan Stamps (nathan.stamps@mail.house.gov) in Rep. Bilirakis's office.

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September XX, 2026

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

Dear Secretary Rubio,

We recognize the work this administration has done to mediate peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Furthermore, we note efforts by Armenia and Azerbaijan to resolve longstanding border disputes through consistent talks. However, we are concerned that amid these positive steps Azerbaijan continues to undermine the peace process. Azerbaijan's decision to sentence the unlawfully detained Armenian prisoners of war demonstrates a willingness to upend stability. Additionally, the presence of Azerbaijani military forces in more than 200 square kilometers of Armenian territory creates asymmetry in ongoing talks.¹ This context illustrates Azerbaijan's fragile commitment to the process and emphasizes the importance of the United States remaining engaged on this issue. As Azerbaijan's conduct threatens to compromise the integrity of the peace process, we note with concern the recent decision to reauthorize the waiver of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act [U.S. Public Law No: 102-511]. Despite the issuance of the waiver, we urge your administration to withhold U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan if they continue to jeopardize the success of negotiations. The United States has a critical role in ensuring that ongoing talks yield results that advance peace and security in the region.

In February 2026, Azerbaijan sentenced 16 Armenian detainees to extended terms ranging from 15 years to life in prison. These sentences followed a series of trials that were widely rebuked by international human rights organizations, legal experts, and the European Parliament as a miscarriage of justice². The detainees consisted of political and military leaders of Nagorno-Karabakh who have been held illegally since Azerbaijan's military assault on the region in 2023. Almost three years have passed since Azerbaijan's attack on Nagorno-Karabakh forcibly displaced over 100,000 Armenian inhabitants in what has been widely characterized as an act of ethnic cleansing.³ In addition to forced displacement there continue to be reports of the destruction of Armenian Churches in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴ The pattern of cultural erasure in the region and the decision to move forward with sentencing these individuals, calls into question Azerbaijan's genuine commitment to long term peace and stability.

On April 30, 2026, Armenia and Azerbaijan held the thirteenth meeting to discuss border delimitation. Addressing longstanding border disputes remains a critical task to ensure the stability of any future peace agreement. So far, the only practical outcome from these talks has come from Armenia's efforts to address Soviet-era territorial disputes. In May of 2024 Armenia returned four Azerbaijani enclave villages that had been under Armenian control since the first Karabakh

¹ Hayk Hovhannisyan, *Mapping the Occupation: 241 km² of Armenian Territory Remains Under Azerbaijani Control*, Civilnet (Oct. 23, 2025) (<https://civilnet.am/en/news/980654>)

² Nailia Bagirova, *Azerbaijan summons EU envoy in row over treatment of Karabakh Armenians*, Reuters (May 1, 2026) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-summons-eu-envoy-row-over-treatment-karabakh-armenians-2026-05-01/>)

³ *Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?*, Freedom House (2024) (https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/NO-ARMENIANS-IN-NK-DDF-FH_FACT-FINDING_REPORT_FULL_VERSION.pdf)

⁴ Amos Chapple and Mark Kurtov, *Cathedral, Church Demolished In Nagorno-Karabakh*, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty (Apr. 27, 2026) (<https://www.rferl.org/a/cathedral-church-demolished-nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict/33743489.html>)

war.⁵ However, these efforts have been complicated by Azerbaijan's ongoing occupation of an estimated 241.4 sq kilometers of Armenian territory, following military encroachments into Armenia in 2021 and 2022⁶. Azerbaijan's recent encroachments and entrenched military presence within Armenia's internationally recognized borders presents a security challenge and sets the stage for asymmetric negotiations. A just outcome to these talks is imperative to maintaining the integrity of Armenian sovereignty and ensuring long-term stability in the region. We encourage the administration to use existing leverage, such as withholding military assistance, to ensure positive outcomes.

Following a White House summit with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan last year, the waiver of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act was extended.⁷ Although the summit was an important step in the right direction there is still significant work to be done to address unresolved humanitarian and security issues. It is clear, that the decision to waive Section 907 has not induced Azerbaijan's engagement on ensuring the release of POWs. As a result, we are concerned that Azerbaijan's inconsistent behavior jeopardizes the prospect of a just and long-lasting peace in the region – and that the continued waiver of Section 907 without a commitment to addressing these concerns will only further encourage destabilizing actions.

June 23rd, 2026, marked the 1000th day of unlawful detention for the Armenian hostages in Azerbaijan's custody. It is imperative that the United States applies meaningful pressure on Azerbaijan to ensure their release, as required under international law. We call on the administration to engage with Azerbaijan to secure the release of the prisoners and encourage the removal of Azerbaijani military forces from sovereign Armenian land. If meaningful steps are not taken, we urge your administration to withhold U.S. military assistance in order to demonstrate the United States' commitment to ensuring all parties take the peace process seriously.

We thank you for your consideration and look forward to the opportunity to work with you on efforts to ensure peace and stability in the region.

Sincerely,

[[CLOSING]]

[[SIGNATURES]]

⁵ Sossi Tatikyan, *The Enclave Issue Between Armenia and Azerbaijan*, EVN Report (May 21, 2026) (<https://evnreport.com/politics/the-enclave-issue-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan/>)

⁶ Hayk Hovhannisyan, *Mapping the Occupation: 241 km² of Armenian Territory Remains Under Azerbaijani Control*, Civilnet (Oct. 23, 2025) (<https://civilnet.am/en/news/980654>)

⁷ *Extension of Waiver of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act with Respect to Assistance to the Government of Azerbaijan*, Department of State (Aug. 08, 2025) (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/08/15/2025-15682/extension-of-waiver-of-section-907-of-the-freedom-support-act-with-respect-to-assistance-to-the>)



Armenian National Committee of America

1711 N Street NW | Washington DC 20036 | Tel: (202) 775-1918 | Fax: (202) 775-1918 anca@anca.org | www.anca.org

ANCA Policy Brief: The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act

During its military assault on Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) in 2020, and the subsequent blockade and genocidal ethnic cleansing of the region in 2023, Azerbaijan perpetrated grave war crimes against the region's Armenian population – including but not limited to the arbitrary detention and abuse of prisoners of war and civilian captives, the extrajudicial killing of civilians, and the deliberate targeting of civilians. Despite this, Azerbaijan has faced no accountability for its flagrant violations of international law.

Azerbaijan continues to detain at least 19 known Armenian prisoners of war, civilian captives, and former Artsakh officials – including past presidents, foreign ministers, and parliamentary leaders. In February, 2026, Azerbaijan [sentenced](#) 16 Armenian hostages to extended sentences of 15 years to life in prison. These sentences marked the culmination of year-long [sham trials](#), during which Armenian detainees were subject to torture and abuse, denied due process, deprived of their fundamental legal rights, and charged on political and racially motivated grounds. In September 2025, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) closed its mission in Azerbaijan after being [ordered](#) to leave by the Azerbaijani government. The ICRC was the only organization authorized to visit Armenian prisoners in Azerbaijan's unjust detention.

Despite ongoing negotiations, the draft peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan initialed during a trilateral summit at the White House last August contains **no provision to guarantee the release of unlawfully detained Armenian captives**. Additionally, at the Munich Security Conference in February, 2026, President Aliyev [declared](#) he would not grant Armenian detainees clemency.

In November 2025, Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) led a [letter](#) signed by 26 Senate colleagues – including Leader Schumer (D-NY) – urging the Administration to apply pressure on Azerbaijan to secure the release of Armenian prisoners. In December 2025, the State Department responded – noting that they had called for public and fair trials of detainees. Despite this, Azerbaijan proceeded with the unlawful sentencing of Armenians – widely condemned by international human rights organizations including [Amnesty International](#) as “an affront to all victims of crimes under international law.”

Urge Enforcement of Global Magnitsky Sanctions Against Azerbaijani War Criminals

In light of Azerbaijan's unlawful sentencing of Armenian prisoners of war, the ANCA is urging members of Congress to support legislative efforts to impose meaningful pressure on Azerbaijan to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of Armenian prisoners. The sentencing of Armenian detainees significantly undermines trust and confidence in peace talks. As such, the ANCA continues to call for the enforcement of targeted **Global Magnitsky Act Sanctions** against Azerbaijani officials responsible for the unlawful detention, abuse, and sentencing of Armenian prisoners of war.

ANCA Requests:

- 1) **Support upcoming legislative efforts** urging the Trump Administration to enforce Global Magnitsky Sanctions against Azerbaijani officials responsible for human rights violations, including the unlawful detention of Armenian POWs.
- 2) **Public Statements:** As we mark three years since the genocidal ethnic cleansing of Artsakh, the ANCA urges Congressional offices to **issue public statements, statements for the record, and/or social media posts calling for the immediate release of all unlawfully detained Armenian POWs.**

THE CHRISTIAN POST

Azerbaijan destroys historic Christian churches in Nagorno-Karabakh: 'Cultural genocide'

By [Anugrah Kumar](#), Christian Post Contributor Thursday, April 30, 2026



A priest stands in front of a church in Stepanakert on September 27, 2023. Armenia said on Sept. 27, 2023, that 42,500 refugees have arrived from Nagorno-Karabakh since Azerbaijan's lightning offensive, representing a third of the separatist ethnic Armenian enclave's population. | SIRANUSH SARGSYAN/AFP via Getty Images

Satellite imagery has confirmed the demolition of two historic Christian churches in Stepanakert, the main city in the Nagorno-Karabakh region held by Azerbaijan since September 2023, with Armenia's church authorities calling it a deliberate campaign to erase Armenian religious heritage from the territory.

The Holy Mother of God Cathedral, the principal site of Christian worship in Stepanakert, called Khankendi by Azerbaijanis, has been razed, [Radio Free Europe](#) reported, based on satellite imagery taken on Sunday.

Construction of the cathedral began in 2006, and the site was consecrated in 2019. During the Azerbaijani military offensives in the 2020s, the cathedral's basement was used as a bomb shelter by residents.

A social media post from early February showed a construction-type fence surrounding the cathedral. The building is believed to have been demolished by early April.

Along with the cathedral, satellite imagery confirmed the Church of St. Jacob, another major Christian site in the city, was also destroyed in recent weeks. Completed in 2007, the church was funded by an

Armenian-American philanthropist in memory of his deceased son. Cross stones in the grounds surrounding the demolished church have also been destroyed, according to the Armenian church.

The board said the structures had been “illegally” constructed during what it called the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territory, and argued the demolition “cannot be distorted in any way as the destruction of religious or cultural heritage.” It added that Azerbaijanis who returned to the city had urged authorities to remove structures that did not exist there before the period it described as “occupation.”

Last week, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, the governing authority of the Armenian Apostolic Church, accused Azerbaijan of “deliberately target[ing] Armenian Christian holy sites, seeking to erase the Armenian presence” in Nagorno-Karabakh, [Middle East Eye](#) reported.

The Caucasus Muslims Board dismissed that statement as “a manifestation of hostility and disinformation.”

Elnare Akimova, a member of Azerbaijan’s parliament, called reports of the churches’ destruction “a provocation by revanchist forces” and said Azerbaijan “has preserved religious and historic monuments on its territories as a state policy.”

Lernik Hovhannisyan, chairman of the Artsakh Diocesan Council, the administrative body of the Armenian church in the Nagorno-Karabakh region that Armenians call Artsakh, disputed the Azerbaijani government’s framing. He was quoted as saying that Armenians had always been the predominant population of Stepanakert, and that Azerbaijanis were brought to the city’s upper Krkzhan district in the 1960s to change demographic conditions in what was then the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.

Hovhannisyan also questioned why the Azerbaijani justifications made no mention of the Green Hour and Mokhrenes churches, built in the 18th and 19th centuries, which were destroyed in the nearby city of Shushi.

He said it was inconsistent with how Azerbaijan presents itself as a tolerant country where, in its own telling, “a church, a mosque, and a synagogue operate side by side.” He asked where the 27,000 monuments of Nakhichevan and the monuments of northern Artsakh now stood.

Hovhannisyan argued the demolitions were incompatible with international standards on self-determination.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe or OSCE, Minsk Group, the multinational mediation body co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States that had worked since 1992 to find a negotiated resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, had recognized the right of the Armenian population of the territory to self-determination in its documents.

The group had been effectively moribund since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 severed working relations among its co-chairs, and it ceased all substantive activity after Azerbaijan’s September 2023 offensive.

The demolitions have stirred controversy ahead of Armenia’s upcoming parliamentary elections, with critics accusing Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of failing to press the issue or seek international condemnation of Baku for the destruction of Christian holy sites in the territory.

Pashinyan said his government was working to gather complete information on the matter, but stopped short of condemning Baku. “I do not think that, taking into account our previous experience, we will make this a subject of international discussions at the state level,” he was quoted as telling reporters. He also said “such topics are a double-edged sword,” calling instead for “prudence.”

Around 120,000 ethnic Armenians fled Nagorno-Karabakh following a series of Azerbaijani military offensives that culminated in Azerbaijan’s full capture of the territory in September 2023. Armenians captured during the conflict remain jailed in Azerbaijan.

In a [post on X](#), Nadine Maenza, former chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, called the destruction of churches “Cultural genocide after the ethnic cleansing of 120,000.”

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/azerbaijan-destroys-historic-churches-in-nagorno-karabakh.html>

Freedom House Report on Azerbaijan's Ethnic Cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh

In July 2024, Freedom House released a report — [**“Why Are There No Armenians In Nagorno-Karabakh? Fact-Finding Report Summary”**](#) — that determined Azerbaijan's blockade and military assault against Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian population constituted an act of ethnic cleansing. The report found that Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh was intentional, noting *“the evidence demonstrates that the Azerbaijani state acted upon a comprehensive, methodically implemented strategy to empty Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population and historical and cultural presence.”*

The Blockade and Humanitarian Crisis

In December 2022, Azerbaijan imposed a blockade on the Lachin Corridor – the only humanitarian lifeline connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia – restricting free movement and the flow of food, goods, medicine, and fuel to the region's 120,000 Armenians, creating a dire humanitarian crisis. The report also found that *“the blockade was accompanied by the regular cutting of the supply of gas and electricity, as well as disrupting lines of communication, such as telephone landlines, cellular signals, and internet.”*

The Attack and Displacement of Armenians

On September 19, 2023, the Azerbaijani armed forces launched a military operation on Armenian-populated territory – resulting in the forced displacement of the region's entire indigenous Armenian population: *“The one-day offensive resulted in 229 deaths, among them 34 civilians, 5 of whom were children. Two hundred and forty-four were wounded, including 31 civilians, 10 of whom were children.”*

Arbitrary Detention and Abuse of Prisoners of War and Civilians

Freedom House noted that following the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Azerbaijan's “extrajudicial killings, torture, and abductions of civilians by servicemen of the Azerbaijani armed forces” contributed to an environment of intense fear and insecurity among ethnic Armenians. The report notes that in addition to those detained during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan abducted Armenian civilians as they crossed into Armenia – including from those in the ICRC's care. Additionally, following Azerbaijan's military assault, 17 Armenians were detained – including eight former high-ranking officials of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan's Deliberate Ethnic Cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh

Freedom House concluded that *“an analysis of the action and rhetoric of Azerbaijani authorities in conjunction with the lived experiences of the ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh provides reasonable grounds to conclude that their forced displacement was intentional. The evidence suggests a coordinated, long-term plan aimed at ridding Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population.”*

Freedom House reported the Armenian population was *“intentionally subjected to regular attacks, intimidation, deprivation of basic rights and adequate living conditions, and forced displacement,”* and that *“the Azerbaijani state imposed conditions of life designed to either bring about the destruction of the Armenian population over time, or render it impossible for them to stay and survive.”*

Since its military assault, Azerbaijan has engaged in a pattern of destruction of Armenian cultural heritage sites, which Freedom House determined was designed to *“to eliminate all traces of Armenian presence and heritage from Nagorno-Karabakh.”*



Use the QR code to access the full Freedom House report – [**“Why Are There No Armenians In Nagorno-Karabakh? Fact-Finding Report Summary”**](#)

Recommendations

To Individual States:

- Support international efforts to prosecute crimes against humanity and war crimes committed against the population of Nagorno-Karabakh, including by making a state referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC).
- Advocate within the Human Rights Council for the establishment of a country mechanism and a Special Procedure to investigate systemic human rights violations in Azerbaijan and report them to the Human Rights Council, General Assembly, and other UN bodies.
- Urge the UN Human Rights Council and OHCHR to investigate the war crimes and human rights violations documented in this report. Request that they recommend referral of these matters to the ICC by the UN General Assembly and Security Council.
- Implement targeted sanctions, such as travel bans and asset freezes, against Azerbaijani officials, military leaders, and individuals implicated in gross human rights violations and war crimes. Extend sanctions to include key Azerbaijani entities and companies involved in these crimes.
- Act collectively and individually to halt the sale, supply, or transfer of offensive military equipment, technology, and intelligence to Azerbaijan. This measure is critical to preventing further aggression and human rights violations.
- Urge Azerbaijan to immediately release and repatriate all detained ethnic Armenians, regardless of their ascribed status.
- Leverage diplomatic channels to urge Azerbaijan to uphold international cultural preservation standards and prevent further destruction or modification of Armenian cultural properties. Advocate for Azerbaijan's cooperation with UNESCO and other relevant bodies to facilitate independent monitoring missions and promote international dialogue for the protection and restoration of these sites.
- Urge governments to keep the issues of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh at the forefront of international attention. This includes raising these topics during major international events, forums, and initiatives to build leverage and pressure for decisive action, such as accountability measures, protection of cultural sites, and support for the rights of displaced persons.

AZERBAIJAN

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, Azerbaijan's government committed severe violations of religious freedom. Authorities [enforced](#) the country's highly restrictive religion law, which criminalizes unregistered religious activities and grants the government full control over registered religious organizations. The religion law furthermore mandates the official review and approval of religious materials, restricts who can engage in missionary activities, and requires state approval of religious leaders, among other limitations.

In April, law enforcement in Nakhichevan reportedly raided a Protestant worship service for gathering without state permission. Courts later reportedly fined five Azerbaijani citizens 1,500 manats (\$882) each and fined and deported a family of foreign citizens over the incident. Also in April, police in Baku reportedly detained members of the unregistered religious group Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light for unfurling banners with religious slogans and imagery in a public space. In June, the State Security Service and State Migration Service announced the deportation of three foreign citizens for organizing religious meetings and engaging in missionary activities for "non-traditional religious movements." In July, Shi'a Muslim activists claimed that the government had placed restrictions on Ashura-related religious activities that did not occur on the day the state-controlled Caucasus Muslim Board recognized as the holiday. The government continued not to process the registration applications of several nondenominational Protestant groups and still has not granted Jehovah's Witnesses registration outside of Baku.

Azerbaijan has yet to implement an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. Dozens of military-age male Jehovah's Witnesses who reject military service on religious grounds have received travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country, and in July, a court sentenced Jehovah's Witness [Elgiz Ibrahimov](#) to one year in prison for refusing to serve in the military in accordance with his religious beliefs. An appeals court later released him on probation.

Azerbaijan continued to unjustly imprison more than 200 Shi'a Muslims who practice their religion outside the government's preferred interpretation of Islam. Most Shi'a detainees face dubious drug-related charges, which authorities have a history of using to target political dissent. Many Shi'a detainees have accused law enforcement of torture and other abuse during their arrests and imprisonment. In June, law enforcement detained and allegedly abused [Elgiz Mammadov](#), a member of the unregistered Shi'a group the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM), which the government has targeted for years. Authorities had previously [arrested](#) and allegedly sexually assaulted Mammadov in 2022 after he protested the trial of one of his fellow MUM colleagues. In July, a court sentenced MUM member [Tarlan Sayyadov](#) to three years in prison on drug-related charges. In August, police arrested six women reportedly while distributing alms and protesting in commemoration of the Shi'a holiday of Arba'in. Officers allegedly threatened the women with sexual assault and forcibly removed one woman's hijab.

Historic Armenian religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories remain at risk following Azerbaijan's retaking of the territories in 2020 and 2023. As of July, satellite imagery identified eight destroyed and another 10 damaged religious sites, including churches, cemeteries, and other artifacts. Additionally, family members have reported that Armenian prisoners are prevented from receiving religious items, such as the Bible; however, the Azerbaijani government has claimed prisoners have access to religious materials.

In February, a USCIRF delegation traveled to Azerbaijan to survey religious freedom conditions and meet with government officials. While the Azerbaijani government has been willing to engage with USCIRF, it has not made any significant progress since then to address USCIRF's recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Azerbaijan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Azerbaijani government agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Main Department for Combating Organized Crime (also known as Bandotdel), and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and

visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- Enter into a memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Department of State and the Azerbaijani government to develop and implement strategies to improve religious freedom and other human rights within the country; and
- Allocate funds to programs that document and/or report on religious freedom and related human rights violations in Azerbaijan, such as Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

The U.S. Congress should:

- Set conditions on foreign military financing and other security assistance to Azerbaijan, requiring specified improvements in religious freedom and related human rights;
- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, and other actions; and
- Advocate for freedom of religion or belief prisoners of conscience, including supporting individuals in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- [Commission Delegation Visit: Baku in February 2025](#)
- [Hearing: Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan](#)
- [Country Update: Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan](#)
- [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) and Appendix 2

Background

Azerbaijan has an [estimated](#) population of 10.6 million. Azerbaijan has no official state religion. Approximately 96 percent of the population identify as Muslim, composed of around 65 percent Shi'a and 35 percent Sunni. The remaining four percent of the population consists of atheists, Armenian Apostolic, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox.

Civil Society Crackdown

Azerbaijan's ongoing repression of independent civil society, especially journalists and human rights defenders, has resulted in less reporting and credible information on religious freedom and related human rights within the country. In March, authorities arrested Bashir Suleymanli, head of the Civil Rights Institute, one of Azerbaijan's remaining human rights organizations. In May, authorities arrested VOA journalist Ulviyya Guliyeva (known as Ulviyya Ali) on spurious smuggling charges in retaliation for her work. Guliyeva had consistently reported on the human rights issues in Azerbaijan, including the detention of Shi'a Muslim activists. During Guliyeva's interrogation, police allegedly physically assaulted her and threatened her with sexual violence. In June, a court sentenced seven journalists to between seven and nine and a half years in prison on fabricated charges tied to their alleged work for Abzas Media, a local independent Azerbaijani news outlet that reports on human rights issues. As of the end of the reporting period, Azerbaijan was imprisoning around 25 journalists.

International Bodies and Mechanisms

European bodies regularly highlighted Azerbaijan's human rights record, including on cases related to religious freedom. In July, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) [ordered](#) Azerbaijan to compensate Vugar Rafiyev for violating his freedom of religion or belief after authorities fined him and others for gathering to study the writings of Muslim theologian Said Nursi in 2017. In September, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) [visited](#) Azerbaijan to examine detainee conditions. The CPT had [criticized](#) Azerbaijan in 2024 for failing to cooperate with the organization and implement its recommendations. In October, the ECHR [ruled](#) that Azerbaijan had wrongfully disbarred human rights lawyer Yalchin Imanov for publicly commenting in 2017 on torture allegations made by his client, MUM leader Abbas Huseynov.

Chair Vicky Hartzler Dissent on Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan should be designated a Country of Particular Concern rather than Special Watch List due to its ongoing, egregious, and severe violations of religious freedom. The country outwardly claims to support religious freedom, yet inwardly does the opposite. It tortures its citizens, controls religious activity, expels independent media and the Red Cross, and destroys religious heritage sites.

Control of religion involves government approval for the publication and distribution of religious materials, requirements on the registration of churches, appointments by the government of imams to mosques, and government writing of sermons for Muslim services.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Azerbaijani bilateral relations primarily focused on securing a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with the U.S. government playing a mediating role. In August, President Donald J. Trump [hosted](#) Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan at the White House for peace talks. There, both countries [entered](#) into memoranda of understanding with the United States meant to facilitate peace through economic development, trade, and defense cooperation.

The Trump administration's cuts to broader human rights programming and U.S.-funded international media impacted organizations that documented or reported on religious freedom violations in Azerbaijan. A funding freeze for the U.S. Agency for Global Media resulted in the shutdown of VOA and a major reduction in reporting from RFE/RL. Organizations receiving funding from NED reported major disruptions to their operations as NED's funding was temporarily paused amid the administration's review of foreign aid.

Congress elevated human rights concerns in Azerbaijan throughout the year, including related to religious freedom. In March, 60 bipartisan members of Congress [urged](#) U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio to enforce prohibitions on U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan under [Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act](#) in part due to Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian religious heritage in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In April, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) led a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [hearing](#) on human rights in Azerbaijan following its hosting of the United Nations' annual climate conference. In July, more than 80 bipartisan members of Congress urged Secretary Rubio to ensure the safe return of Armenians displaced during Azerbaijan's 2023 military campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh. The letter mentioned Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian religious sites in the region.

In September, Representatives Dina Titus (D-NV) and Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) reintroduced the Azerbaijan Sanctions Review Act ([H.R. 5349](#)), which, if passed, would require the Trump administration to determine whether Azerbaijani officials mentioned in the bill participated in human rights abuses and qualified for sanctions under relevant U.S. law. Some of the Azerbaijani judges mentioned in the bill have been involved in sentencing Shi'a Muslim activists. Members of both the [House](#) and [Senate](#) introduced bipartisan resolutions condemning Azerbaijan's crackdown on civil society and mistreatment of academic and political activist Gubad Ibadoghlu, who faces charges in relation to his alleged possession of religious materials.

The U.S. Department of State [last placed](#) Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023.

Shi'a religious actors imprisoned for their faith have been subjected to beatings, threats of rape, and detention in horrid conditions. The nearly two dozen Armenian Christian prisoners from Nagorno-Karabakh, who were tried behind closed doors without adequate legal counsel, have received beatings, psychological abuse, lack of access to medical care and proper food, denials of Bibles, and the erasure of cross tattoos through burning. Police are not held accountable for these actions.

In addition, Azerbaijan continues to destroy religious monuments and churches in Nagorno-Karabakh, erasing over 2,000 years of Christian presence in that area. Satellite imagery has identified eight destroyed and another 10 damaged religious sites as of July, including churches, cemeteries, and other artifacts. Azerbaijan's treatment of religion and its people needs to change. If Azerbaijan wants to be a full partner with the United States and advance shared economic and strategic goals, it needs to take meaningful steps to truly embrace religious freedom.



© SIMON WOHLFAHRT/AFP via Getty Images

17 February 2026

Also available in Español, Հայերեն, Русский

Azerbaijan: Ruben Vardanyan's 20-year prison term culminates “travesty” of a trial against ethnic Armenian leaders

Responding to the conviction and 20-year sentence of Ruben Vardanyan, the last of 16 ethnic Armenians put on trial by Azerbaijan in connection with their roles in Azerbaijan's break-away region of Nagorno-Karabakh (Karabakh) prior to its takeover by Azerbaijani forces in 2023, Marie Struthers, Amnesty International's Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, said:

“The conviction of the 16 defendants, culminating in this sentence against Ruben Vardanyan, is nothing short of a travesty. The fact that Ruben Vardanyan and the others, several civilians like himself, were tried before a military court in itself raises serious concerns and is incompatible with fair trial guarantees. While victims of the decades-long conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in both Armenia and Azerbaijan deserve truth, justice, reparations and assurances of non-repetition, these convictions constitute an affront to all victims of crimes under international law.”

“

While victims of the decades-long conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in both Armenia and Azerbaijan deserve truth, justice, reparations

and assurances of non-repetition, these convictions constitute an affront to all victims of crimes under international law

Marie Struthers, Amnesty International's Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

“Accused of a plethora of extremely serious crimes, Ruben Vardanyan and other defendants were tried in an effectively closed hearing, based on ‘evidence’ in a language they could not understand and that was not adequately translated. Even the charges – over 40 against Vardanyan alone – including “terrorism” and “crimes against humanity” were not fully publicly disclosed during proceedings. Amnesty International requested information from the Azerbaijani authorities about the trial and the evidence but received no response.

“Azerbaijan must comply with its obligations under international human rights law and ensure that all those accused of crimes are tried in full compliance with international law and fair trial standards.”

Background

A prominent businessman, Ruben Vardanyan moved from Russia to Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022 and was detained by the Azerbaijani authorities on 27 September 2023 amid the mass exodus of ethnic Armenians following Azerbaijan's military takeover of the region. He faced multiple charges, including “financing terrorism,” “creating illegal armed group” and “violent seizure of power.”

Amnesty International expressed concern regarding his fair trial rights, citing allegations of ill-treatment, coerced signature of falsified case materials and denial of adequate time to prepare his defence, and called for an investigation into these reported violations.

On 5 February, the same court sentenced 15 other defendants, including former leaders of the self-proclaimed “Republic of Artsakh.” Five, including the former de facto President Arayik Harutyunyan, received life sentences. The defendants, both civilian and military, were accused of 2,548 crimes overall, including “genocide,” “slavery,” “enforced disappearance” and “financing terrorism.”

TUES. SEPT. 15



ARTSAKH ACCOUNTABILITY CAPITOL HILL RECEPTION

JUSTICE. FREEDOM. RIGHT OF RETURN.

5:30 PM, Capitol Visitor Center Room 217.



Keynote Remarks By:

SIRANUSH SAHAKYAN

Executive Director, Armenian Legal Center

Representing Armenian Hostages unlawfully held by Azerbaijan
Advocating for property claims of displaced Armenians of Artsakh

anca.org/rsvp | rsvp@anca.org | 202-775-1918

1000+ DAYS IN CAPTIVITY FREE ARMENIAN PRISONERS



Ruben Vardanyan



Davit Babayan



Davit Ishkhanyan



Arayik Harutyunyan



Bako Sahakyan



Arkadi Ghukasyan



Davit Manukyan



Levon Mnatsakanyan



Vasili Beglaryan



Garik Martirosyan



Alyosha Khosrovyan



Levon Balayan



Lyudvig Mkrtchyan



Melikset Pashayan



Gurgen Stepanyan



Madat Babayan



Davit Allahverdyan



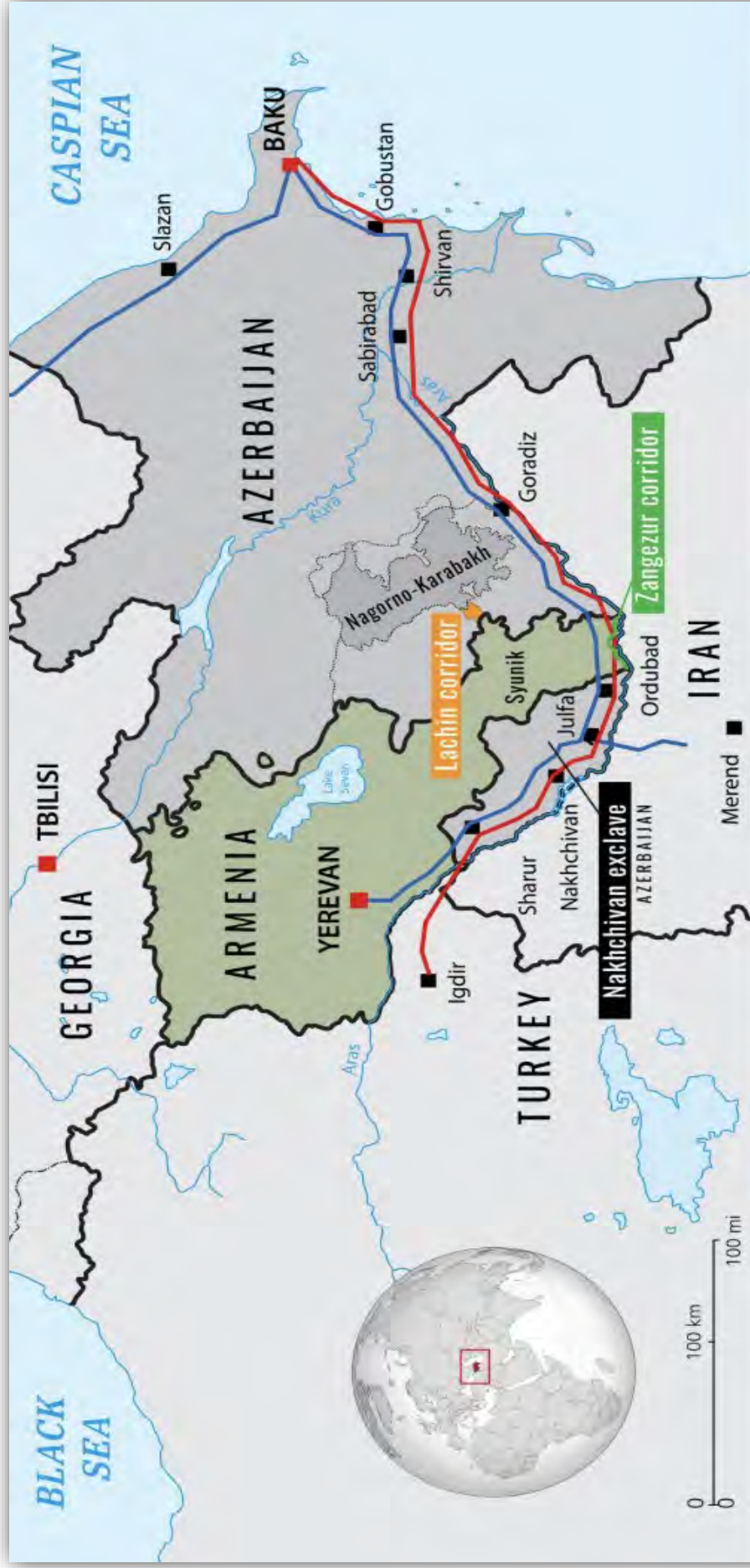
Erik Ghazaryan



Rashid Beglaryan

For over 1,000 days Artsakh leaders and prisoners of war have been illegally detained and tortured by Azerbaijan in violation of international law.

#FREEARMENIANPRISONERS



— Transport corridor that would connect Armenia with Russia and Iran (part of North-South Transport Corridor route)

— Transport corridor that would connect Azerbaijan with Turkey

