

ARMENIAN ASSEMBLY OF AMERICA – FISCAL YEAR 2021 TESTIMONY
BY BRYAN ARDOUNY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Prepared for the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

Chairman Lindsey Graham, Ranking Member Patrick Leahy and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, the Armenian Assembly of America (Assembly), established in 1972, is the largest Washington-based organization promoting public understanding and awareness of Armenian issues and welcomes the opportunity to provide the following testimony.

PROTECTING VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES – Founded by survivors of the Armenian Genocide and their descendants, who came to the United States fleeing persecution and oppression, the Assembly stands in solidarity with mourners and protestors from across the United States and around the world in calling for social justice, condemning racism, and urging much-needed and overdue reforms in our law enforcement sector. The Assembly strongly believes that vulnerable communities must be afforded protections and safeguarded wherever they reside. We, therefore, remain deeply concerned about Christians and other minorities at risk in the Middle East, particularly in light of President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s May 4, 2020 statement that “we do not allow terrorist leftovers of the sword in our country.” The term “leftovers of the sword” has been utilized pejoratively by Turkish authorities during the past century to stigmatize its Armenian, Assyrian and Greek populations. We consider this an early warning sign of immediate threats to Armenians, Greeks, fellow Christians, Kurds and Yazidis, as well as other minorities in the region. **We urge the United States to counteract these threats and safeguard innocent lives.** Garo Paylan, an outspoken Turkish parliamentarian of Armenian descent and Rakel Dink, widow to the late Hrant Dink, a Turkish Armenian journalist who was assassinated in broad daylight by a Turkish ultranationalist are two examples of individuals facing such public threats. History teaches that, especially in emergency situations, leaders’ dog-whistle calls to racism lead to tragic consequences, and we are seeing that history repeats itself in the current pandemic crisis.

President Erdoğan’s inflammatory language and actions are contributing to the elevation of tensions in Turkish society and inciting hate crimes towards Armenians and Armenian properties in Turkey, including St. Mary Armenian Church in Istanbul’s Bakırköy neighborhood which was vandalized on May 8, 2020 during an attempted burning of the church. The apprehended suspect stated that his motive to burn down the church was predicated on the false notion that Armenians “caused the coronavirus – the plague.” Minority groups in countries outside of Turkey, including in Syria and Nagorno Karabakh, also feel threatened by such statements. As highlighted in Freedom House’s 2020 report, “ethnic, religious, and other minority groups have borne the brunt of recent state abuses in both democracies and authoritarian countries. Left unchecked, such violations threaten the freedom of entire societies.” **We can and must do better, and urge robust assistance to support refugees fleeing persecution, including those who have found safe-haven in Armenia,** which, according to *The Economist*, has taken on the third largest number of refugees in Europe as a proportion of its population.

ASSISTANCE TO DEMOCRATIC CHRISTIAN ARMENIA – The Assembly’s non-partisan approach and support for democracy was enhanced as the world witnessed a watershed moment in Armenia’s history with the remarkable democratic transformation that took place in

2018 and 2019. In fact, *The Economist* named Armenia “Country of the Year” for its peaceful and democratic change of government. Armenia’s prime minister Nikol Pashinyan told *TIME* that “I believe Armenia will be one of the world’s strongest democracies.” *TIME* called Pashinyan a crusader who is “keeping the dream of democracy alive.” In its annual *Freedom in the World 2019* report, titled “Democracy in Retreat,” Freedom House highlighted Armenia as a country where “democracy has enduring appeal as a means of holding leaders accountable and creating the conditions for a better life.” **We urge not less than \$100 million in FY 2021 for Armenia’s continued institutional reforms, economic development, and efforts to combat COVID-19, and appreciates the over \$6 million in COVID related funding to date.** America’s strong support of and investment in Armenia’s democracy will have a profound effect across the globe. Armenia’s actions stand in stark contrast to its increasingly authoritarian neighbors. Whether it is Turkey’s practice of targeting, harassing and jailing journalists, attacking U.S. citizens on American soil, incarcerating U.S. diplomats, slaughtering the Kurdish people, lobbying against and denying the Armenian Genocide, or the \$530,000 paid to a firm to secretly lobby for Turkey, and, most jarringly, Azerbaijan’s \$3 billion slush fund to whitewash its human rights record as exposed by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), we are deeply troubled by Turkey and Azerbaijan’s surreptitious influence and attempts to undermine western democratic values and institutions.

Given Armenia’s ongoing support to America before and after 9-11, including Armenia’s participation in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Lebanon and Mali, **the Assembly urges the Subcommittee to allocate not less than \$10 million in military assistance to Armenia for FMF and IMET.** Such assistance not only further strengthens Armenia’s NATO Partnership for Peace activities, but also supports NATO interoperability and modernization of Armenia’s Peacekeeping Brigade. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed the partnership between the Alliance and Yerevan during a meeting at the UN General Assembly and thanked Prime Minister Pashinyan for Armenia’s strong contributions to NATO’s training mission in Afghanistan and peacekeeping mission in Kosovo.

ASSISTANCE TO NAGORNO KARABAKH (ARTSAKH) – The Assembly urges as a priority not less than \$25 million in assistance to Artsakh, especially as disbursement of aid has trailed behind congressional intent for years. The Assembly and the people of Artsakh deeply appreciate and welcome the ongoing support that the United States provides to Artsakh as it rebuilds from the war launched against it by Azerbaijan and further strengthens its democratic institutions. Artsakh’s March 31, 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections were, as in past elections, deemed free and fair by observers on the ground. Azerbaijan continues to blockade Armenia and Artsakh and has threatened to wipe Armenians off the map. Azerbaijan also regularly receives poor marks for its elections, including the February 9, 2020 parliamentary elections, which international observers noted were marred by “significant procedural violations during counting and the tabulation” and held in a “restrictive legislation and political environment [that] prevented genuine competition,” and “raised concerns whether the results were established honestly.” For a relatively small investment, America can make a significant difference in the everyday lives of the people of Artsakh by supporting Artsakh’s democratic growth, as well as its ongoing humanitarian and development needs. We also strongly support the recent letter to this Subcommittee, spearheaded by Senator Bob Menendez and cosigned by 30 Senators calling for “not less than \$1.5 million... to fund de-mining and landmine risk education programs in

Nagorno-Karabakh,” as well as “robust funding for Nagorno-Karabakh-based regional rehabilitation services for survivors of landmine injuries and individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities.”

MILITARY AID DISPARITY – The Assembly is deeply troubled by the severe disparity in U.S. military aid between Azerbaijan and Armenia widely reported last year. As we did last Fall during our National Advocacy Conference in Washington, DC, we raised serious concerns, and endeavor to do so again. We urge Congress to reverse and rectify this issue and uphold the letter and spirit of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act by ensuring military aid parity, and fully support Senator Menendez’s request this month to the Government Accountability Office on this matter. Given Azerbaijan’s military expenditures, which are reported to exceed the entire national budget of Armenia, the major discrepancy between Azerbaijan’s arms purchases (which, according to The Jamestown Foundation, “Russia has long been Azerbaijan’s main arms supplier”) and excesses over arms control commitments, and the unconscionable pardon of an Azerbaijani officer (Ramil Safarov) who brutally axe-murdered an Armenian officer (Gurgen Margaryan) at a NATO Partnership for Peace training exercise, **we further recommend that Congress cease any and all military assistance to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan should not be rewarded for its ongoing violations and threats against the Armenian people.** The Assembly also welcomes the European Court of Human Rights decision regarding the Safarov case, which ruled last month that Azerbaijan’s pardon and promotion of Safarov amounted to “approval” and “endorsement” of the “very serious ethnically-biased crime” committed, and urges the Subcommittee under the authority of the Leahy Laws to ensure that no U.S. assistance has been provided to Safarov’s military unit in Azerbaijan as a result of this gross human rights violation.

The United States took a principled stand against Azerbaijani aggression by adopting Section 907, which states that no U.S. funds may be “provided to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President determines, and so reports to the Congress, that the Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.” Instead of complying with Section 907, Azerbaijan has shown its willingness to flaunt U.S. and international law, and continues to violate Section 907 by taking military action against Armenia and Artsakh, including the April 2016 unprecedented offensive that started with the killing of a 12-year-old boy, and continued with the gruesome, ISIS-style beheading of a soldier and the mutilation of an elderly Armenian couple. Despite the signed 1994 cease-fire agreement, Azerbaijan’s president has said he will continue firing on Artsakh and Armenia. Azerbaijan’s bellicose rhetoric has been unabated for far too long and is now matched by its deadly cease-fire violations. In fact, Azerbaijan’s violations have only skyrocketed, and include the inexplicable and repeated targeting of kindergartens in Armenia’s Tavush Province border region as well as other civilian areas, not to mention the continual acts of vandalism, such as the destruction of centuries-old Armenian cemeteries noted for their historic monuments. In a March 1, 2019 article, *The Guardian* highlighted “a damning report [that] details an attempted erasure by Azerbaijan of its Armenian cultural heritage, including the destruction of tens of thousands of UNESCO-protected [artifacts].” The United States should directly condemn such actions. We should not turn a blind eye to Azerbaijan’s undue influence and attempts to whitewash its human rights record, while trying to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by wiping out its Christian Armenian population.

ENDING THE DUAL BLOCKADES IMPOSED UPON ARMENIA

Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as its official state religion in 301 A.D. Throughout the centuries, Armenians have maintained their faith, even during 70 years of oppressive Soviet rule and often at great cost. Today, despite the dual blockades imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia continues to show its resilience. According to the World Bank, since independence “Armenia’s economy has undergone a profound transformation” and “sustained growth, ambitious growth, as well as inflows of capital and remittances that have created a market-oriented environment.” Imagine the impact of Armenia’s democratic and economic reforms if it was not blockaded. The United States has spoken clearly about the need for Turkey to lift its more than 25-year blockade of Armenia and establish diplomatic relations, both of which are also required under international treaties. **The Assembly urges report language requiring a full accounting of the steps that the Administration is taking and the responses therein to eliminate the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades. Finally, we believe that the provisions of the Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act should be broadened to preclude any and all assistance to Turkey and Azerbaijan so long as they blockade Armenia.**

THE PEACE PROCESS – 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. The governments of Armenia and Artsakh 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, jingoistic rhetoric, deadly cease-fire violations, and attempts to isolate Armenia. In view of the escalation of the lethal cease-fire violations by Azerbaijan, including Azerbaijan’s April 2016 military offensive, the Assembly supports efforts to prioritize the placement of OSCE-monitored, advanced gunfire locator systems and sound-ranging equipment to determine the source of attacks along the line of contact at the border. The Assembly also supports funding for confidence-building measures to help facilitate a peaceful resolution of the Artsakh conflict. In addition, the Assembly strongly believes that Artsakh’s participation in direct negotiations should be restored as any solution to the conflict requires the consent of the people and leadership of Artsakh. 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 yet universal tenets of human rights. Finally, the Assembly urges the U.S. Department of State to remove any official or unofficial restrictions on U.S.-Artsakh relations.

CONCLUSION – The enduring and natural bonds that exist between the United States and Armenia are readily apparent in Armenia’s ongoing support for America. Armenians in Armenia and Artsakh consider the United States a close friend and ally. Armenian Americans gratefully remember the support that the United States provided after the 1988 earthquake in Armenia, as Armenia moved boldly towards independence in 1991, during Artsakh’s struggle for freedom and democracy, through America’s proud record of humanitarian intervention during the 1915 Armenian Genocide, and with last year’s historic passage of Armenian Genocide resolutions in Congress. This is a relationship that spans families and generations. Given its central location, Christian heritage, entrepreneurial spirit, and western value system, Armenia is poised to play a pivotal role in helping America achieve its stated policy objectives in the region. The Assembly greatly appreciates your attention to these policy matters and looks forward to working with you.