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The Lobbying Battle for Nagorno-Karabakh

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Executive Summary

Long before Azerbaijani forces took the Nagorno-Karabakh region by force in September – displacing 100,000 Karabakh Armenians in an act that’s been described as ethnic cleansing – Azerbaijan and Armenia were waging a furious lobbying and influence battle in Washington.

A closer examination of the countries’ respective attempts to influence U.S. policymakers before the Second and Third Nagorno-Karabakh Wars provides critical context for understanding Washington’s muted reaction to Azerbaijan’s recent aggression, seemingly at odds with the strong moral position U.S. officials have taken over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Azerbaijan has spent years pursuing a course of “caviar diplomacy” in our nation’s capital: using the authoritarian petrostates’ wealth to court officials, journalists, and scholars. Since 2015, the government of Azerbaijan has spent just over \$7 million on lobbying and public relations firms registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Azerbaijan’s agents – like BGR Government Affairs – have conducted vigorous advocacy for Baku’s interests, including continued military assistance to Azerbaijan following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020. Azerbaijan’s influence in the U.S. has also been aided considerably by Israel; Baku boasts powerful advocates like Ezra Friedlander as registered lobbyists for its interests. And this only constitutes what’s publicly known which, given Azerbaijan’s history, is likely just the tip of the iceberg. As the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) has painstakingly documented, the Azerbaijan government has a history of laundering its influence in Europe and the U.S.

Azerbaijan’s extensive influence efforts in the U.S. stand in stark contrast to those of the Armenian interests which, until earlier this year, had not had a FARA registered lobbying

or public relations firm on their payroll since 2020. Armenia has traditionally relied on its extensive diaspora to garner influence in the West, with repeated successes including a boycott of lobbying and PR firms working for Azerbaijan and President Biden's recognition of the Armenian genocide. But as the negligible U.S. response to Azerbaijan's use of military force in Nagorno-Karabakh shows, Washington's perceived strategic interests continue to trump Armenians' concerns.

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U.S. officials' overly-cautious and restrained reaction to the lightning offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh and the resulting mass exodus of Armenians from the region seems to reflect a stalemate in the lobbying and influence battle the two countries have been waging in the U.S; it may also be a product of the selective approach to human rights within U.S. foreign policy. No matter how one weighs the precise causes, the effect remains the same: a country used military might to reclaim its territory during a negotiating process, faced little consequences from the U.S., and seems emboldened to continue its aggression in an already volatile region. Time will tell the dangers of that decision.

Introduction

In September, Azerbaijani forces launched an assault on ethnic Armenians in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, quickly taking over the territory in what some have described as an act of ethnic cleansing.¹ The roots of this conflict go back several decades; September's fighting has been labeled the third war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

¹ Scheffer, David J. "Ethnic Cleansing Is Happening in Nagorno-Karabakh. How Can the World Respond?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/ethnic-cleansing-happening-nagorno-karabakh-how-can-world-respond>.

The contemporary dispute over Nagorno–Karabakh is rooted in events that took place in the late 1980s, during Mikhail Gorbachev’s era of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. But the genesis of the conflict was in 1923, when the Soviet regime created the Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and designated it a part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), even though its population was predominantly ethnic Armenian. During the seven–decade Soviet rule, Karabakh Armenians demonstrated several times their desire to join the neighboring Armenian SSR. But this process only began in earnest during the 1980s, when Gorbachev’s revolutionary changes to Soviet policies opened the political space for such developments.

It was in this context that the Armenians of the NKAO agitated for unification with the Armenian SSR, which in turn caused a groundswell of public support in their western, coethnic neighbor. Such rebellious action, regardless of its legality under Soviet law,² prompted strong reactions from Azerbaijanis who committed acts of ethnic violence against Armenians in the Azerbaijani cities of Baku and Sumgait. The intensity of the dispute increased as Moscow’s central power weakened. Eventually, with the dispute unresolved and the USSR dissolved, the once–internal conflict became an interstate war between the two newly independent republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The First Nagorno–Karabakh War (1992–94) caused the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands across the region and the death of tens of thousands on both sides. By the time Moscow brokered a ceasefire in May 1994, Armenians had gained significant control over the former NKAO, including the strategic fortress city of Shushi (Shusha to Azerbaijanis) – and even extensive Azerbaijani territory surrounding the region. Discussions under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group – co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States – were tasked with working with Armenians and Azerbaijanis to find a

² Tchilingirian, Hratch. “Nagorno–Karabakh: War Fails to Resolve the Conflict.” *Cambridge Journal of Law, Politics and Art* 1, (Summer 2022), https://www.cjlpa.org/_files/ugd/b589e0_23c87be158174a409c275d8be700ba65.pdf.

peaceful solution to the conflict. Unfortunately, more than 25 years of engagement within this framework failed to bring any solution, with both Yerevan and Baku at different times rejecting the painful, yet necessary, compromises to achieve diplomatic compromise. In September 2020, having invested its oil and gas revenues in its armed forces,³ and with Yerevan under the premiership of an inexperienced new government following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, Baku launched what would become the Second Nagorno–Karabakh War.⁴

This fighting lasted six weeks and saw Azerbaijan, heavily backed and supported by NATO member Türkiye and militarily supplied from Israel, achieve a significant victory against the Armenians. Baku was able to secure territory first on the battlefield and then achieved further concessions from Yerevan in a tripartite ceasefire statement signed on November 10 with Moscow, losing what Armenians had long considered a strategic buffer zone between the NKAO and the Republic of Azerbaijan.⁵

³ Ambrose, Jillian. “BP projects have helped fund Azerbaijan military aggression, say campaigners.” *The Guardian*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/nov/08/bp-projects-have-helped-fund-azerbaijan-military-aggression-say-campaigners>.

⁴ Gatopoulos, Alex. “The Nagorno–Karabakh conflict is ushering in a new age of warfare.” *Al Jazeera*, October 11, 2020 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/11/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-ushering-in-new-age-of-warfare>.

⁵ President of Russia. *Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*. November 10, 2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>.



This map illustrates the situation in the region following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War where Azerbaijani troops regained significant territory first on the battlefield and then through a ceasefire negotiation which ended that round of fighting. The Russian peacekeeping presence in the remaining Armenian controlled part of the territory, the Lachin Corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and the proposed "Zangezur corridor" are also visualized. (Source: International Crisis Group)

Azerbaijan had long argued that Armenian secessionist forces were occupying its internationally recognized territory. This reality was accepted by all countries, including the Republic of Armenia, which never recognized the self-governing polity in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, by resorting to force as a means of resolving the conflict, Baku went against the OSCE-backed process. In making this choice, Azerbaijan embarked on a path that has significantly undermined the peace process and further eroded the trust between the two sides. Nevertheless, Baku believes it has acted well within its rights on its own sovereign territory.

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Since the 2020 war, Azerbaijan has pressed its military advantage against a dramatically weakened Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the already thin and ill-defined Russian peacekeeping force that was deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh following the 2020 War stood idly by as Baku began to change facts on the ground. The most significant moment was in September 2022 when Azerbaijani forces launched an attack against Armenia proper; its troops continue to occupy 200 square kilometers of internationally recognized Armenian territory to this day, according to Armenia's foreign minister.⁶ In December 2022, Baku-backed demonstrators began blocking the sole road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia proper, and thus the outside world.⁷ Access to the Lachin Corridor, as the road is known, was a key point of the 2020 ceasefire declaration. However, Azerbaijan had accused Armenians of transporting weapons and mines through the corridor, a claim Armenia denied.⁸ While the U.S., EU, Russia and international institutions repeatedly voiced opposition to this development, no actor was able or willing to reverse it – including the Russian peacekeepers on the ground. In April of 2023, Azerbaijan formalized the blockade by installing an official checkpoint along the corridor.⁹ By the

⁶ "Approximately 200 square kilometers of Armenian territory is under Azeri control - FM." *ArmenPress*, November 3, 2023, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1123429.html>.

⁷ Dersimonian, Artin. "Azerbaijan exploiting Ukraine distraction to press advantage in Armenian conflict." *Responsible Statecraft*, December 16, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/12/16/azerbaijan-exploiting-ukraine-distraction-to-press-advantage-in-armenian-conflict/>.

⁸ "Armenia denies having used Lachin Corridor for transfer of landmines, reiterates good faith approach to negotiations." *ArmenPress*, January 20, 2023, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1102194.html>.

⁹ "Azerbaijan sets up checkpoints on the Lachin corridor." *Economist Intelligence Unit*, April 27, 2023. <https://www.eiu.com/n/azerbaijan-sets-up-checkpoints-on-the-lachin-corridor/>.

summer of 2023, the situation in Nagorno–Karabakh was growing dire as food, medical, and energy supplies had all but vanished and no deliveries were being allowed through the Lachin Corridor.¹⁰

Azerbaijan, for its part, had offered an alternative route for humanitarian deliveries through the recently reclaimed city of Aghdam. However, Armenians were fearful that such a development would leave their fate entirely in Azerbaijan’s control – a fear substantiated by decades of intense rivalry between the two peoples.¹¹ Luis Moreno Ocampo, a former chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, published a report in August explaining how Nagorno–Karabakh Armenians were facing “genocide” as a result of Azerbaijan’s tactics to regain control of the territory.¹² Immediately following the initial transit of aid to the region and at the start of the UN General Assembly on September 19, Azerbaijan launched what many had been anticipating for months: a “lightning offensive” against Nagorno–Karabakh. Termed an “anti–terrorist” operation by Baku, within 24 hours the Nagorno–Karabakh Armenians capitulated as the Russian peacekeeping force once again stood by. Within two weeks, over 100,000 Karabakh Armenians had fled in a mass exodus to the neighboring Republic of Armenia, fearing for their future under Azerbaijani rule, in what has been described as ethnic cleansing.¹³

This is the publicly–told story of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and its dramatic end – concurrently euphoric for Azerbaijanis and devastating for Armenians. Less well–known is that the roots of this conflict also go back to the United States, where Azerbaijan and Armenia have been waging a heated lobbying and influence battle that

¹⁰ Demytrie, Rayhan. “Nagorno-Karabakh: ‘People are fainting queuing up for bread.’” *BBC*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66646677>.

¹¹ For background to this rivalry, see: Broers, Laurence, “Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry,” (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvrs91nw>.

¹² Ocampo, Luis Moreno. “Expert Opinion: Genocide against Armenians in 2023.” August 7, 2023, <https://luismorenoocampo.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Armenia-Report-Expert-Opinion.pdf>.

¹³ Scheffer, David J. “Ethnic Cleansing Is Happening in Nagorno-Karabakh. How Can the World Respond?” Council on Foreign Relations, October 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/ethnic-cleansing-happening-nagorno-karabakh-how-can-world-respond>.

has sought to guide U.S. policy in this tumultuous region. This is the story of the lobbying battle before the Second and Third Nagorno–Karabakh Wars.

Azerbaijan and Armenia have been waging a heated lobbying and influence battle that has sought to guide U.S. policy in this tumultuous region.

Azerbaijan’s agents in America

Azerbaijan has been quietly wooing Washington for years, engaging in what’s been dubbed “caviar diplomacy”: using the authoritarian petrostate’s wealth to court American officials, journalists, and scholars.¹⁴

By the numbers, the government of Azerbaijan has spent just over \$7 million on lobbying and public relations firms registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) since 2015, according to OpenSecrets.¹⁵ While this is a nominal amount of spending compared to foreign influence heavyweights like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – both of which have spent more than \$175 million on FARA registrants in the same time period¹⁶ – Azerbaijan’s lobbyists have been incredibly active and have cultivated relationships with scores of powerful members of Congress.

Chief among the Azerbaijan lobby’s hired guns is BGR Government Affairs, one of Washington’s top lobbying firms. BGR’s contract with the Azerbaijan Embassy in the United States stipulates that the firm will serve as a “liaison for the embassy in Washington D.C.”¹⁷ A Quincy Institute analysis of the firm’s FARA filings reveals that the firm has fulfilled that mission and then some – contacting congressional offices more than a thousand times on Azerbaijan’s behalf in just the first half of 2023. According to a FARA filing from the firm, this work included efforts “to ensure there were no negative

¹⁴ “Caviar Diplomacy – How Azerbaijan silenced the Council of Europe.” *European Stability Initiative*, May 24, 2012, <https://www.esiweb.org/publications/caviar-diplomacy-how-azerbaijan-silenced-council-europe>.

¹⁵ “Azerbaijan.” OpenSecrets, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/fara/countries/197>.

¹⁶ “Foreign Lobby Watch.” OpenSecrets, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/fara>.

¹⁷ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Ed Rogers to Elin Suleymanov, March 11, 2020*. December 16, 2020, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Exhibit-AB-20201216-87.pdf>.

Azerbaijan amendments on the National Defense Authorization Act,” that the appropriations process included “fair language for Azerbaijan,” and, more generally, that BGR’s lobbyists, “educated policymakers in Congress about the important role Azerbaijan plays as a key security partner of the United States.”¹⁸

As part of their lobbying efforts on Azerbaijan’s behalf, BGR distributed Azerbaijan Embassy talking points. In March 2023, for example, the firm distributed a memo from the Azerbaijan Embassy warning of “Armenia’s active engagement in sanctions evasion imposed on Russia.”¹⁹ The effort by BGR and Azerbaijan’s government to tie Armenia to Russia began in earnest in the lead up to and following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For example, as Russian troops were amassing on Ukraine’s border in early 2022, a BGR FARA filing distributed to policymakers lamented, “Armenia’s recent deployment, alongside Russian forces, to repress protests in Kazakhstan,” at the request of the President of Kazakhstan.²⁰ Another BGR FARA filing distributed just days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began argued that “Arayik Harutyunyan, leader of the Karabakh Armenians, has steadily embraced Russia throughout the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.”²¹

In 2018, BGR signed an agreement with another lobbying firm, Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell, and Berkowitz (Baker, Donelson), to aid its efforts on behalf of the Azerbaijan embassy.²² An analysis of that firm’s FARA filings shows that they’ve been laser focused on the State, Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the House Committee

¹⁸ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Supplemental Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended*. June 28, 2023, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Supplemental-Statement-20230628-51.pdf>.

¹⁹ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Concerns over Sanctions Evasion in the Caucasus*, sent by Mark Tavlarides on March 31, 2023. March 31, 2023, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Informational-Materials-20230331-280.pdf>.

²⁰ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Information on Armenian Forces in Kazakhstan*, sent by Mark Tavlarides on January 11, 2022. January 12, 2022, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Informational-Materials-20220112-182.pdf>.

²¹ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Karabakh Separatists Support Russia’s Recognition of Breakaway Ukraine Regions*, sent by Mark Tavlarides on March 1, 2022. March 1, 2022, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Informational-Materials-20220301-195.pdf>.

²² NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Exhibit A to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended*. March 5, 2018, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6535-Exhibit-AB-20180305-1.pdf>.

on Appropriations, which is responsible for, amongst many other issues, determining how much U.S. military assistance flows to Armenia and Azerbaijan. Baker, Donelson's lobbying of the appropriations committee was undoubtedly made easier by one of the firms' registered foreign agents, James W. Dyer, previously serving as staff director of the House Appropriations Committee for ten years.²³

The work of Baker, Donelson and BGR is at least partially responsible for ensuring that U.S. military assistance continued to flow to Azerbaijan following the Second Nagorno–Karabakh war in 2020.

Baker, Donelson's lobbying efforts included distributing a letter to the Chairman and Ranking Member of the State, Foreign Operations (SFOPS) Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations signed by Reps Paul Gosar, Steve Cohen, and Joe Wilson – the latter two of which are members of the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus—urging them “to recognize the strategic value of the U.S.–Azerbaijan partnership in the new global reality.”²⁴

The work of Baker, Donelson and BGR is at least partially responsible for ensuring that U.S. military assistance continued to flow to Azerbaijan following the Second Nagorno–Karabakh war in 2020. Every year since then the firms have, for example, distributed “Dear Colleague” letters that call for support of Azerbaijan in the SFOPS Appropriations process.²⁵ This work to keep the spigot of U.S. military assistance flowing was preceded by BGR's efforts to mold U.S. public opinion in Azerbaijan's favor

²³ “James W. Dyer.” Baker Donelson, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.bakerdonelson.com/james-w-dyer>.

²⁴ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Steve Cohen, Joe Wilson, and Paul A. Gosar D.D.S. to Mario Diaz-Balart and Hal Rogers, March 23, 2023*. April 14, 2023
<https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6535-Informational-Materials-20230417-4.pdf>.

²⁵ For two examples, see: NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Re: Support for U.S.-Azerbaijan Relations in FY23*, sent by Mark Tavlarides on April 21, 2022. April 22, 2022, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Informational-Materials-20220422-205.pdf>; and NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Re: Support the U.S.-Azerbaijan Relationship in FY22 SFOPs Appropriations*, sent by Mark Tavlarides on April 16, 2021. April 16, 2021, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Informational-Materials-20210416-122.pdf>.

during the Second Nagorno–Karabakh war. This narrative–shaping began almost as soon as the war itself did, with a BGR letter distributed to policymakers on September 28, 2020 misleadingly placing blame for the conflicts origins squarely on the shoulders of Armenia, which had allegedly “launched a large–scale provocation against Azerbaijan, targeting residential areas and the armed forces of Azerbaijan. As a result of massive shelling of Azerbaijani villages, eight civilians were killed and many more injured. The Azerbaijani army, using the right of self–defense and in order to protect civilians, reacted through counter–offensive measures.”²⁶ Later arguments distributed by BGR during the conflict went so far as to accuse Armenian forces of “causing mass displacement of Azerbaijan’s population,” when in reality it was Armenians in Nagorno–Karabakh who first came under attack and were being forced to flee their homes.²⁷

It’s worth noting that, at least as of this writing in late November 2023, there is no evidence in FARA filings that BGR has worked to similarly make the case for Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the third war in Nagorno–Karabakh. In fact, the last FARA filing the firm made on Azerbaijan’s behalf was in May and argued that, “Supporting Armenia–Azerbaijan Peace Advances United States’ National Interests.”²⁸

Nearly 70 percent of Azerbaijan’s military arsenal between 2016–20 was reportedly supplied by Israel.

Azerbaijan’s influence in the United States has also been aided considerably by Israel. While this might seem an unlikely alliance between a predominately Jewish state and an almost entirely Muslim state, it’s a bond built heavily on two pillars: weapons and oil. Nearly 70 percent of Azerbaijan’s military arsenal between 2016–20 was reportedly

²⁶ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Azerbaijan Update*, sent by Mark Tavlarides on September 28, 2020. September 28, 2020, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Informational-Materials-20200928-73.pdf>.

²⁷ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Azerbaijan Update*, sent by Mark Tavlarides on October 8, 2020. October 8, 2020, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Informational-Materials-20201008-81.pdf>.

²⁸ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Update on South Caucasus Peace Negotiations*, sent by Mark Tavlarides on May 19, 2023. May 24, 2023, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Informational-Materials-20230524-283.pdf>.

supplied by Israel.²⁹ This included many of the weapons Azerbaijan used in its recent attacks on Nagorno–Karabakh, including kamikaze drones.³⁰ In return, with the help of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, Azerbaijan supplies Israel with 40 percent of its energy.³¹ It’s worth noting that this pipeline avoids both Russian and Iranian territory, a fact even more relevant since Russia’s war in Ukraine. As Arkady Mil-Man, Israel’s former ambassador to Azerbaijan, said when speaking about Tel Aviv’s relationship with Baku: “We have a strategic partnership to contain Iran.”³²

This international bond has carried over to the influence arena in America, as two of the Azerbaijan government’s FARA registrants are prominent in pro–Israel lobbying. In January 2020, Stellar Jay Communications registered under FARA to work for the Azerbaijan Embassy on “a \$3,300 fee per project” basis.³³ The agreement was signed by Stellar Jay’s founder, Jacob Kamaras, who is the editor of the San Diego Jewish World and former editor–in–chief of the Jewish News Syndicate. Kamaras has written extensively about Azerbaijan and Israel, even going so far as to write an article for The Jerusalem Post entitled “Azerbaijan’s story mirrors that of Israel,” while registered as an agent of Azerbaijan.³⁴ Based upon Stellar Jay’s receipts from Azerbaijan, as reported in FARA filings, articles like these appear to be the “project” that Azerbaijan pays \$3,300 a piece for.

²⁹ Debre, Isabel. “Israeli weapons quietly helped Azerbaijan retake Nagorno-Karabakh – sources, data.” *The Times of Israel*, October 5, 2023,

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-weapons-quietly-helped-azerbaijan-retake-nagorno-karabakh-sources-data/>.

³⁰ Ravid, Barak. “Azerbaijan using Israeli ‘kamikaze drones’ in Nagorno–Karabakh clashes.” *Axios*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/2020/09/30/israel-kamikaze-drones-nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan>.

³¹ Lazaroff, Tovah. “Azerbaijani ambassador: Border hostilities may harm Israeli oil supplies.” *The Jerusalem Post*, July 21, 2020

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/azerbaijani-ambassador-border-hostilities-may-harm-israeli-oil-supplies-635851>.

³² Debre, Isabel. “Israeli arms quietly helped Azerbaijan retake Nagorno-Karabakh, to the dismay of region’s Armenians.” Associated Press, October 5, 2023,

<https://apnews.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-weapons-israel-6814437bcd744acc1c4df0409a74406c>.

³³ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Exhibit A to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended*. January 31, 2020,

<https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6789-Exhibit-AB-20200131-1.pdf>.

³⁴ Kamaras, Jacob. “Azerbaijan’s story mirrors that of Israel – opinion.” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-719739>.

This international bond has carried over to the influence arena in America, as two of the Azerbaijan government's FARA registrants are prominent in pro-Israel lobbying.

The Azerbaijan lobby made an even stronger tie with the American-Israeli lobby on February 10 this year when the Azerbaijan Embassy signed a contract with the Friedlander Group.³⁵ The firm boasts of conducting lobbying and public relations campaigns on behalf of numerous Jewish organizations.³⁶ The firm's namesake, Ezra Friedlander, has rubbed shoulders with some of the most powerful players in politics, including former President Donald Trump,³⁷ his son-in-law Jared Kushner,³⁸ and even Sheldon Adelson, the late casino billionaire who was a significant supporter of both Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former U.S. president Donald Trump.³⁹

When he began working for Azerbaijan earlier this year, he wasted no time connecting with politicians from both sides of the aisle. In fact, according to his firm's FARA filing he met, in person, with 29 different congressional offices.⁴⁰ This included nine meetings directly with congressional representatives and senators, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

³⁵ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Exhibit A to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended*. February 10, 2023, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/7009-Exhibit-AB-20230210-6.pdf>.

³⁶ "Our Clients And Projects." The Friedlander Group, accessed November 17, 2023, <http://www.thefriedlandergroup.com/our-clients-and-projects.3-0-3-.html>.

³⁷ Friedlander, Ezra (@EzraFriedlander). "Wanted to express my condolences to @POTUS @realDonaldTrump and the Trump family on the passing of Robert Trump. @ @jaredkushner @IvankaTrump @FLOTUS @MELANIATRUMP @DonaldJTrumpJr @EricTrump @TiffanyATrump @Trump @aviberkow45 @AviBerkow." Twitter, August 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/EzraFriedlander/status/1294842227437469696>.

³⁸ "Ezra Friedlander At A White House Event With Jared Kushner And Attorney General Sessions." The Friedlander Group, June 2018, accessed November 17, 2023, <http://www.thefriedlandergroup.com/ezra-friedlander-at-a-white-house-event-with-jared-kushner-and-attorney-general-sessions.1732.sub.html>.

³⁹ "Photo of Ezra Friedlander with Sheldon Adelson." The Friedlander Group, accessed November 17, 2023, <http://www.thefriedlandergroup.com/photo-sheldon-adelson.86-1547-153.sub.html>.

⁴⁰ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Supplemental Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended*. May 1, 2023, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/7009-Supplemental-Statement-20230501-3.pdf>.

Neither BGR, Baker Donelson, Stellar Jay Communications, nor The Friedlander Group responded to requests for comment.

Azerbaijan's other advocates in the U.S.

All of this is just what's publicly known about Azerbaijan's influence in America which, given Azerbaijan's history, is likely just the tip of the iceberg. As the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) has painstakingly documented, the Azerbaijan government has a history of laundering its influence in Europe and the United States.⁴¹ This "Azerbaijani laundromat," as OCCRP dubbed it, was "a complex money-laundering operation and slush fund that handled \$2.9 billion over a two-year period through four shell companies," according to the OCCRP.⁴² Other investigations of Azerbaijan's illicit influence in Europe have dubbed it "caviar diplomacy,"⁴³ given the country's repeated attempts to bribe European officials with all manner of luxury goods, including, of course, caviar.⁴⁴

Investigations of Azerbaijan's illicit influence in Europe have dubbed it "caviar diplomacy", given the country's repeated attempts to bribe European officials with all manner of luxury goods.

In the United States, at the receiving end of funds run through the Azerbaijani laundromat were Bob Lawrence & Associates (BL&A), a lobbying firm in Northern Virginia, and Adil Baguirov, whom the OCCRP described as "Baku's Man in America."⁴⁵

⁴¹ "The Azerbaijani Laundromat." *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.occrp.org/en/azerbaijanilaundromat/>.

⁴² "The Azerbaijani Laundromat." *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*.

⁴³ "Caviar Diplomacy-- How Azerbaijan silenced the Council of Europe." *European Stability Initiative*, May 24, 2012, <https://www.esiweb.org/publications/caviar-diplomacy-how-azerbaijan-silenced-council-europe>

⁴⁴ Gehrke, Laurenz. "Another German conservative MP quits as scandals mount." *Politico*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/another-german-conservative-cdu-mp-quits-scandals-mount/>; and

"Council of Europe Faults PACE Members in Azerbaijan Probe." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-caviar-council-europe-corruption/29186177.html>.

⁴⁵ Wrate, Jonny. "US Lobbying Firm Lauanders Azerbaijan's Reputation — And Gets 'Laundromat' Cash." *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, May 23, 2018,

In 2004, BL&A began lobbying on behalf of Renaissance Associates, a Baku based firm described as “trade consultants” in BL&A’s Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA) registration.⁴⁶ But, as OCCRP documented, Renaissance served as a pass-through for money coming from an Azerbaijan government shell company, Hilux, to Renaissance and then ultimately to BL&A.⁴⁷ As the OCCRP documented, from 2004 to 2017 BL&A worked to promote Azerbaijan’s interests at the highest levels of government in the United States, including paving the way for Azerbaijan’s President Alihem Aliyev to visit the White House in 2006.⁴⁸ The firm’s namesake, Bob Lawrence, regularly testified before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Matters, where he would unabashedly promote Azerbaijan and refer to Armenia as “a rogue nation.”⁴⁹

Adil Baguirov, “Baku’s man in America,” has also advocated extensively for Azerbaijan in the United States, repeatedly testifying before the House in favor of U.S. military aid to Azerbaijan, coordinating the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus, and helping to organize numerous U.S.–Azeri conferences in D.C. and Baku.⁵⁰ OCCRP also discovered that a consulting company, Turbillion LLC, owned by Baguirov received a \$253,150 payment from Hilux Services – one of the Azerbaijan laundromat shell companies – just months after another non-profit he runs helped to organize a congressional delegation’s trip to Baku.⁵¹ Members of Congress and their staff attending the event were lavished with silk scarves, tea sets, and rugs worth up to \$10,000, according to a House Ethics Committee investigation that revealed the trip was secretly funded by the Azerbaijani government.⁵²

<https://www.occrp.org/en/azerbajjanilaundromat/us-lobbying-firm-launders-azerbajjans-reputation>; and Wrate, Jonny, “Baku’s Man in America.” *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/azerbajjanilaundromat/bakus-man-in-america>.

⁴⁶ US Secretary of the Senate. *Lobbying Registration*. Filing #29b54eba-32ea-455a-9286-463fbe201429. March 30, 2004. <https://lda.senate.gov/filings/public/filing/29b54eba-32ea-455a-9286-463fbe201429/print/>.

⁴⁷ Wrate, Jonny. “US Lobbying Firm Launders Azerbaijan’s Reputation – And Gets ‘Laundromat’ Cash.”

⁴⁸ Silverstein, Ken. “Bogus Azeri ‘Human Rights Group’ Comes to Washington.” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 17, 2007. <https://harpers.org/2007/09/bogus-azeri-human-rights-group-comes-to-washington/>.

⁴⁹ Wrate, Jonny. “US Lobbying Firm Launders Azerbaijan’s Reputation – And Gets ‘Laundromat’ Cash.”

⁵⁰ Wrate, Jonny. “Baku’s Man in America.”

⁵¹ Wrate, Jonny. “Baku’s Man in America.”

⁵² Higham, Scott, Steven Rich, and Alice Crites. “10 members of Congress took trip secretly funded by foreign government.” *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2015.

In late 2018, six months after the OCCRP investigation was published, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced that Kevin Oksuz – president of the Turquoise Council of Americans and Eurasians, which also helped to organize the trip – pleaded guilty to concealing the fact that the trip was secretly funded by the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR).⁵³

The FBI's investigation into illicit Azerbaijani influence in the United States did not stop with the guilty plea of Oksuz. In fact, it resulted in FBI agents raiding the home of Henry Cuellar (D-TX), co-chair of the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus, in January 2022.⁵⁴

While no charges have been filed against Cuellar, the congressman has pushed Azerbaijan's agenda in Congress for years after forging ties with Oskuz and Azerbaijan oil executives.⁵⁵ Over the years, Oksuz donated thousands of dollars to Cuellar's campaigns.⁵⁶ With the backing of Oksuz and another non-profit he ran, the Assembly of Friends of Azerbaijan, Cuellar negotiated an agreement with Texas A&M University to send students on all-expenses paid trips to Azerbaijan.⁵⁷

Armenia's influence in the U.S.

In noticeable contrast to Azerbaijan's extensive influence efforts in the United States, Armenia did not even have a FARA-registered lobbying or public relations firm on its payroll from 2020 until earlier this year.⁵⁸ On March 27, 2023, the Livingston Group

https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/10-members-of-congress-took-trip-secretly-funded-by-foreign-government/2015/05/13/76b55332-f720-11e4-9030-b4732caefe81_story.html.

⁵³ Office of Public Affairs, US Department of Justice. *Former Non-Profit President Pleads Guilty to Scheme to Conceal Foreign Funding of 2013 Congressional Trip*. Press Release Number: 18-1620. December 10, 2018.

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/former-non-profit-president-pleads-guilty-scheme-conceal-foreign-funding-2013-congressional>.

⁵⁴ Levine, Mike. "FBI raid on House Democrat's home related to Azerbaijan probe, source says." ABC News, January 20, 2022. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/fbi-raid-house-democrats-home-related-azerbaijan-probe/story?id=82384118>.

⁵⁵ Grim, Ryan and Lee Fang. "After Forging Ties With Azerbaijan Oil Executives, Rep. Henry Cuellar Pushed Nation's Agenda in Congress." *The Intercept*, January 21, 2022.

<https://theintercept.com/2022/01/21/henry-cuellar-azerbaijan-fbi-texas/>.

⁵⁶ Sollenberger, Roger, and Jackie Kucinich. "Years Before FBI Raid, Dem Rep. Henry Cuellar Made Sketchy Azerbaijan Connections." *The Daily Beast*, January 21, 2022.

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/years-before-fbi-raid-dem-rep-henry-cuellar-made-sketchy-azerbaijan-connections>.

⁵⁷ Office of US Congressman Henry Cuellar. *In The News: LAREDO MORNING TIMES: Azerbaijan adventures*. July 4, 2015. <https://cuellar.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=398670>.

⁵⁸ It's worth noting that the Government of Nagorno-Karabakh itself is registered under FARA, which is something of an oddity given that diplomatic and consular officers of foreign governments are explicitly exempt from the requirements of FARA registration.

signed an agreement to represent the National Democratic Alliance of Armenia, which is described in the FARA filing as, “a pro–Western political party which seeks to significantly reduce the malign influence of Russia in Armenia, as well as forge close ties with both the United States and European Union, and with U.S. allies and partners.” While the initial agreement, for a monthly retainer of just \$5,000 per month, centered solely around providing access to U.S. policymakers for a senior leader of the National Democratic Alliance of Armenia, the relationship is ongoing. It has resulted in the Livingston Group reporting lobbying efforts related to legislation that would prevent waivers to Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act – which explicitly prohibited the vast majority of U.S. assistance from the Act to post–Soviet Azerbaijan, until Baku “cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno–Karabakh.”⁵⁹ In addition, the lobbying efforts focused on providing Armenia with millions of dollars in U.S. economic and military assistance.⁶⁰ As of this writing in late November 2023, the bill, “Preventing Ethnic Cleansing and Atrocities in Nagorno-Karabakh Act of 2023,” was introduced in the House and has 15 co–sponsors.⁶¹ Additionally, the Livingston Group has also provided congressional offices with suggested questions for witnesses testifying at a House hearing on November 15, 2023 entitled, “The Future of Nagorno Karabakh.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Congress.gov. *Public Law 102-511*. October 24, 1992, <https://www.congress.gov/102/statute/STATUTE-106/STATUTE-106-Pg3320.pdf>.

⁶⁰ NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *H.R. 5686*. September 26, 2023, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6344-Informational-Materials-20231026-163.pdf>.

⁶¹ *H.R. 5686: Preventing Ethnic Cleansing and Atrocities in Nagorno-Karabakh Act of 2023*. GovTrack, accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/118/hr5686>.

⁶² NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *DISSEMINATION BY THE LIVINGSTON GROUP, LLC*. November 14, 2023, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6344-Informational-Materials-20231114-164.pdf>.

Armenia did not even have a FARA–registered lobbying or public relations firm on its payroll from 2020 until earlier this year.

The Armenian diaspora in the U.S.

While the Livingston Group has provided Armenia with some lobbying presence, Armenia has traditionally relied mostly on an extensive diaspora to garner influence in the west. This diaspora community – estimated to be more than one million in the United States – has found repeated success in its advocacy efforts, including a high–profile boycott of lobbying and PR firms working for Azerbaijan.⁶³

The vast majority of the Armenian–American diaspora initially relocated to the United States between the 1890s and the 1920s, a period when Armenians in the collapsing Ottoman Empire were increasingly persecuted for demanding self–determination, as were many other peoples in the empire. The Hamidian Massacres of 1894–6, so–called because they occurred during the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and the far more extensive and systematic Armenian genocide during World War One, resulted in tens of thousands of surviving Armenians fleeing to North America.

When the nascent First Republic of Armenia fell under Soviet domination in the early 1920s, diaspora Armenians (predominately found in the United States, France, and Russia but also in Lebanon, Syria, Iran and elsewhere), most of whom were unable to visit or return to their homeland, focused their energy on the issue of the Armenian genocide. In many ways, the focus on genocide recognition and reparations from the Republic of Türkiye constituted a significant part of the diaspora’s attention for decades as the Armenian SSR withdrew into the Soviet Union and behind the Iron Curtain following World War Two. However, following the devastating earthquake in 1988 near

⁶³ Pecquet, Julian. “Azerbaijan defies Armenian boycott campaign with new PR hire.” *Foreign Lobby Report*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.foreignlobby.com/2020/10/29/azerbaijan-defies-armenian-boycott-campaign-with-new-pr-hire/>.

the modern-day city of Gyumri and as access to the Armenian SSR increased, the diaspora began to see new opportunities to push for international support to an Armenian state facing war and domestic crisis. The United States undertook its first large-scale relief effort in the Soviet Union since World War Two when it sent aid to Armenia following the earthquake, demonstrating the thaw in relations between the world's two superpowers.⁶⁴

Armenia has traditionally relied mostly on an extensive diaspora to garner influence in the west.

As the Soviet Union began to unravel and the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh became a full-scale war between the two new republics, the Armenian diaspora found a new *idée fixe* in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, or what Armenians call Artsakh. In the early 1990s, the Armenian diaspora in the United States began to use their significant demographic sway across the country to foster American support for the Republic of Armenia.⁶⁵ During this time, Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act was heralded as a great success for the diaspora in the United States. Nevertheless, since the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have closed their border with Armenia, leaving the landlocked republic with access to the outside world only through Georgia to the north and Iran to the south.

Following the events of 9/11, the George W. Bush administration, in its burgeoning “global war on terror,” issued a waiver to Section 907, thereby allowing U.S aid to begin flowing to Azerbaijan with the intent of supporting Washington and coalition partners in countering international terrorism and enhancing Azerbaijan’s border security. The waiver, passed every year since 2002, included a clause that it could not “undermine or hamper ongoing efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement between Armenia and

⁶⁴ Mann, Jim. “Worldwide Quake Help Pouring Into Armenia : 3 Planes Carrying Official American Aid.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1988, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-12-11-mn-436-story.html>.

⁶⁵ Olcott, Martha Brill. “U.S. Policy in the South Caucasus.” *Connections* 1, no. 3 (September 2002): 59–66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26322954>.

Azerbaijan or be used for offensive purposes against Armenia,” a point that was most clearly violated when Azerbaijan launched the 2020 Nagorno–Karabakh War.

Diaspora Armenians have relied on the Armenian Assembly and the Armenian National Committee of America as their main lobbying groups in the United States. Both organizations, although with sometimes differing perspectives and goals, have established genuine representation in Washington, D.C. and with members of Congress. The Congressional Armenian Caucus is the most clear representation of this influence; its membership strongly, although not always, coincides with highly Armenian–concentrated centers across the United States.

In 2018, the so–called Velvet Revolution swept Nikol Pashinyan to the premiership by ousting the former ruling Karabakh Clan from power in Yerevan on a platform of combating corruption and improving democratic governance. This development was seen as an opportunity for Armenia to position itself as the sole democratic pole in an otherwise authoritarian neighborhood. The Armenian diaspora in the west shared and supported this view.

Pashinyan’s government and Armenian society more broadly believed that its democratic status and its improved relations with European countries and the United States would provide a defense against authoritarian aggression by Azerbaijan. However, the war in 2020, repeated attacks and territorial claims against Armenia proper, the 2023 lightning offensive against Nagorno–Karabakh and the resulting mass exodus of Armenians from the region have proven that Washington’s strategic interests continue to take precedence over concerns of democracy and human rights, much to the disappointment of Armenians.⁶⁶

A large part of post–Soviet Armenian identity – in Armenia, Nagorno–Karabakh, and in the diaspora – was strongly built on the successes and apparent victory in the First

⁶⁶ Shoujounian, Aram (@AramShoujounian). “🇷🇺 #RecognizeArtsakh | #LosAngeles 🇺🇸 #BREAKING: Watch this historic protest in #California 🇺🇸 Yesterday, around 200 000 Armenians protested in front of the Turkish and #Azerbaijan-i Consulates in LA. #ՅԱՂԹԵԼՈՒԿԵՆԷ #ArtsakhStrong #StopAzerbaijaniAggression © Mher Petrosyan.” Twitter, October 12, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AramShoujounian/status/1315807580548104192?s=20>.

Nagorno–Karabakh War. This attitude lingered well into Pashinyan’s rule. Therefore, a sense of hubris, especially from those in hardline or nationalist factions of Armenian politics and diasporic opinion, dominated. But that thinking, in the absence of a long period of dynamic economic growth and a steadily decreasing population, hindered Armenia’s ability to develop militarily at a comparable rate and was to prove disastrous, as Azerbaijan developed extensively with the ultimate goal of reigniting the conflict at a favorable moment. This moment eventually came amidst the global pandemic and in the run up to the contentious 2020 U.S. presidential election, resulting in an almost media blackout throughout the course of the 44 day war on Europe’s periphery.

A large part of post–Soviet Armenian identity was strongly built on the successes and apparent victory in the First Nagorno–Karabakh War.

From the early days of the 2020 Nagorno–Karabakh War, Armenian groups in the United States and Armenians more broadly sought to prevent the production of American and western components that were being used in Turkish drones against Armenians and to influence members of Congress to support Armenia and Nagorno–Karabakh. A main objective of the Armenian diaspora in the United States and Europe has been to have sanctions applied to the Azerbaijani élite, with the hope that such pressure would act as a deterrent against Baku’s aggression or to directly influence its actions. To date, such sanctions have not come to pass from either Washington or Brussels.

On April 24, 2021, President Biden became the first American president to acknowledge the systemic and mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as Genocide. For the Armenian diaspora in the United States which had long sought Washington’s recognition of the genocide, this was an important achievement. However, the wording by the administration was more of Washington sticking it to Ankara than standing shoulder to shoulder with Armenians and declaring “never again.”

As of now, the Section 907 Waiver for this year has not been issued and signals from the administration suggest it will not be.⁶⁷ While this would be seen as a victory for the Armenian cause, it is generally viewed as too little, too late. With the de facto Nagorno–Karabakh Republic set to dissolve on January 1, 2024 following the “lightning offensive” and threats to Armenia proper still a pressing concern, attention has shifted to safeguarding Armenia’s territorial integrity.

In France, where the Armenian diaspora is also very strong, the recent announcement of a deal for the sale of defense armaments to Armenia has generally been viewed quite positively, especially as Yerevan warns of a future Azerbaijani attack on its southern flank.⁶⁸ While the Armenian lobby in Europe and the United States has been able to garner some support, it is often largely symbolic and has proven unable to prevent escalation in a conflict that has yet to be fully resolved. Nevertheless, as the war in Ukraine reshapes the post–Soviet space, the interests of regional and extra regional actors have also been reshaped in the South Caucasus.

The current battle for U.S. support

Immediately following the Azerbaijan assault on Nagorno Karabakh, on September 19, the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues released a statement alleging that “Azerbaijan was implementing a genocidal campaign against the Armenian people of Nagorno–Karabakh,” and that the United States should use every tool, including sanctions, to ensure Armenians can remain there.⁶⁹ The next day, Secretary of State Antony Blinken released a statement explaining the United States was “deeply

⁶⁷ US House Foreign Affairs Committee. *The Future of Nagorno-Karabakh*. November 15, 2023, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/the-future-of-nagorno-karabakh/>; Bazail-Eimil, Eric and Gabriel Gavin. “Blinken warned lawmakers Azerbaijan may invade Armenia in coming weeks.” *Politico*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/10/13/blinken-warned-lawmakers-azerbaijan-may-invade-armenia-in-coming-weeks-00121500>.

⁶⁸ Kayali, Laura and Gabriel Gavin. “France sends weapons to Armenia amid fears of new conflict with Azerbaijan.” *Politico*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-armenia-fear-conflict-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-zangezur/>.

⁶⁹ Office of US Congressman Frank Pallone, Jr. *Armenian Congressional Caucus Co-Chairs Statement on Unprovoked Attacks on Artsakh*. September 19, 2023. <https://pallone.house.gov/media/press-releases/armenian-congressional-caucus-co-chairs-statement-unprovoked-attacks-artsakh>.

concerned by Azerbaijan’s military actions in Nagorno–Karabakh and calls on Azerbaijan to cease these actions immediately.”⁷⁰

The fighting did end just 24 hours after it began, but that’s when more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians began leaving Nagorno–Karabakh en masse following the Azerbaijani military assault. This led Senator Ben Cardin, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to issue a statement on October 4 arguing the United States should withhold military assistance to Azerbaijan until it ends what he called a “coordinated, intentional campaign of ethnic cleansing” of Armenians in Nagorno–Karabakh.⁷¹

Cardin’s proposal faces an uphill climb, however, as Azerbaijan’s lobbyists and Cardin’s colleagues on the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus continue to defend Azerbaijan’s actions. A presentation from the Azerbaijan Embassy, circulated by the Friedlander Group, for example, argues that in the latest Nagorno–Karabakh war, “Azerbaijan acted in full compliance with norms of humanitarian law. All measures were taken to avoid collateral damage to civilians and civilian infrastructure.”⁷² This stands in stark contrast to the observations of independent observers, like Human Rights Watch, which stated that Azerbaijan’s claims to have protected civilians in Nagorno–Karabakh, “are difficult to accept at face value after the months of severe hardships, decades of conflict, impunity for alleged crimes, in particular during hostilities, and the Azerbaijani government’s overall deteriorating human rights record.”⁷³

As of this writing in November 2023, Cardin’s proposal has not gained traction, no sanctions have been issued against Azerbaijan, and the Biden administration has done nothing to punish Azerbaijan for its brutal assault on and displacement of Armenians in

⁷⁰ US Embassy in Armenia. *Statement by Secretary Antony J. Blinken*. September 19, 2023. <https://am.usembassy.gov/statement-by-secretary-2/>.

⁷¹ US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. *Chairman Cardin Statement on Need to Reevaluate Military Assistance to Azerbaijan*. October 4, 2023. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/dem/release/chairman-cardin-statement-on-need-to-reevaluate-military-assistance-to-azerbaijan>.

⁷² NSD/FARA Registration Unit, US Department of Justice. *Recent developments in the South Caucasus*. November 1, 2023. <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/7009-Informational-Materials-20231101-3.pdf>.

⁷³ “Guarantee Right to Return to Nagorno Karabakh.” *Human Rights Watch*, October 5, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/05/guarantee-right-return-nagorno-karabakh>.

Nagorno–Karabakh. The only meaningful action from the U.S. government has been the Senate passing the “Armenian Protection Act of 2023,” which would repeal Freedom Support Act Section 907 waiver authority, effectively blocking military aid to Azerbaijan.

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This inaction, on balance, hasn’t gone unnoticed by the Armenian diaspora in the United States. “Not only is the Biden administration failing to address any of this stuff, the Biden administration is complicit in the genocide of Armenians,” a spokesperson for the Armenian National Committee of America said at a rally in Los Angeles.”⁷⁵ Other rally attendees likened the current situation to 1915, the year of the Armenian Genocide, and called on both the Biden administration and the Republican Party to support sanctions against Azerbaijan and end U.S. military aid.

The negligible U.S. response to Azerbaijan’s use of military force in Nagorno–Karabakh could reflect something of a stalemate in the lobbying and influence battle the two countries have been waging in the United States. In this view, the influence of the Armenian diaspora in the United States helps to engender outcries from policymakers, but cannot overcome the influence of the Azerbaijan lobby within D.C. to enact any meaningful punishments for Azerbaijan’s assault on Armenians in Nagorno–Karabakh.

⁷⁴ GovInfo.gov. S. 3000 (IS) - Armenian Protection Act of 2023. Accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/BILLS-118s3000is/related>.

⁷⁵ Childs, Jeremy and Christian Martinez. “Armenian Americans say another genocide underway in Nagorno-Karabakh, rally for U.S. action.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-09-26/armenian-rally-for-artsakh-reagan-library>.

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Another plausible explanation for the muted U.S. response is the selective approach to human rights within U.S. foreign policy. The United States has, historically, sung the merits of defending human rights when it was strategically convenient, justifying U.S. military involvement on humanitarian grounds in places like Kosovo, Somalia, and Iraq, even after weapons of mass destruction were not found. As each of those cases attests, U.S. military involvement on humanitarian grounds has often resulted in more, not less, human suffering. As Quincy Institute Non–Resident Fellow Asli Bali has written, the reason for this “humanitarian paradox” is that, “the intervener’s interests often diverge from those of civilians on the ground.”⁷⁶

Yet, despite expansive rhetoric about defending human rights, the United States has often ignored human rights atrocities, especially when they’ve been committed by America’s supposed “friends” in places like Yemen. This could, at least partially, explain current U.S. inaction related to Azerbaijan’s assault on Nagorno–Karabakh. Given Azerbaijan’s ties to – and support from – Israel, it is possible the United States is being pushed to stand idly by. But, Azerbaijan and Israel’s “strategic partnership to contain Iran” must not become a reason for the United States to remain indifferent as Baku engages in coercive diplomacy with Yerevan. The threat of new conflict in the South Caucasus– this time likely across Armenia’s internationally recognized southern regions– is serious.⁷⁷ Washington must do what it can to prevent a clear violation of

⁷⁶ Bali, Asli. “The Humanitarian Paradox: Why Human Rights Require Restraint.” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, August 1, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/report/the-humanitarian-paradox-why-human-rights-require-restraint/>.

⁷⁷ “Assessing the Prospect of Azerbaijan Invading Armenia.” *Stratfor*, October 19, 2023, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/assessing-prospect-azerbaijan-invading-armenia>; Dumoulin, Marie and Gustav

international law and another exodus of Armenians by Azerbaijani armed units, possibly seeking to create the so-called “Zangezur corridor” by military force. The strategic value that Washington ascribed to Azerbaijan following the events of September 11, 2001 has since diminished. Furthermore, Baku’s role as an energy supplier to Europe that avoids both Iran and Russia is not significant enough so as to ignore the plight of Nagorno–Karabakh Armenians and the threats to Armenia proper. Otherwise, the strong moral position that the United States took over Russia’s war in Ukraine risks becoming further undermined, as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has already demonstrated.

The outcome is a situation where a country used military might to reclaim its territory during a negotiating process and faced little consequences from the United States.

The root causes of U.S. inaction are likely some combination of these forces. Regardless of the cause, however, the outcome is a situation where a country used military might to reclaim its territory during a negotiating process and faced little consequences from the United States – or any country for that matter – and seems emboldened to continue its aggression in an already volatile region. Time will tell the dangers of that decision.

Disclosure: Artin Dersimonian was a summer intern at the Armenian Embassy in Washington in 2018. The Terjenian-Thomas Assembly Internship Program at the Armenian Assembly facilitated Dersimonian's internship with the embassy.

Gressel. “After Nagorno-Karabakh: How Europeans can strengthen Armenia’s resilience.” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 24, 2023.
<https://ecfr.eu/article/after-nagorno-karabakh-how-europeans-can-strengthen-armenias-resilience/>

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About the Quincy Institute

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