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Sent: Wednesday, July 1, 2020 3:15 PM
To: Tavlarides, Mark <mtavlarides@bgrdc.com>
Subject: Azerbaijan Update

Good afternoon,

I wanted to share a few updates on Azerbaijan.

Armenian Ambassador to the U.S. Sends Misleading Letter to U.S. Congress

Following the letter of the Ambassador of Azerbaijan to the U.S., which called for greater efforts to bring peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia's Ambassador to the U.S. Varuzhan Nersesyan sent his own [letter](#) to the U.S. Congress, once again rejecting the current format of the peace process. In his letter, Mr. Nersesyan attempted to introduce a proxy regime on Azerbaijan's occupied territories as another party to the negotiations, which is contrary to international law and directly undermines the negotiations process under the OSCE Minsk Group. Additionally, he misquoted [Senate Joint Resolution 178](#) from 1989, stating it includes a reference to "engaging in meaningful discussions with elected representatives of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh regarding their demands of reunification with the Armenian homeland." However, this line does not exist within the version of the resolution that passed the Senate. Moreover, the resolution preceded the independence of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and since then, both nations have been recognized by the United Nations and the United States in their current official borders. Lastly, the Armenian Ambassador's description of "self-determination" amounts to illegal occupation, annexation, and ethnic cleansing of a neighbor's territories, all of which are contrary to the very notion of self-determination. Such an approach is detrimental to U.S. interests, not only with regard to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also vis-à-vis similar conflicts in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This idea is clearly manifested by Armenia's voting pattern within international organizations against the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

U.S. State Department Reiterates Strategic Importance of U.S.-Azerbaijan Partnership

On June 23, 2020, after an inquiry by a member of the Congressional Armenian Caucus about Azerbaijan's military exercises in May, Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs Mary Elizabeth Taylor responded with a [letter](#) of her own. She reaffirmed U.S. support for helping achieve a "lasting, peaceful settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, based on the Helsinki Final Act principles of refraining from the threat or use of force, the territorial integrity of states and the equal rights and self-determination of peoples." Regarding the May military exercises in Azerbaijan, she wrote, "After reviewing the available information, to date the United States has not determined that the Azerbaijani military exercises that concluded on May 22 at any point exceeded VD 11 [the 2011 Vienna Document

on Confidence-Building and Security-Building Measures] notification thresholds.” She noted the Defense Department’s maritime and border security cooperation programs with Azerbaijan “are in the national interests of the United States, Azerbaijan, and other partners in the region as these borders are areas of significant concern for potential movement of terrorists, weapons of mass destruction, illicit narcotics, and other unlawful trafficking. Moreover, these programs increase Azerbaijan’s capability to counter threats to its critical energy infrastructure, which provides a critical alternative to Russian and Iranian energy resources for Western markets.” She clarified these program activities do not occur at or near the Armenia-Azerbaijan border or the Line of Contact, and the nature of the training and equipment provided do not contribute to the offensive capabilities of Azerbaijan and “cannot be misused to threaten Armenia or regional stability.”

OSCE Minsk Group Meets to Discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

On June 29-30, the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs met separately and jointly via video conference with Armenian Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov to discuss the public health situation in the region, current dynamics in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and next steps in the peace process. In a [statement](#), the Co-Chairs emphasized the importance of promoting and maintaining an atmosphere conducive to peace and favorable to substantive negotiations. They stressed, “There is no military solution to the conflict.” However, the Co-Chairs expressed concern that “possible steps intended to change the situation on the ground in tangible ways could undermine the settlement process.” This important element should be read in light of Armenia’s recent announcements to start new projects in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan as a further step towards de facto annexation of these territories. Such projects are actively being used to strengthen Armenia’s military presence in the occupied territories, deliver offensive weapons to the occupation regime, and reinforce the policy of ethnic cleansing. The Co-Chairs and Foreign Ministers agreed to hold another joint video conference in July and to meet in person as soon as possible.

“US International Religious Freedom Efforts Should Not Promote Islamic Extremism”

In RealClearReligion, Brenda Shaffer and Svante Cornell write “[US International Religious Freedom Efforts Should Not Promote Islamic Extremism](#).” They called on the United States to change its approach to international religious freedom in Muslim-populated states because, “In its policies toward Muslim-majority states, the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and the U.S. Department of State advocate for allowance of greater activity of Islamic extremists, many backed by Iran, as part of their promotion of religious freedom.” They evidence the case of Azerbaijan, wherein U.S. government publications “extensively rely on” information provided by a small NGO called Forum 18, a self-titled “Christian initiative,” as well as reports from activist media groups and “claims made by self-appointed ‘human rights defenders.’” The authors write, “*The USCIRF and State Department recent chapters on Azerbaijan, for instance, refer to that country’s actions to combat the Muslim Unity Movement as “repression against believers” and lists jailed combatants as “religious prisoners.” But the movement, which receives Iranian backing and training, has been credibly linked to violence, including the deaths of two policemen; the Iranian regime hosts regular television broadcasts in Qom by a member of the Movement who escaped to Iran and regularly agitates against the West and its secular culture. Is this the type of movement for which American taxpayers should advocate?*”

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Please let me know if you have any questions.

Best,

Mark

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