

Armenian Assembly Virtual Advocacy Conference Speech

Remarks by Senator Bob Menendez

March 9, 2021

Hello, this is Senator Bob Menendez. It's a pleasure to join the Armenian Assembly of America for your virtual advocacy conference. I look forward to the day when we can gather in person again, but welcome this opportunity to discuss the serious challenges facing the Armenian people today.

Last year the Armenian people experienced an unconscionable tragedy when Azerbaijan, with the full support of Turkey, launched its unprovoked attack.

We mourn the thousands of civilians and soldiers who lost their lives, and honor those who were injured fighting against Aliyev's aggression.

To make matters worse, since the conflict ended we have seen countless reports of atrocities committed by Azerbaijani soldiers against Armenian prisoners of war and civilians. This is unacceptable.

I am sorry to say that the lack of top-level Trump administration engagement throughout the war enabled this horrific outcome.

The Trump Administration did nothing as Azerbaijan's military forces gathered. Did nothing as Azerbaijan attacked Nagorno-Karabakh.

Did nothing as reports told of jihadists coming to fight alongside Azerbaijani troops. Did nothing as Armenian civilians were driven out of their homes, Armenian soldiers lost their lives, and Azerbaijan advanced.

By the time the former Secretary of State tried to engage, it was far too late. The Armenian people were truly alone, left to fend for themselves at a time American leadership was sorely needed.

As Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, I will work to ensure that the Biden Administration takes this situation seriously. We must prevent further aggression by Azerbaijan and Turkey, ensure the release of the prisoners of war and help Armenians get the humanitarian assistance they need.

Azerbaijan's refusal to release its POWs is a violation of international law. The State Department must press the Government of Azerbaijan to uphold the law and return all Armenian POWs to their home.

The people of Nagorno-Karabakh, especially those displaced from their homes, continue to face urgent challenges including access to food, shelter, and healthcare.

The need for demining activities and unexploded ordnance clearance has grown exponentially due to the conflict. I will work to ensure the U.S. lives up to its proud tradition of providing humanitarian assistance.

In addition to these problems, the Biden Administration must move quickly to recalibrate our relationships with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act states that Azerbaijan should “cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force” against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh as a condition to receive U.S. assistance.

And yet, Azerbaijan’s bad behavior has been rewarded with years of waivers and, under the previous Administration, over \$120 million in military assistance.

This must end.

I have called on the Biden Administration not to renew the waiver of Section 907, and will hold them to account on this front.

The United States cannot be in the business of supporting a corrupt authoritarian regime that has attacked innocent civilians and committed appalling atrocities in violation of humanitarian law.

Turkey's aggression also remains a serious threat to the Armenian people. For years I've warned that under President Erdogan, Turkey is not a responsible actor on the world stage. It is not a trustworthy ally. And it is not a democracy.

As I told Secretary Blinken during his confirmation hearing, we must be clear-eyed about Erdogan's true nature – and the threat Turkey poses to Armenia. I will continue to oppose any security assistance or arms sales to Turkey so that the U.S. does not facilitate Turkey's aggression.

In the face of the many challenges facing the Armenian community, you have the power to make things better.

Your advocacy, through the incredible work of the Armenian Assembly, has made the United States a better country.

Nowhere is that clearer than with the fight to recognize the truth of the Armenian Genocide.

As you all know, for over a century Turkey has lied about the facts of the Armenian Genocide, and for decades the United States was complicit in this deception.

However, in 2019, things changed. I went to the floor of the Senate to call for the unanimous passage of my resolution recognizing the truth of the Armenian Genocide not once, not twice, but **FOUR** times.

Each of the first three times, another Senator chose to block it. But we persisted, and finally, on the fourth attempt, the Senate stood up to Turkey's lies and passed the resolution unanimously.

It was a truly historic day, and made possible in large part by the advocacy of the Armenian Assembly and the greater Armenian-American community.

You wrote letters, made phone calls, and urged your Senators to speak the truth. Your work delivered this incredible victory for all who believe in the words, “Never Again.”

However, our work is far from over. As you know, successive Administrations have failed to recognize the Armenian Genocide as a genocide.

I have called on President Biden to break this pattern of complicity and officially recognize the Armenian Genocide, and I am leading a letter to him on this topic.

As we speak, that letter is circulating among my Senate colleagues for signatures, and I am grateful for your support of that effort.

Just like with the passage of the Senate resolution, your sustained advocacy will be vital to pressing the executive branch to break its decades of silence and speak the truth of the genocide.

The challenges facing the Armenian people are significant, but so is your determination to take them on.

I'm proud to have always stood alongside you, and that will never change. Thank you, God bless you, and best wishes for a successful conference.