

ASSESSING U.S. POLICY IN THE CAUCASUS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

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C O N T E N T S

	Page
Menendez, Hon. Robert, U.S. Senator From New Jersey	1
Prepared Statement of Senator James E. Risch	3
Donfried, Hon. Karen, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC	4
Prepared Statement	6
Reeker, Hon. Philip, Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC	7
Prepared Statement	9

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Responses of Ms. Karen Donfried and Mr. Philip Reeker to Questions Submitted by Senator James E. Risch	27
Responses of Ms. Karen Donfried to Questions Submitted by Senator Cory Booker	30
Response of Ms. Karen Donfried to a Question Submitted by Senator Chris Van Hollen	32
Responses of Ms. Karen Donfried to Questions Submitted by Senator Bill Hagerty	32
Testimony From Tereza Yerimyan, Government Affairs Director, Armenian National Committee of America	33
Statement From the Armenian Bar Association: Azerbaijan's Destruction of Armenian Cultural and Religious Monuments and Suppression of Religious Freedom	35

ASSESSING U.S. POLICY IN THE CAUCASUS

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2022

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:04 a.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Robert Menendez presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Cardin, Shaheen, Murphy, Kaine, Markey, Booker, and Van Hollen.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order.

Assistant Secretary Donfried, Ambassador Reeker, thank you for appearing before us today to talk about United States policy in the Caucasus.

I would just simply note that our Republican colleagues are having a caucus so the ranking member is attending and, hopefully, he will be able to be here later and he has given his consent for us to proceed.

The absence of members on the other side is not an indication of their lack of interest in this. They are very interested, but they have a caucus.

This region is an ancient crossroads with deep geopolitical importance as a bridge between the West and the heart of Asia.

Too often, dictators with imperial aspirations have victimized those living in the South Caucasus. From Russian-backed aggression in Abkhazia or South Ossetia to Turkish-supported Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia, their disregard for human life has been clear.

In 2020, Azerbaijan's war uprooted close to 100,000 Armenians from their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh. Sixty-five hundred people died.

Today, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, the land they know as Artsakh, still face an acute humanitarian crisis, including threats of ethnic cleansing and chronic shortages of water, energy, health care, and food.

That is why I have pushed for more humanitarian assistance to help the victims both in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh because the U.S. humanitarian response has been, in my view, insufficient.

Today, I want to hear from you about what more we can do and could be helping these affected areas, but, incredibly, it is not just

that the United States is failing to meet these humanitarian needs. We are still sending security assistance to Azerbaijan.

How on earth can the United States justify sending any kind of support, security or otherwise, to a regime in Baku? It is inexcusable.

I personally think it is morally repugnant and it makes a mockery of the Freedom Support Act. Section 907 of this act is meant to ban security assistance to Azerbaijan until Azerbaijan is “taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.”

Yet, the Department of State has waived Section 907 over and over again. It requested \$600,000 for fiscal year 2022 to provide Azerbaijan with international military education and training, a program meant to “provide a professional military education to countries selected by the Secretary of State.”

Suffice it to say that I am strongly opposed to having any aid go to a fighting force known for war crimes and aggression against a neighbor state, and the Department greenlit security assistance to the regime in Baku just months before it invaded Armenia in September, months before a video caught Azerbaijani forces killing unarmed Armenian soldiers in cold blood, months before a report surfaced of Azerbaijani soldiers sexually assaulting and mutilating an Armenian female soldier.

The GAO report I commissioned to get to the bottom of this found both the Department of State and Department of Defense failed to meet statutory reporting requirements to Congress on this issue.

I would like you to explain why. It simply makes no sense to say that the United States’ assistance and training has not impacted Azerbaijan’s military balance with Armenia.

I want you to give us all the details Congress has asked for so we can assess any assistance the U.S. provides to Baku.

Finally, I want to be clear. I still have hopes for a lasting peace in the region. I know Secretary Blinken hosted Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers here in Washington last week. I welcome senior level U.S. engagement in this region. The lack of attention to the Caucasus over successive administrations has only benefited Russia’s interests. I appreciate this new approach.

I hope to hear from you about what more we could be doing for peace in the Caucasus and, specifically, following the recent attack on Armenia.

I also remain skeptical that authoritarians in Baku or Moscow or Turkey, for that matter, will agree to let the Armenian people choose their own destiny, and it is not just Armenia, but Georgia as well.

This is a nation with so much potential and, yet, today we see intimidation of independent media, arrests of opposition leaders, and continued efforts to block the very democratic reforms Georgia needs to advance on its Euro-Atlantic path.

The United States must remain engaged to support the democratic development of Georgia during this tenuous period, and I look forward to hearing from the witnesses about these efforts.

The people of this region do not want to live under the threat of violence. They do not want autocratic rule imposed on them by the

barrel of a gun. No one wants to live that way—not you, not me, not the Armenian people, not the people of Nagorno-Karabakh.

They deserve to live in peace. They deserve freedom and security, and that means ensuring that a peace deal does not lead to ethnic cleansing for the Armenian people of Nagorno-Karabakh.

It means tackling the needs of the humanitarian crisis there. It means holding accountable those who order and carry out the violence we have seen in this region.

I look forward to hearing from you today about where things stand with the Administration's efforts to help facilitate a peace process and address these issues.

When Senator Risch arrives, I will be happy to recognize him for any opening statements.

[The prepared statement of Senator James E. Risch follows:]

Prepared Statement of Senator James E. Risch

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you to Assistant Secretary Donfried and Ambassador Reeker for appearing before us today.

The emerging instability in Europe and Eurasia has made clear the need for a strong U.S. policy for the Caucasus, a region that lies between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Democratic backsliding in Georgia, war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the malign ambitions of Russia and Iran are all critical challenges we must face with clear goals and strategies.

Perhaps most importantly, Russia's war on Ukraine has distracted Putin and prevented him from maintaining his brand of chaos in the Caucasus. As its military power falters, Russia has proved unwilling and unable to continue flexing its military muscles in the region.

This new environment means there is an opportunity to help foster a stable and democratic future in the Caucasus. Our policy towards the region must look to fill that leadership void and help the Caucasian nations achieve lasting peace by building strong democracies, societies, and economies.

Russia's current inaction in helping to find a solution to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and absence from the Minsk Process, has provided a chance for a new approach to negotiations. The EU, France, and the U.S., have all recently made good-faith efforts to help Armenia and Azerbaijan end this long-standing conflict. I look forward to hearing from Ambassador Reeker about what solutions might be possible. Ending this conflict would both bring peace to a fractured region and remove one of Russia's key levers of influence in the region.

In Georgia, the political situation has unfortunately deteriorated. Georgia was once a leader in democratic reform, but years of political polarization and failure to resist Russian malign influence have reversed its trajectory. It is extremely troubling that parties are unable to simply communicate with each other, much less compromise on basic issues, especially as Georgia faces serious challenges and 20 percent of its territory remains occupied by Russia.

I am also very worried by the unacceptable and slanderous attacks on the U.S. ambassador, our diplomats, and on Georgia's civil society. The State Department must take a firm stand and push back against this inflammatory behavior. I look forward to hearing from you how State will respond specifically to these attacks and how the U.S. plans to help Georgia break through its political gridlock, implement reforms, and recommit to its European path.

The Caucasus is tremendously important as a crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. While we help these nations confront the issues they have both internally and with one another, we must also look at ways to promote productive international partnerships. Trade agreements, energy deals, infrastructure, and investment all have the potential to better integrate the region within the transatlantic community.

A more peaceful and settled Caucasus can also help open Central Asia to the world and better balance Russian and Chinese influence there. However, if we fail to form and implement an effective policy, we could see a return of Russian influence, or even see China establishing a stronger foothold in the region.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Let us introduce our two witnesses today.

Assistant Secretary Karen Donfried leads the Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs at the Department of State, having previously served as president of the German Marshall Fund, the National Security Council, and the National Intelligence Council. She is no stranger to the committee and we look forward to hearing from her today.

We are also joined by the State Department Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations, Ambassador Philip Reeker.

Ambassador Reeker serves as a U.S. OSCE Minsk Group co-chair and lead negotiator for the U.S. delegation to the Geneva international discussions.

He previously served the U.S. Embassy in London as Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and a civilian deputy and policy adviser to the commander of EUCOM.

Welcome to both of you. Your full statements will be included in the record, without objection. I would ask you to summarize them in about 5 minutes or so so that members of the committee can have a conversation with you.

We will recognize Assistant Secretary Donfried first.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE KAREN DONFRIED, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. DONFRIED. Chairman Menendez, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the Administration's priorities and engagement efforts in the South Caucasus.

I appreciate and welcome your advice as we work collaboratively to advance U.S. interests across the region.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have an historic opportunity to secure a lasting peace to a conflict that was triggered during the fall of the Soviet Union and has lasted for more than 30 years.

There have been setbacks, such as the fighting that broke out September 13–14. When hostilities erupted, we immediately engaged to halt the fighting. This setback reminded all of us of the fragility of the situation and the importance of securing a comprehensive sustainable peace agreement.

Secretary Blinken's leadership has been instrumental in promoting dialogue. He hosted joint meetings of the foreign ministers on September 19 and November 7, along with a telephone call with both on October 4.

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with his counterparts in Washington on September 27, demonstrating the Administration's whole-of-government commitment to securing peace.

Thanks in part to our engagement, on October 4 Azerbaijan released 17 Armenian POWs detained during the September fighting. Actions like this help build needed trust between the two sides, and we take every opportunity to urge Azerbaijan to release the remaining detainees in its custody.

We continue to encourage Azerbaijan and Armenia to maintain momentum for negotiations and we are doing so in close coordination with the EU and other partners.

In this vein, we assess the Turkish-Armenian normalization dialogue positively and have let both sides know that we want to play a helpful role.

It has the potential to increase regional stability, deter malign influence, and lead to greater economic development. This is even more important now, given Russia's unprovoked brutal war in Ukraine.

More broadly, supporting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is both the right thing to do and in our national security interest.

Should Azerbaijan and Armenia secure a peace deal, our security cooperation will become even more critical as we build the confidence and capacity of each country to freely express their sovereignty in a matter that maintains peace with their neighbors.

Our bilateral relations with Armenia have never been stronger. We continue to seek ways to broaden our security partnership, deepen people-to-people ties, and grow our cooperation on democratic and economic development.

The U.S.-Armenia Strategic Dialogue is the flagship format for this partnership. We held the Dialogue's capstone event in Washington in May of this year, including a very positive meeting between Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Mirzoyan.

At that time, we signed a nuclear cooperation memorandum of understanding that can advance Armenia's energy sovereignty and build stronger U.S.-Armenian cooperation on nuclear energy, including through the potential provision of U.S.-origin small modular reactors.

Other working groups on security and defense, justice reform and democracy, discussed additional ways the United States can help bolster Armenia's democratic development.

I look forward to participating in the upcoming dialogue in Yerevan next year.

In Azerbaijan, we remain committed to advancing our bilateral priorities—security, economic growth, democracy, and human rights. After 9/11, Azerbaijan stepped up early with financial and troop support to Afghanistan and helped protect Kabul International Airport until the final days of the 2021 withdrawal.

Security cooperation with Azerbaijan supports our national security priorities including counterterrorism objectives, interdiction of drugs and illicit material, and increased security of critical Caspian energy infrastructure.

We welcome Azerbaijan's growing support for European energy security.

The human rights situation in Azerbaijan remains a challenge. This Administration regularly urges Azerbaijan's government to respect human rights and the fundamental freedoms necessary to realize the full potential of Azerbaijan's people.

In Georgia, the American people have long stood in solidarity with Georgians' desire to be a free, democratic, and sovereign country within its internationally recognized borders.

Over the last 30 years, we have become strategic partners working toward a shared vision of a Georgia fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic family of nations.

The United States has allocated over \$6 billion in assistance funds to Georgia, sending thousands of Georgians to the United

States for cultural and educational exchanges, and training tens of thousands of Georgian soldiers to defend Georgia's territory and promote peace and stability outside its borders as well.

That assistance supports democratic governance, rule of law, a vibrant civil society, and economic growth. We continue to urge the Georgian Government to implement the necessary reforms to acquire EU candidate status.

People across the South Caucasus deserve to live in peace, which will unlock prosperity for the entire region. This Administration is fully committed to supporting that worthy goal.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss our priorities and efforts in the South Caucasus. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Donfried follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Karen Donfried

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished Members of the Committee: Thank you for inviting me here to discuss the Administration's priorities and engagement efforts in the South Caucasus. I appreciate and welcome your advice as we work collaboratively to advance U.S. interests across the region.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have a historic opportunity to secure a lasting peace to a conflict that was triggered during the fall of the Soviet Union and has lasted for more than 30 years. There have been setbacks, such as the fighting that broke out September 13–14. When hostilities erupted, we immediately engaged to halt the fighting. This setback reminded all of us of the fragility of the situation and the importance of securing a comprehensive, sustainable peace agreement.

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More broadly, supporting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is both the right thing to do and in our national security interest. Should Azerbaijan and Armenia secure a peace deal, our security cooperation will become even more critical as we build the confidence and capacity of each country to freely exercise their sovereignty in a matter that maintains peace with their neighbors.

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counterterrorism objectives, interdiction of drugs and illicit material, and increased security of critical Caspian energy infrastructure. We welcome Azerbaijan's growing support for European energy security. The human rights situation in Azerbaijan remains a challenge. This Administration regularly urges Azerbaijan's government to respect human rights and the fundamental freedoms necessary to realize the full potential of Azerbaijan's people.

In Georgia, the American people have long stood in solidarity with Georgians' desire to be a free, democratic, and sovereign country within its internationally recognized borders. Over the last 30 years, we have become strategic partners, working toward our shared vision of a Georgia fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic family of nations. The United States has allocated more than \$6 billion in assistance funds to Georgia, sending thousands of Georgians to the United States for cultural and education exchanges, and training tens of thousands of Georgian soldiers to defend Georgia's territory and promote peace and stability outside its borders as well. U.S. assistance supports democratic governance, the rule of law, a vibrant civil society, and economic growth, and we continue to urge the Georgian Government to implement the necessary reforms to acquire EU candidate status.

People across the South Caucasus deserve to live in peace, which will unlock prosperity for the entire region. This Administration is fully committed to supporting this worthy goal. Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss our priorities and efforts in the South Caucasus. I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Ambassador Reeker.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE PHILIP REEKER, SENIOR ADVISOR FOR CAUCASUS NEGOTIATIONS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. REEKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and distinguished members of the committee.

I really do thank you for the opportunity to come before you as the Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations, the opportunity to discuss the Administration's efforts to support regional negotiations and address the core issues that pose a challenge to sustainable peace in the South Caucasus.

Having taken this position just under 3 months ago after my return from Embassy London, I very much welcome your interest and value the cooperation with this committee and all members of Congress to advance U.S. interests in the region and help build a lasting comprehensive peace that will benefit the people of the region.

Let me start by echoing Assistant Secretary Donfried's optimism about the potential for peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia and her realism about the setbacks we have encountered even since I began this work.

I was in the region, in fact, during the September 13–14 fighting and met with President Aliyev on September 14 to urge an end to the violence.

My meetings with Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders paralleled urgent and around-the-clock engagements with leadership of the two countries by Secretary Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, Assistant Secretary Donfried herself, and Deputy Assistant Secretary Erika Olson as well as by our colleagues at the Department of Defense.

Those engagements have continued since, and the joint efforts of the United States, the European Union, and partner countries have paved the way for a series of meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders to discuss peace.

Despite hostilities, we are encouraged by the pace of engagement by the Armenian and Azerbaijani leadership in their peace process. The leaders have met for negotiations on multiple occasions in re-

cent months as part of an EU-facilitated peace process, most recently in Prague on October 6.

The Prague meeting produced two meaningful outcomes that have the potential to pave the way for peace: mutual recognition of the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration as a basis for border discussions and acceptance of an EU monitoring capacity with the potential to build confidence between the sides and deescalate potential hostilities.

The United States has engaged bilaterally through partners like the European Union and its peace process, and through international organizations like the OSCE.

On September 27, I think you are aware, national security advisors met in Washington to discuss ways of focusing the various tracks of negotiations and accelerating their efforts.

On October 2, I conferred with the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers before and after their meeting in Geneva on the margins of the Geneva international discussions about Georgia to encourage their discussions and their accelerated negotiations.

As noted, just last week on November 7, Secretary Blinken hosted both foreign ministers here in Washington at Blair House to maintain positive momentum between the sides.

Our efforts and support complement those of the EU, which hosted border discussions on November 3 in Brussels. As with any peace negotiations, as I know you all know well, these are difficult discussions that focus on issues complicated by layers of history.

The pace and depth of the current discussions demonstrates a clear potential, one we have not seen for a long time, for a settlement that could end decades of conflict.

Of course, much remains to be done by both governments including investigating allegations of human rights and international humanitarian law violations, holding perpetrators accountable, ceasing inflammatory rhetoric, and fostering reconciliation.

Though the U.S. and EU are facilitating negotiations between the sides, the substance of these discussions is being led by Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives themselves.

Direct negotiations held at the initiative of the two countries and driven by their interests rather than the interests of outside actors have the greatest chance of long-term success.

We will support those efforts in any way we can. Secretary Blinken has offered not only his counsel, but he has also offered U.S. technical assistance on issues ranging from border delimitation to the planning of transportation routes.

While the resolution of contentious issues remains the responsibility of Armenia and Azerbaijan, I have made it clear the international community and the United States has a specific responsibility to ensure that the rights and security of ethnic Armenians are addressed credibly and in line with a peace settlement.

To that end, I have repeatedly encouraged the leaders in both countries to consider an international mechanism or construct to ensure, monitor, and report on any agreement involving Nagorno-Karabakh.

The sides are at an historic crossroads. We are encouraging them to choose a future of prosperity and demonstrate the wisdom of

working together on a peace that will benefit the people of the region for generations to come.

Our efforts will continue toward this goal and we will do so in any way we can.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Reeker follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. Philip Reeker

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to come before you as the Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations to discuss the Administration's efforts to support regional negotiations and address the core issues that pose a challenge to sustainable peace in the South Caucasus. I welcome cooperation with this committee and all Members of Congress to advance U.S. interests in the region and help build a lasting, comprehensive peace that will benefit the people of the region.

Let me start by echoing Assistant Secretary Donfried's optimism about the potential for peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and her realism about the setbacks we have encountered. I was in the region during the September 13–14 fighting and met with President Aliyev on September 14 to urge an end to the violence. My meetings with Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders paralleled urgent and around-the-clock engagements with leadership of the two countries by Secretary Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Assistant Secretary Donfried, and Deputy Assistant Secretary Erika Olson, as well as by our colleagues at the Department of Defense. Those engagements have continued since, and the joint efforts of the United States, EU, and partner countries have paved the way for a series of meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders to discuss peace.

Despite recent hostilities, we are encouraged by the pace of engagement by Armenian and Azerbaijani leadership in the peace process. The leaders have met for negotiations on multiple occasions in recent months as part of an EU-facilitated peace process, most recently in Prague on October 6. The Prague meeting produced two meaningful outcomes that have the potential to pave the way for peace: mutual recognition of the 1991 Almaty Declaration as a basis for border discussions, and acceptance of an EU "Monitoring Capacity" with the potential to build confidence amongst the sides and deescalate potential hostilities.

The United States is engaged bilaterally, through partners like the EU and its peace process, and through international organizations like the OSCE. On September 27, national security advisors met in Washington to discuss ways of focusing the various tracks of negotiations and accelerating efforts. On October 2, I conferred with the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers before and after their meeting in Geneva to encourage their discussions and accelerated negotiations. Last week, on November 7, the Secretary hosted both foreign ministers here in Washington to maintain positive momentum between the sides. Our efforts support and complement those of the EU, which hosted border discussions on November 3 in Brussels. As with any peace negotiations, these are difficult discussions that focus on issues complicated by layers of history. But the pace and depth of the current discussions demonstrates a clear potential for a settlement that could end decades of conflict.

Of course, much remains to be done by both governments, including investigating allegations of human rights and international humanitarian law violations, holding perpetrators accountable, ceasing inflammatory rhetoric, and fostering reconciliation.

Though the U.S. and EU are facilitating negotiations between the sides, the substance of these discussions is being led by Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives themselves. Direct negotiations held at the initiative of the two countries and driven by their interests, rather than the interests of outside actors, have the greatest chance of long-term success. We will support those efforts in any way we can. The Secretary has not only offered his counsel, but he has also offered U.S. technical assistance on issues ranging from border delimitation to the planning of transportation routes. While the resolution of contentious issues remains the responsibility of Armenia and Azerbaijan, I have made it clear the international community has a specific responsibility to ensure that the rights and security of ethnic Armenians are addressed credibly and in line with a peace settlement. To that end, I have repeatedly encouraged the leaders in both countries to consider an international mechanism to ensure, monitor, and report on any agreement involving Nagorno-Karabakh.

The sides are at an historic crossroads. We are encouraging them to choose a future of prosperity and demonstrate the wisdom of working together on a peace that will benefit the people of the region for generations to come. Our efforts will continue towards this goal, and we will do so in any way we can.

The CHAIRMAN. I thank you. We will start a round.

I have to be honest with you, this testimony is unresponsive to the concerns that I have raised either in my opening statement or in the past. Let me try to get responses to it through questions.

In 2020, Azerbaijan's war grew to close to 100,000 Armenians. Is that true?

Ms. DONFRIED. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. 6,500 people died. Is that true?

Mr. REEKER. I believe that is the numbers I have seen, although I do not know that they are exact counts, Senator.

The CHAIRMAN. Have you seen the video that caught Azerbaijani forces killing unarmed Armenian soldiers in cold blood?

Mr. REEKER. I have seen a number of videos. My email box is filled with—

The CHAIRMAN. Have you been able to verify the videos?

Mr. REEKER. I have not, no.

The CHAIRMAN. Are we making efforts to verify the videos?

Mr. REEKER. I would have to check with others. I know in the region they were undertaking efforts in both countries.

The CHAIRMAN. How about the reports of Azerbaijani soldiers sexually assaulting and mutilating an Armenian female soldier?

Mr. REEKER. I think we have all seen those reports—many reports of atrocities.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, this is the problem.

I do not understand—my understanding also, are you familiar with reports of Azerbaijan's reported use of illegal weapons, including white phosphorus cluster bombs, both of which are internationally prohibited munitions?

Mr. REEKER. I am not familiar with those specific reports.

The CHAIRMAN. The white phosphorus is very well reported, unfortunately, provided by Ukraine.

Here is my point. You all seem to be looking the other way because of whatever interests we have with Azerbaijan.

You mentioned, Assistant Secretary, there are some security interests and drug trafficking interests, but that should not trump, at the end of the day, violations that go to the very core of the instability. My frustration with the State Department is that they always say, well, both sides should refrain.

When there is an aggressor we should call out the aggressor, and I think it is—does not take a rocket scientist to figure out who is the aggressor, who has the ability to even be an aggressor in this conflict. It is Azerbaijan. Yet, we look the other way and we waive Section 907.

How does the Administration answer the GAO study that clearly said that the State Department did not meet up to its responsibilities in determining whether such a waiver should take place, and how do you provide a waiver in the face of all of these atrocities being committed by Azerbaijan?

Assistant Secretary Donfried.

Ms. DONFRIED. Chairman Menendez, to your first point about the State Department looking the other way, we are working very hard to achieve a goal, I think, we share, which is a sustainable peace in the South Caucasus.

As I noted in my opening testimony, we have seen over three decades of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and what we are hearing from both of those countries today is they both believe there is an historic opportunity for a sustainable peace in the region. That would be profoundly important for both of these countries and for the region as a whole.

What we are trying to do is facilitate to the best of our abilities these two countries achieving that peace, and I am happy to go into detail about how we are doing that. That is our goal.

The CHAIRMAN. Facilitating including just overlooking what Azerbaijan does?

Ms. DONFRIED. Now let us come to your concern about our waiving 907. We welcomed the GAO's review of the Section 907 waiver process and we took steps to implement the GAO's recommendations before making the decision to extend the waiver in June.

I want to emphasize there is nothing automatic about either the waiver or about any subsequent—

The CHAIRMAN. It looks pretty automatic to me.

In the face of all of the facts, how does one justify a 907 waiver? Is it humanly possible to say that Azerbaijan has not benefitted itself from the assistance we have given it in a way that gives it a clear edge against Armenia as it relates to its military promise?

There is no way to say that. You cannot sit here with a straight face and say that.

Ms. DONFRIED. We have looked at this with great care. We have asked all engaged in these programs whether they assess that there is an impact on the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, whether there is an assessment that U.S. assistance in some way undermines or hampers efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and to assure that any assistance we provide cannot be used for offensive purposes against Armenia—

The CHAIRMAN. I have a great deal of respect for you, but you are losing my confidence when you make evasive remarks like that.

What specific actions—I will close on this—has the Biden administration taken to directly help at-risk Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh?

I want you to cite for me program descriptions, partner organizations, deliverables, budgets, other relevant details, because I think we are woefully under-serving the humanitarian needs of those who are facing the realities of this conflict.

Ms. DONFRIED. I will turn that question to Ambassador Reeker, but I do on 907 want to be very clear that I do believe that assistance is in the national security interest of the U.S.

We provide nonlethal border security that has provided significant results countering transnational threats from Iran and disrupting smuggling routes to the South Caucasus, Russia, and Europe.

I do believe what that assistance is going to supports U.S.—

The CHAIRMAN. Border security that allows Azerbaijan to actually infringe upon the actual borders of Armenia.

Can you tell me what actions we are taking to help humanitarian assistance?

Mr. REEKER. Mr. Chairman, in my context, focusing on this peace process, what is most noticeable is the terrible humanitarian toll, particularly from the conflict in 2020, and that still seems to be a challenge for many.

The Department continues to work with relevant agencies to evaluate needs in the region and identify how best humanitarian assistance can be provided.

It is important to note that in the Nagorno-Karabakh itself access is extremely limited. I have not been able to visit there on my trips in the past 2 months to the region.

It is not currently possible for U.S. Government personnel to access the area and conduct needs assessments or monitor programs, but the United States has programmed substantial funding for humanitarian demining operations, something that Armenians have raised with us repeatedly as a great concern as well as Azerbaijanis who have lost a number of civilians to landmine injuries and deaths. That includes an announcement—I just have a note here of \$2 million announced on September 11 for that.

I have met when I have been in the region with the ICRC representatives and UNHCR representatives based in Yerevan who are able to travel in and working with both of our embassies in the region, including also our embassy in Tbilisi, which has access in that area.

The Department does continue to develop programs to strengthen and advance ties with peoples in the region to foster the conditions.

The goal, of course, of my work and what the secretary and assistant secretary have asked me to do is focus on getting the sides to a peace agreement and they are at this historical moment where, perhaps, they can do that and prevent any more horrific scenes, any more suffering—

The CHAIRMAN. I appreciate all the aspirations, but this is wholly unresponsive in terms of health care, food security, water. I cannot believe we do not have an answer.

Senator Cardin.

Senator CARDIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me thank both of our witnesses.

I have the honor of being the chair of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, which monitors our participation in the OSCE.

Ambassador Reeker, I want to ask you a question. I have been listening to reports for 30 years on the Minsk Group at OSCE international meetings and it is a carbon copy report every year. It is 30 years plus. Is it time to end the Minsk Group?

Mr. REEKER. Thanks, Senator Cardin.

You and I have discussed the Minsk Group and OSCE. You are probably familiar with my great respect for the OSCE and the—what I call toolbox that it offers to the broad region and its 57 participating states.

As you note, the Minsk Group was created under a mandate by OSCE almost 30 years ago after the horrific wars of the nineties

and the breakup of the Soviet Union. The United States is a co-chair, one of three with France and—

Senator CARDIN. Yes. I know the background on all this. My point is that Russia cannot really participate now because they are not even participating in the OSCE.

Mr. REEKER. Right.

Senator CARDIN. Some of their members cannot even get to meetings because of the war in Ukraine. Does this give us an opportunity just to end this process through our leadership in the OSCE?

Mr. REEKER. Well, I think that is—we have seen an evolution and that is what I have taken on board very much. I have met at the OSCE. The Minsk Group, as it is been known, is not functioning.

The mandate remains—the goal of the mandate, of course, remains and OSCE operates by consensus. I keep in very close touch with the French colleague, with the EU, which is still involved in the region now, with other interested parties, the OSCE itself. Azerbaijan has simply said they will not deal with the Minsk Group anymore.

Senator CARDIN. I am not suggesting that we not stay engaged with OSCE and the potential peace process, but is it time to end the Minsk Group?

Mr. REEKER. As I said, I think it has evolved to the point where, by consensus, we could end that mandate, but I think the mandate itself is quite useful.

The Minsk Group co-chair process itself is really no longer functioning and we are participating with the parties themselves on their peace process.

Senator CARDIN. I just think it gives cover to Russia right now and it gives cover to those who do not want to move forward with peace. It is time, I think, for us to look at an effective way up.

Secretary Donfried, I want to get to Georgia.

Georgia is a strategic partner for the United States. I recognize that. We have seen incredible backsliding on democratic advancements so much so the EU differentiated between Ukraine and Moldova when it came to Georgia, which was a clear indication the EU sees the backsliding.

We saw the criticism of our ambassador. We have seen the failure for judicial reform.

What is our strategy in regards to Georgia advancing democratic institutions and how do we plan to make progress?

Ms. DONFRIED. Thanks so much for bringing Georgia into the conversation.

As you know, the United States has partnered closely with Georgia since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and I think we have seen over those decades significant progress in Georgia in developing its Euro-Atlantic ties—

Senator CARDIN. Have we seen progress recently?

Ms. DONFRIED. Based on that progress, we have had a strategic partnership with Georgia and what we have seen recently has been deeply concerning to us because we have seen democratic backsliding in Georgia.

I will tell you, I was in Georgia on the day that the European Commission previewed the decision that was coming from the European Council the next week where Georgia would be given a European perspective and, as you noted, Ukraine and Moldova were given candidate status.

It was so emotional in Georgia. I had a lunch with civil society actors who were in tears because Georgia, as you know, had been the front runner on this path to EU membership.

What strikes me about Georgia is 85 percent of Georgians support these Euro-Atlantic aspirations and I think that puts pressure on the government, and what we have been doing is saying to the Georgian Government, we have joined hands with the European Union. The list of reforms they are saying you need to make to get candidate status we are all in on helping you make those reforms.

We are still hopeful that there will be progress, but, absolutely, we are concerned about the lack of progress to date.

You mentioned the just outrageous criticism of our Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan, and I want to say to the members here that she is a fantastic representative of the United States in Georgia and I will back her up any day of the week.

We have talked to the Georgian Government about this, the Prime Minister has spoken to this, and while these are groups that are not part of the government, some of the groups who have been highly and wrongly critical of her have close ties to the government. We have made clear that that criticism will undermine the partnership we have had over time with—

Senator CARDIN. I agree with that. I would just underscore this point.

Georgia is important to the United States, but the United States is critical to Georgia, and we need to make that clear in demonstratable progress towards these democratic goals.

We need Georgia to be on a path to integration in Europe and we have to make that absolutely abundantly clear that it is very critically important for the continued support from the United States.

Ms. DONFRIED. If I can just add, I think it is important to just remind all of us that Russia continues to occupy 20 percent of Georgian territory and seeks to negatively impact Georgia's independence, its ties with the U.S., and its democracy.

I do believe, as you just said, that our continued engagement and support is critical for Georgia's future and for the South Caucasus.

Thanks.

Senator CARDIN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Kaine.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to ask some questions about food security issues. On October 29, Vladimir Putin announced that Russia's suspension of its participation in the U.N. and Turkey brokered grain deal and he cited the Ukrainian drone attacks against Russian vessels in Russian-occupied Crimea.

They agreed to resume participation on November 2, but that agreement is slated to expire on the 19 of November.

I do not buy Putin's explanation for the withdrawing from the agreement in the first place because the Ukrainian drone attacks

were on their own sovereign territory, which continues to be illegally occupied by Russia.

Next week, Ukraine and the world observes the 90th anniversary of the Holodomor, a man-made famine caused by the Soviet Union that killed millions of Ukrainians in the 1930s.

Senator Portman and I have a resolution currently under consideration by the SFRC to commemorate this event. As important as this grain deal is, we cannot forget that it is a workaround to a crisis that Vladimir Putin created.

Secretary Donfried, what is your assessment on prospects to extend the grain deal past November 19?

Ms. DONFRIED. Senator Kaine, thank you so much for your engagement on Ukraine and the related issues, including food security.

We are deeply engaged in the ongoing negotiations to extend the grain agreement. We are cautiously optimistic, but we will see how this plays out in the end.

As you noted, food insecurity is such a critical issue for so many countries around the world, and part of Ukraine's success in standing up to Russia and winning this war is keeping global opinion on Ukraine's side.

We have seen how important that has been. Look at the most recent vote on Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory where 103 countries stood with Ukraine.

I could not agree with you more about how critical this issue is. What we are seeing is continued Russian escalation. Yesterday, we saw the largest number of Russian missiles flying against Ukrainian cities that we have seen in this 8½-month course of the war.

I think we want to continue to underscore that food insecurity. All of the negative ramifications of this war are a result of Russia's unprovoked invasion, and there is one person who can change that and it is Vladimir Putin.

Senator KAINE. Putin is the one that can change it, but the U.S. can also play an important role in rebutting misinformation from the Russians.

The Russians are indicating the U.S. sanctions are hindering its ability to export Russian grains and fertilizers. That is not the case. That is not what our sanctions do and there have actually been exports of both grain and fertilizer from Russia.

What steps is State taking to counter Russian disinformation that is apparently convincing some nations in Africa and elsewhere that it is the U.S. sanctions that are causing this food crisis rather than Russian misbehavior?

Ms. DONFRIED. You are absolutely right that Russian misinformation has been quite successful in wide swaths of the world, and we are doing our very best to rebut that through various mechanisms that State is using.

We are also working very closely with our allies and partners on this. We are engaging actively with the African Union in various international fora and we are also encouraging the Ukrainians to engage directly with those countries to share the truth.

I think—I will point again to that UNGA vote. I think we are having some success with this, but we need to do more because you see the number of countries that also abstained in that vote.

We certainly do not think we have achieved success here. We need to keep engaging, on your point, that sanctions are not the cause of this—in fact, there are exemptions for food and fertilizer—and we also need to make clear that the United States is the largest provider of assistance to the World Food Programme, that we are actively working to get grain to these countries and, I think, given Russia's seeming hesitation to renew the Black Sea grain initiative, another indicator that Russia's top concern is not alleviating food insecurity around the world.

Senator KAINE. Well, I hope we will use the Holodomor commemoration as an opportunity to really cast a spotlight on this. Essentially, it is a forced hunger issue that is being driven by Russia in the same way that the Soviet Union manufactured a famine in Ukraine that killed millions in the 1930s.

One last question, Secretary Donfried. I understand you recently traveled to Ukraine. Tell me about the morale of our Ukrainian partners but, particularly, the morale of our personnel at Embassy Kyiv.

Ms. DONFRIED. Thank you so much for asking about my recent trip.

I was the first government official who is not at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv who was able to stay overnight in Kyiv, which meant I had two full days, which may not sound like that much, but it did give me the opportunity to meet with a much larger group of Ukrainian interlocutors, but also to spend more time with my colleagues at the embassy.

In terms of the engagements with Ukrainian folks in government, civil society, others, I just came away so inspired. This is a country that is truly under attack, and there are so many things that distract us from what is happening in Ukraine.

We should not be distracted from these unbelievably horrific attacks against the civilian energy infrastructure, and what Russia is not able to achieve on the battlefield it is trying to achieve by plunging Ukraine into cold and darkness this winter.

The resilience of Ukrainians, but also the pluckiness—the foreign minister said to me, well, I have been taking cold showers, but I hear it is good for my skin—and their resilience in the face of this and it is because of the rightness of their cause.

I was there to deliver President Biden's message that we are standing with you. You have our support across every sector for military, economic, humanitarian, governance, and we will stay with you until you prevail in this conflict.

Embassy—morale at the embassy also very strong, but, boy, do I and all of us at the State Department owe a debt of gratitude to our colleagues who are there every day representing us so ably.

Senator KAINE. Thank you so much.

Mr. Chairman, I am over my time, but I appreciate your patience.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Assistant Secretary Donfried and Ambassador Reeker, thank you both for being here and for all of your efforts, and thank you for that trip to Ukraine, Secretary Donfried.

I also want to begin by thanking you and all of those at the State Department for your efforts to get the EUFOR mandate reauthorized at the U.N. for Bosnia. I know that that was a real effort and I was very pleased, as those of us who care about the Balkans were, to see that that was done and that Russia actually was willing to engage on that. Thank you very much for that.

I want to follow up on Senator Cardin's questions about Georgia because I appreciate that Georgia is trying to play a positive role in Nagorno-Karabakh, but the reality, as you point out, is that there has been tremendous backsliding in Georgia and we provide considerable support to Georgia to support a reform agenda.

I, for one, argued that maybe we should tie some of that aid to behavior on the part of Georgia, and I was persuaded by State Department officials and House members in the last round of budget negotiations that maybe that was not a good thing to do.

I think maybe it is—we need to think about whether it is time to rethink our strategy on Georgia. Can you respond to that?

Ms. DONFRIED. Well, let me begin by thanking you for all you have done in the Western Balkans and—you and colleagues, and there was broad bipartisan support for an extension of that EUFOR mandate. I really think it was a shared success.

We have a lot of challenges still in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but to have that continued security presence, absolutely, share the view of how critical it was.

On Georgia, there, too, there has been broad bipartisan engagement on the Hill in Georgia that, I think, makes an important difference.

I think it is always a good thing to assess policy. Very open to having that conversation in greater detail with you.

You know the reasons why we wanted to stay the course at this point in time. We have voiced our strong concerns about some of the troubling statements and behaviors that we are seeing from some Georgian politicians.

As I noted, I do not think those are indicative of the majority of Georgian people. We are—

Senator SHAHEEN. I do not want to interrupt.

Ms. DONFRIED. Yes. No, go ahead.

Senator SHAHEEN. I certainly agree with you on that, but the fact is that the current Georgian Government said that candidate status was a key commitment that it was going to make. It said that to the public of Georgia. It said that to the United States and the European community, and they, clearly, have reneged on that commitment.

I think it is important for us to think about the options that we have to try and hold them accountable for that, to let them know that there are consequences and some of those consequences may be the kind of assistance that we are willing to provide.

I totally agree that the Georgian people are not the ones at fault here. It is their government, but at some point, they need to demand from their government more accountability.

I will just—I am going to—I want to switch to another topic, but I will leave it at that and I hope that we might be able to engage in the future in a longer discussion about that because I do think we have to think of other ways in which we can help incentivize

behavior because what we are doing now does not seem to be working.

On the Black Sea region, writ large, as I am sure you are aware, Senator Romney and I introduced legislation to try and encourage the development of a strategy for the Black Sea region.

I think one of the things we have seen from the war in Ukraine is just how important that whole region is and how having a coordinated strategy toward the region is really important.

I wonder if you can share with us what the Department is thinking, whether you have that kind of a strategy, whether you are looking to develop something more and what you are thinking about in terms of our approach.

Ms. DONFRIED. Well, thank you for that question and thank you for your work on this as well.

There is no question that Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has focused all of us on the Black Sea region and thinking about the way forward there.

Of course, NATO has taken very seriously the threat posed by Russia to our allies that border the Black Sea and, of course, U.S. force posture in the region looks very different today than it did before February 24.

I think there is no question that the way we are thinking about the region and we are thinking about the critical importance of U.S. engagement is different than it was before this war.

I will say right now our focus is on ensuring Ukraine prevails in this war because in many ways that is going to be foundational for how we think about Black Sea strategy, but very much welcome your work and your ideas on this and I can assure you that is something we are very focused on.

Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN. Just to follow up, is there an effort to develop a more comprehensive strategy and, if so, do you have any timetable in mind for when you—I appreciate that item number one has to be the war in Ukraine, but what else are we doing and what is the time frame?

Ms. DONFRIED. We are focused on it. I do not have a time frame for you.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Good to see you both.

I wanted to ask a broad question about Turkey's role in the region. Obviously, we know their historic role backing Azerbaijan. There does not appear to be evidence that they explicitly supported Azerbaijan's latest provocations.

They have also begun an interesting dialogue with Armenia that could, ultimately, be very important with Russia's preoccupation in Ukraine.

Turkey, obviously, has a vacuum that they can fill. They have been more active than ever since 2020.

Talk a little bit, if you would, Secretary Donfried, about Turkey's role in the region and specifically on this question of Turkey-Armenia normalization.

What is the role that the United States can play to facilitate that? Are we best to just sit back and watch? Is there some kind of active role that we can play?

Ms. DONFRIED. Well, thanks a lot for that question, Senator Murphy, and you are right to have us think about the other actors in the region and Turkey is a critical one.

You are right to remark on the close relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan, but I also appreciate your focus on Turkey-Armenia relations.

We very much support normalization between Armenia and Turkey and we have spoken at length with the Turks about this, and I do believe there is a deep Turkish commitment to move forward on this, which also augurs well for broader peace in the region.

What we have seen is both Turkey and Armenia have appointed special envoys for normalization and they have met multiple times. They have agreed on initial confidence-building measures.

We are encouraging both sides to move forward on those. They need to implement the measures that they have agreed to.

Our role here is one of encouraging that and we are hopeful that we will see progress because I do think it is part of the puzzle of the South Caucasus about how you get to a sustainable peace in the region.

Senator MURPHY. Let me just ask a question. I am sorry if it has been covered already.

Obviously, the backdrop to our relationship with Azerbaijan is their increasing role as a supplier of energy to neighbors and into Europe. I have often thought that we have gotten the balance wrong when it comes to promoting human rights and democracy in countries that have large oil reservoirs.

This is a country that now has more pipeline capacity than it did 10 or 20 years ago. What is the sort of future of Azerbaijani energy with respect to diversifying away from Russian energy in and around the region and how does this factor into the decisions that we make about how to approach some of these thornier issues of Azerbaijani conduct in the region?

Ms. DONFRIED. The energy picture in Europe, as we have all seen over the past 8½ months, has changed fundamentally.

The United States for a long time has been arguing that Russia is not a reliable supplier of energy for Europe. Not all of our European allies and partners agreed with that assessment prior to February 24. I would say all of them today agree with that assessment.

We have long been a voice promoting energy diversification and we are seeing all of these countries that were overly dependent on Russia looking for other sources, and in that context, Azerbaijan is playing a very important role and I think will continue to play a very important role.

That said, it does not mean that we turn a blind eye to our concerns about human rights in Azerbaijan, and I said it in my opening statement, I will say it again, we regularly urge Azerbaijan's government to respect human rights and the fundamental freedoms necessary to realize the full potential of Azerbaijan's people.

I believe it is in our national security interest for us to be promoting human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan and we will continue to do so.

Thanks.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you for that. I will not ask a question. I am running out of time.

I will just note, I just left this committee meeting to meet with the relatively new leader of one of the opposition parties in Kosovo, who is in town, who I think maybe got the chance to see Deputy Secretary Escobar.

On the other side of the Black Sea are the Balkan region. We have got some real potential bumps in the road coming up with the implementation of the license plate agreement in Kosovo.

Again, I would just urge the Department to play as active a role as possible in the continued discussions between Serbia and Kosovo. We, for a long time, for good reason have relied on the Europeans to take the lead, the Germans specifically.

I think that there is more reason now than ever for the United States to step in. I do not think you will see as active or as effective diplomacy from Europe and the need has never been greater, given what could happen in the coming months in the Serb regions of Kosovo.

So, again, just a plea to maintain real direct involvement from the State Department in those very tricky negotiations and talks.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank both of you for being here and for your service.

Secretary Donfried, let me just start on Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Back in April of this year, the Armenian prime minister was speaking to the parliament in which many people [inaudible] and yet, in September we saw a unilateral attack of Azerbaijan on territory of Armenia, and I guess my first question is just a [inaudible].

[Inaudible] is our assessment that that was a unilateral unprovoked attack by Azerbaijan on Armenians. Is that right?

Ms. DONFRIED. I do not believe we have said that.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Do we have a different assessment?

Ms. DONFRIED. I think all of these things are complicated, and our focus has been on how do we try to move these two countries to a peace agreement after 30 years of conflict.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I guess my question, though—I understand, but we did have a—we did see Azerbaijan attack Armenia, and is it your testimony today that that was in response to an Armenian attack on Azerbaijan?

Ms. DONFRIED. My response to that would be that at that time in September when we spoke to both parties our focus was on stopping the violence. I do think we played an important role in that violence being stopped and our goal is to continue to encourage both sides to negotiate a sustainable peace.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. With all due respect, that did not respond to the question, but we will follow up with respect to the situation.

Has Azerbaijan suffered any consequences in terms of U.S. policy as a result of the attack [inaudible].

Ms. DONFRIED. Again, what we—our focus here is on—first, let me just say I agree with you about the importance of the speech

that Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan gave in April. I think it was a very brave speech and I think it was very important in encouraging the peace process.

We are in very close touch with both sides and, as I said in my testimony, I think our relationship with Armenia is probably better than it has ever been, and we are taking our cues from the parties about how we can be most helpful in moving this peace process forward.

There are many elements of it. There is a peace treaty that the foreign ministers are leading on. The Armenian Prime Minister's speech in April was so important because it related to the future of Nagorno-Karabakh and what he was saying is putting a focus on the rights and security of the local Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. No, I recognize that. I thought it was an important speech, too.

Ms. DONFRIED. Yes, and then we have got—

Senator VAN HOLLEN. It was followed in September by this attack.

Look, I am glad that we are playing an important role. [Inaudible] agree with Senator Cardin that it is a process.

By all accounts, at least for these purposes.

[Inaudible] in terms of negotiations?

Mr. REEKER. Senator, I am glad you asked because it is what I try to determine almost every day as I engage on this with Assistant Secretary Donfried's help and guidance, and, of course, Secretary Blinken has played an incredible role. He just spoke with both leaders over the last 2 days even as he is traveling in Asia to follow up on the engagements last week.

Now, what was very interesting about the engagements of the foreign ministers last week, which were bilateral engagements that we hosted and facilitated at Blair House to underscore for them our willingness, our desire, to provide whatever we can in terms of assistance for them to make their project on their peace agreement, was that, at the end of the day, they came out with a joint statement, which was the first time they had done it.

That may not sound like a lot from State Department people who put out statements all the time, but this was a remarkable thing, and the two leaders—the two foreign ministers left and left their press guys, as it were, to work it out. They did it in just 40 minutes, which was, again, remarkable. I had heard of an effort to put out a statement after the Border Commission meeting in Brussels the previous week that took 3½ hours.

There is a little bit of progress there. There is broad agreement coming out of that historic speech of Prime Minister Pashinyan's, which, really, I called a profile in courage, to look at this in a new way.

They have agreed on five broad principles toward a peace agreement. The Armenians want to include a sixth principle in there, which is to make sure that Nagorno-Karabakh is addressed, that the rights and securities are addressed.

Obviously, that is something that has to be discussed between the people in Nagorno-Karabakh and Baku as well, and I have un-

derscored that there should be an international mechanism to do that.

You are absolutely right, Senator, and as Senator Cardin said, the Minsk Group process has not been functioning. The Minsk Group mandate and its ideal remains relevant and the goal of that is right.

I think it is not important to focus on names and what we do with the so-called Minsk Group. The Russian colleague, for instance, has never been in touch with me.

Rather, let us do what we can, working with the two sides bilaterally, trilaterally, as the Secretary did, bringing them together here, working with the European Union, which has been really remarkable in bringing the leaders together because that is where the tough decisions are going to have to be made.

After last week, they have pledged to get back with another round of discussion of ideas, proposed development of a draft peace agreement, and the foreign ministers to meet again.

I expect the leaders will meet again. The progress is drip, drip, drip, as we know, but it is really quite remarkable what I have seen just in less than 3 months in this capacity.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Thank you both.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Booker.

Senator BOOKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Obviously, the war in Ukraine is having an impact on [inaudible] Russia's ability to just maintain and sustain their military presence in Georgia and, obviously, there it is all peacekeepers in the areas in Azerbaijan and [inaudible]

I guess I am wondering what the impact is overall of the war on their ability to influence that region as well.

Mr. REEKER. Senator, I am glad you raised that because we talked about the region—the South Caucasus—being a geographic crossroads. It is really where history and geography meet at a crossroads, and at this moment in history you are seeing this unique situation where Russia, which cannot be excluded from the broad equation—geography tells you that and history tells you that—they play a role. They have been involved.

Obviously, the impact of their actions against Ukraine has made an impression on Azerbaijan as well as Armenia and, certainly, Georgia, which, as we mentioned earlier, is still 20 percent occupied. Their land is occupied, and we underscore every day our strong support for Georgia's full territorial integrity and sovereignty and independence.

I think it is an area where both Armenia and Azerbaijan are actually seeing they have mutual concerns. We are not a part of nor were we involved in the actual peace agreement—that ceasefire, to put it more correctly—that was reached with the Russians' tripartite agreement, they called it, in November 2020. We welcomed the end of hostilities, but that included peacekeepers in those regions.

Now, we have seen with the violence in September that those peacekeepers were, in many ways, nowhere to be seen and I think that has been a question of concern for both sides.

A comprehensive settlement—

Senator BOOKER. You link that to the fact that they are draining resources [inaudible] military resources?

Mr. REEKER. I cannot make that link myself as an analyst, but I think one could see that even when Putin sent peacekeepers there in 2020 we know now that he obviously had other plans for his troops in mind, and the responsibilities he took on in the South Caucasus and Nagorno-Karabakh along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border obviously are affected by that.

Senator BOOKER. We see that Russia is obviously involved in trying to undermine democracy. [inaudible] Madagascar to the EU and I am wondering as we are watching the backsliding [inaudible] it really concerns a number of my colleagues in Georgia, are they involved in ongoing efforts to undermine democratic norms?

Mr. REEKER. As mentioned, I lead our delegation to the Geneva international discussions, which focus on the issue of Russia's occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are integral parts of Georgia.

Russia made a lot of commitments under the 2008 ceasefire agreement and they have not lived up to those commitments. They committed to withdraw their forces. We know that they interfere in politics. We have seen it, of course, in our own country.

They have pledged to allow unfettered access, for instance, for delivery of humanitarian assistance into Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They have not done that.

This is a challenge for Georgia. The Geneva international discussions did hold a session in October and the Russians did show up. They were able to get themselves to Geneva for that, and the Georgians, I think, were pleased that we could show that we continue to stand by that process.

Senator BOOKER. If I can interrupt because I would like to get one more question in. My team and I have been looking a lot at the food insecurity issue as it relates to the conflict in Ukraine.

Obviously, Georgia is an area where we [inaudible] that are clearly undermined by the Russian influence. I am wondering how has the ability to build capacity for wheat production in Georgia as it sort of relates to our ability [inaudible] in a crisis and are we involved in deeper efforts to try to promote that domestic wheat production?

Ms. DONFRIED. I cannot go deep on this, but I can tell you that Cary Fowler, who is the food envoy at the State Department, is incredibly knowledgeable on this and I know is doing a lot of work on it. We certainly can circle back and get you more information on that.

Senator BOOKER. Appreciate that. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. As Senator Markey takes a seat, it is his turn.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very much.

September, I sent a letter with my colleagues to Secretaries Blinken and Austin asking them to prevent any U.S. security assistance from going to Azerbaijan until Armenia and Azerbaijan reached a permanent lasting resolution to ensure peace and stability in Nagorno-Karabakh.

We also requested answers to several questions that I have not yet received answers to so I will pose them to you now.

One, is the U.S. Government currently providing any security assistance to Azerbaijan?

Ms. DONFRIED. As you referenced, in June of this year we did decide to extend the waiver of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act and so we are providing assistance to Azerbaijan through that mechanism.

Senator MARKEY. What is that assistance?

Ms. DONFRIED. That assistance goes to several things. It strengthens interoperability among the U.S., NATO, and Azerbaijani peacekeeping forces.

It increases the Western education and orientation of Azerbaijani officers. It helps secure Azerbaijan's 475-mile border with Iran and it provides security for energy sources critical for our allies in Europe.

Senator MARKEY. Then what are those energy resources?

Ms. DONFRIED. That would be, and actually we have seen an increase of, Azerbaijani oil and gas flowing to Europe as they diversify away from Russia.

Senator MARKEY. Okay. That waiver was granted when?

Ms. DONFRIED. In June.

Senator MARKEY. In June.

Has the U.S. Government taken steps to assess whether any Azerbaijani units who currently receive or have received in the past U.S. security assistance engaged in recent fighting against Armenia?

Ms. DONFRIED. Yes. First, I just want to emphasize there is nothing automatic about this waiver. We assess it every year.

We benefited from the GAO review of the Section 907 waiver process and have implemented those recommendations, and all of our assistance is carefully calibrated to make sure it does not undermine or hamper efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and to ensure that any assistance we provide cannot be used for offensive purposes against Armenia.

Senator MARKEY. You have established that as a fact?

Ms. DONFRIED. Yes, we have. Yes.

Senator MARKEY. Ambassador Reeker, do you believe that Russia's influence in the region and in Armenia in particular is waning and what should the United States do to capitalize on any opportunities to increase our own presence and influence in the region?

Mr. REEKER. Thanks for that question, Senator, because I do think Russia's actions in Ukraine—their attack there have made publics, let alone governments, across the South Caucasus more wary of Russia—Putin's intentions.

The Russian engagement in Armenia has not helped the Armenians and their cause, and I think the question that—and we see that again at public levels as well—I think what we want to do is underscore our dedication to working with the countries bilaterally and in multilateral fora to promote this lasting peace because I think there is a realization that, while Russia remains part of the geographic equation, that it is the two countries coming to a full peace agreement, an end to violence, and then also with Georgia working to create synergies across that critical South Caucasus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea where you have energy

resources. You have infrastructure opportunities. You have great trade opportunities. You have agriculture opportunities.

This can be a food basket for much of the world. Tourism—these are all things that they can do once they have achieved this comprehensive piece, and I think both leaders at this moment see that there is an opportunity for a whole new chapter and history there.

Senator MARKEY. Have you concluded that Russia's influence is waning in Armenia?

Mr. REEKER. I think it is something you have to watch very closely. I do not like leaping to any conclusions.

The Russians remain active. They have historic ties. The CSTO remains a structure which has not lived up to Armenia's expectations as a member of that. They remain active diplomatically. Putin hosted the two leaders in Sochi just a couple of weeks ago.

We want to encourage the leaders to get together and make their own decisions. I think it is important that our embassies are robust. They need to be led by ambassadors there on the ground to increase the engagement that we can do.

In my capacity, I travel regularly. I will be going again in another week to the region to continue to show what the U.S. wants and how we can support their efforts.

Senator MARKEY. In your view, what can a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia do to fully guarantee the rights and security of the Armenian people in Nagorno-Karabakh?

Mr. REEKER. I think that is really the heart of a question that we have to pay attention to. That is where Prime Minister Pashinyan has been very clear that it is not about territory, it is about security and about rights.

President Aliyev has acknowledged that publicly and in conversations I have had with him and other colleagues have had with him. That is important, and to do that fully, as I mentioned in my testimony and as I stress every day, they need to consider how they can engage a mechanism, an international effort, to support, to monitor, to offer help, and it can have an economic component and capacity as well, to make sure that those people have an opportunity to define what security and rights means and to see that that is implemented.

It takes time, but we are at a crucial moment where, I think, there is a new and unique opportunity to try to get that right.

Senator MARKEY. Okay. Great.

Secretary Donfried, just, finally, in your earlier testimony you stated that the State Department has taken steps to implement the GAO recommendations before extending the 907 waiver for Azerbaijan assistance.

Can you please explain in more detail the steps that were taken?

Ms. DONFRIED. Absolutely.

Thank you, Senator.

The State Department requested and received input from agencies about all ongoing assistance programs, the potential impact of those programs on the peace process, and the implementing agencies' and partners' assessments of potential applicability of the Section 907 waiver prior to recommending renewal of the waiver this year.

The State Department then completed an assessment as to whether any of these programs had an impact or could have an impact on the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

This assessment was transmitted to Congress as part of the June 2022 waiver determination, and then in the follow-on, 60-day report the State Department and the Department of Defense evaluated each ongoing assistance program to ensure there was no impact on either the military balance or on peace negotiations between the two countries.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you.

Ms. DONFRIED. Thanks.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Well, let me just say as we come to a close here I will charitably say that this is one of the most disappointing hearings I have ever held, but it has crystallized some things for me.

One, is it seems to me that the United States is in bed with Azerbaijan.

Assistant Secretary Donfried, you said we urge Azerbaijan to observe human rights, yet we give it money and they continue to do what they want. Money is fungible. Whether it is direct assistance that can hurt Armenia or not, money is fungible. They are not using that money—they would have to use other money that they have for other things that we give them money for.

I heard you say that in response to, I think, it was Senator Markey's question that what we were urging them to do is to stop the violence, but you have to recognize when there is an aggressor.

If I am the recipient of the violence and you are urging both sides to stop the violence, but it is one side that is the aggressor you should direct your comments to the aggressor.

We seem incapable of doing that. We have done nothing to verify the videos and the evidence of cluster munitions, of white phosphorus, of—which are illegal. We have done nothing to verify the videos of the execution of Armenian soldiers, the abuse of female Armenian soldiers. We have done nothing. I asked you, are you aware of the videos. Yes. Well, did we do anything to verify them? No.

You come to a hearing in which you cannot even tell me with any degree of specificity what humanitarian assistance we are providing.

It is totally, totally unacceptable, and you can tell the Secretary I will be looking for ways to express my dissatisfaction.

Let me conclude by asking unanimous consent to have Ranking Member Risch's opening statement included in the record as at the opening of the hearing.

Without objection, so ordered.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found at the beginning of this hearing.]

The CHAIRMAN. And unanimous consent that the testimony, "The Armenian-American Community and U.S. Policy Priorities in the Caucasus" submitted by the Armenian National Committee of America be entered into the record.

Without objection, it shall also be submitted.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The information referred to above can be found in the “Additional Material Submitted for the Record” section at the end of this hearing.]

The CHAIRMAN. With that, the record for this hearing will remain open until the close of business on Thursday, November 17. Please ensure that questions for the record are submitted no later than Thursday.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:22 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF MS. KAREN DONFRIED AND MR. PHILIP REEKER TO
QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JAMES E. RISCH

Question. Armenia-Azerbaijan: There is serious concern for the well-being of ethnic Armenians living in Azerbaijan-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh

Does the U.S. believe that specific rights or legal status should be guaranteed to ethnic Armenians living there?

Answer. Armenia has acknowledged that a conversation between the representatives of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Azerbaijani Government is essential for securing the rights and security of the ethnic Armenian population. The State Department continues to raise the need for rights and security for the population of Nagorno-Karabakh in every engagement—including with President Aliyev.

The United States has long supported the Helsinki Final Act (1975) principles of Non-Use of Force, Territorial Integrity, and the Equal Rights and Self-Determination of Peoples. While these can serve as guiding principles, the parties to the conflict need to have an honest, open conversation about rights and security and reach an agreement that is acceptable to all sides. This is not something the United States or any outside party can or should decide for them.

Question. If so, what specific rights or legal status should they be guaranteed?

Answer. The ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh is entitled to human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to security. The State Department will continue to press Azerbaijan to explain and clarify to this population and the international community, in a way that is transparent and verifiable, how this population will be protected.

Question. The U.S. has supported productive border control negotiations between Turkey and Armenia. What barriers remain before Turkey and Armenia can come to an agreement to open up their borders to each other?

Answer. The United States strongly supports Armenia-Turkey normalization, which would be good for the entire region.

Both Turkey and Armenia have appointed special envoys for normalization. These envoys have met multiple times and agreed on some initial confidence-building measures. While more needs to be done to advance these negotiations and to implement agreed measures, we commend both Armenia and Turkey for taking initial steps in this direction.

Question. Russia's war in Ukraine has diminished its ability to project power in the South Caucasus as it has in recent years. What role have we seen the Russian “peacekeepers” play in Nagorno-Karabakh?

Answer. The United States was not involved in the November 9, 2020, ceasefire brokered by Russia between Armenia and Azerbaijan that resulted in the deployment of Russian “peacekeepers” to the region for a term of 5 years.

A comprehensive settlement to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that addresses rights and security and resolves other outstanding issues would obviate the need for Russian “peacekeepers” to remain in the area.

We have seen nothing to indicate that the Russian military presence in Armenia played a mediating role in fighting that broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh in March or along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border in September.

Question. Has the role of Russian “peacekeepers” in Nagorno-Karabakh changed since Russia invaded Ukraine?

Answer. Like the Russia-brokered ceasefire, we have little visibility into the Russian “peacekeepers” actions in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have both complained publicly about Russian “peacekeeper” responsiveness to developments in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.

Question. If so, how has their role changed?

Answer. Because we were not party to the 2020 ceasefire and do not have direct access to the region patrolled by Russian peacekeepers, we are not in a position to assess any change in their behavior since February 2022.

Question. Georgia: After making clear progress for many years, Georgia’s democracy appears to be backsliding rapidly.

What else can the U.S. do to rebuild electoral, judicial, and press freedom in Georgia?

Answer. We share your concerns and raise these issues repeatedly in our meetings with Georgian officials. We continue to press Georgian officials to reverse backsliding and strengthen democratic institutions and processes in Georgia. For too long, elections in Georgia have been marred by allegations of pressure, intimidation, and vote buying. This problem has worsened in recent elections. It is also clear that judges are vulnerable to political pressure from within and outside the judiciary on cases involving politically sensitive subjects or individuals. Deeper and systemic electoral and judicial reforms, and the effective implementation of reforms, are needed to level the playing field and introduce transparency, independence, impartiality, and accountability. Reforms fostering a truly independent, impartial judiciary also would help to improve respect for freedom of expression, including for journalists and media outlets.

Our Ambassador and her team at Embassy Tbilisi are employing diplomatic engagement, capacity building, and assistance programs to address these issues. We are evaluating all available tools and forms of leverage to push Georgia’s governing party to conduct and implement these reforms inclusively and transparently.

Question. How will the State Department confront the lies about our diplomats and the United States’ intentions for Georgia?

Answer. As we’ve said before, these kinds of false accusations against the United States and our Ambassador in Tbilisi are damaging to our bilateral relations and, frankly, are not how friends talk to one another. They also raise questions regarding the underlying goals and motivations of those casting the false accusations, as well as those who stand behind them. Neither the United States nor Georgia benefits from the propagation of unfounded accusations that appear designed to weaken the bond between the United States, arguably Georgia’s strongest partner in the face of Russian aggression, and Georgia. We have voiced our strong concerns to Georgians at the most senior levels about the troubling statements that we have recently heard from some Georgian politicians. Fortunately, these statements do not appear to be indicative of the views of the majority of the people of Georgia. Washington fully supports Ambassador Degnan and her committed team at Embassy Tbilisi, and we remain a firm strategic partner to the people of Georgia, as we have been for three decades.

Question. What role should the U.S. play, if any, in helping Georgia achieve an EU membership perspective?

Answer. The European Council’s unanimous decision to grant European perspective status to Georgia is an important step, which recognizes the European aspirations of the Georgian people. This step keeps Georgia on the path to EU membership, and the security, prosperity, and western integration that comes with it. We continue to press Georgia’s government to undertake the meaningful reforms called for by the European Commission.

The road to EU candidate status is clear and achievable. We continue to strongly urge the government to seize this opportunity and work with stakeholders across Georgian society to enact and implement the necessary steps as laid out by the European Commission, to achieve the European future the Georgian people desire, and to fulfill the commitment to European integration enshrined in the Georgian constitution and repeatedly promised by Georgia’s government. In addition, many of our assistance programs in areas such as democratic development, rule of law, and a human-rights based approach to law enforcement also support the same goals as the European Commission’s recommendations.

We’ve also voiced our concerns publicly and privately about some of the government’s actions, including stalling or moving backward on important democratic reforms. Georgian Government authorities have created setbacks to the clear, overwhelming aspirations of the people of Georgia for EU membership and for broader

Euro-Atlantic integration. These actions have deepened polarization within Georgian society rather than unify the country. We continue to message to the Georgian Government and people the need to overcome this polarization and work together for the future well-being of their country.

Question. Foreign Influence: What is the U.S. doing to stop bad actors like Iran and China from taking advantage of Russia's current lack of ability and loss of influence in the region?

Answer. We recognize Armenia's and Azerbaijan's delicate geographic position vis-à-vis Iran and have consistently encouraged both countries to assess Iran's intentions in the region comprehensively, and to proceed with caution in all dealings involving the Iranian regime.

While the PRC continues to seek inroads into Azerbaijan and Armenia due to its geostrategic neighborhood and its location at regional trade crossroads, the PRC has a limited presence.

The PRC is active in Azerbaijan's information and communication technology (ICT) sector, through vaccine diplomacy, and through other soft power initiatives like Confucius Institutes. Azerbaijan has not signed agreements incurring debt from the PRC, nor are there any large-scale PRC investments in Azerbaijan.

In Armenia, our priority is to establish fair and reciprocal economic relationships that do not disadvantage American companies and advocate for passage and implementation of robust investment screening legislation to safeguard regional security and data privacy.

Question. Iran: What is your assessment of Azerbaijan-Iran relations and its impact on U.S. national security?

Answer. Azerbaijan pursues a pragmatic foreign policy towards Iran, with which it shares a 475-mile border. Iran has a large ethnic Azeri population, which shares linguistic and cultural ties with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan-Iran relations are currently tense, in part due to concern over Iranian attempts to export its ideology to other Shia-majority countries including Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's growing defense and energy ties with Israel are an irritant in its bilateral relationship with Iran. The aspirational International North-South Transportation Corridor, which would connect Russian and Azerbaijani rail networks to Iranian ports, remains incomplete. Iran and Russia are reportedly negotiating funding a key portion of the rail network in Iran.

Azerbaijan supports U.S. security interests as a key partner in counterterrorism and anti-narcotic activities along its southern border with Iran.

Question. What is your assessment of Armenia-Iran relations and its impact on U.S. national security?

Answer. We are aware of efforts by Iran to make headway in the South Caucasus by expanding its political, security, and economic presence.

While we recognize Armenia's delicate geographic position vis-à-vis Iran, we consistently encourage Armenia to assess Iran's intentions in the region comprehensively, and to proceed with caution in all dealings involving the Iranian regime. Armenia has also committed repeatedly to fully complying with all U.S. sanctions, including against Iran, and has demonstrated good faith in these efforts. While Armenia and Iran enjoy cordial relations, their ties are mostly official and declarative. Iran cannot offer the types of partnerships the United States can in the economic, political, security, and people-to-people spheres.

Question. We provide security assistance to Azerbaijan for border security along the Azerbaijan-Iran border. What benefit does this security assistance provide to U.S. national security interests?

Answer. Azerbaijan is an important counterterrorism partner, and it occupies a difficult geographic space between Russia and Iran. In prior years, DoD has allocated section 333 funds (Train and Equip) to Azerbaijan, though it has not done so since FY 2020. Section 333 assistance is designed in part to assist our partners in countering terrorism and ensuring border security, and it is therefore a uniquely valuable assistance tool to advance U.S. interests and national security in the South Caucasus region. Section 333 assistance in Azerbaijan has focused on maritime security in the Caspian Sea and enhancing security along Azerbaijan's southern border with Iran.

U.S. non-lethal border security assistance along Azerbaijan's southern border with Iran—including x-ray systems, radiation detectors, and training for inspecting trucks and railcars—has produced results: Azerbaijani officials have reported an increase in interdictions along the southern border, impeding the narcotics smuggling that reportedly funds Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, an entity des-

ignated by the Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The State Customs Committee announced the interdiction of more than 2,000 kg (4,400 lbs.) of narcotics along the southern border in 2021—seizures that officials directly attributed to USG-provided scanners and other border security equipment. They are on track to exceed that total this year.

Question. What would happen if we withdrew our security assistance to Azerbaijan?

Answer. The U.S. provides assistance on terms that clarify both the intended purposes and the limitations of the use of such assistance. The interagency continuously reviews and monitors U.S. foreign assistance provided to the Government of Azerbaijan for both in-country and regional impact.

The United States calibrates all its security assistance to Azerbaijan to ensure that it is not usable for offensive purposes against Armenia and does not undermine or hamper ongoing efforts to negotiate a long-term political settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

U.S. security assistance to Azerbaijan strengthens interoperability among the U.S., NATO, and Azerbaijani peacekeeping forces, increases the western education and orientation of Azerbaijani officers, helps secure Azerbaijan's 475-mile border with Iran, and provides security for energy sources critical for our allies in Europe.

Our non-lethal border security assistance has produced significant results countering transnational threats from Iran and disrupting smuggling routes to the South Caucasus, Russia, and Europe.

A notable success from this assistance includes over 6,000 pounds of narcotics seized by the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan in 2021 using U.S.-provided equipment and training. Profit from this narcotics trade is widely suspected of funding the IRGC in Iran. They are on track to exceed that total this year. Withdrawing security assistance would harm ongoing successful cooperation with Azerbaijan in all of these, degrading U.S. abilities in countering various transnational threats.

RESPONSES OF MS. KAREN DONFRIED TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CORY BOOKER

Question. Wheat Production in Georgia: Five of the world's ancient wheat species are indigenous to the country of Georgia. These wheat varieties are now endangered, however, due to Soviet-era agricultural policies. As a result, Georgia is importing nearly five times as much wheat from Russia than it produces domestically according to recent statistics. Some farmers and non-profit organizations are spearheading efforts to promote organic agriculture and the planting of domestic wheat, although harvesting these varieties can be more expensive than growing industrialized wheat.

Is the U.S. Government doing anything to promote domestic wheat production in the country of Georgia as part of an effort to reduce its dependency on Russia?

Answer. Georgia is dependent upon wheat imports for 85 percent of domestic food consumption needs. Almost all imported wheat comes from the Russian Federation, the world's largest wheat exporter. Russia has used its leverage over Georgian food security to its recent geopolitical advantage, instituting a floating export tax in June 2021 designed to incentivize the import of Russian milled flour, thereby introducing an additional layer of dependency. In 2021, Russian wheat exports to Georgia halved while flour exports increased approximately 12 times. As a result, almost all Georgian wheat flour mills ceased operation or decreased operational capacity and laid off employees. Russia's war on Ukraine has brought a renewed interest in a commitment to rebuilding Georgian domestic wheat production and diversifying supplies away from Russia.

To support Georgia's broader effort to transition away from Russia's sphere of influence, Georgia must sustainably improve its wheat yield per acre with modern seeds, technology, and agricultural practices. Given land and climate factors, Georgia could increase current wheat production to meet approximately 30–40 percent of domestic demand, lessening its dependence upon imported Russian wheat and reducing Russia's leverage over Georgia.

Embassy Tbilisi received \$850,000 in FY21 AECCA funds for a USDA/FAS project to strengthen Georgia's wheat value chain system. Due to limited support for the domestic wheat value chain and a changing market situation over the last decade, the initial intervention includes conducting an assessment of Georgia's wheat and milling industry including extension services offered to farmers by the public and private sector by Kansas State University (KSU), working with USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service. A study of varietal development and propagation efforts to

produce a region-specific higher-yield crop, and a study on using more resilient wheat varieties in collaboration with the Regional International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) office is underway.

To provide key intervention recommendations, KSU agricultural faculty are assessing the entire wheat growing and harvest cycle of marketing year 2022/23. The first field trip by KSU and USDA experts occurred in October 2022 with the second assessment planned for January 2023. USDA also plans to assess market information for Georgian wheat with the objective of providing insights into grain grading and standards, market intelligence to highlight trends in domestic production and consumption, and current, historical, and future options for trade supply chains and diversification.

After the initial assessment, USDA will produce a Georgian Wheat Value Chain Study, including recommendations on policy actions, capacity building activities, and other recommended interventions for USG, GoG and other public and private partners. These activities will be ready for potential funding during the FY23 budget cycle. These interventions could assist Georgia with more stability in the domestic bread value chain.

Question. Black Sea Grain Deal: Regarding the recent extension of the grain deal: How many countries stand to benefit? What is the measurable impact?

Answer. Prior to Russia's February 24 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ukraine shipped 5 million metric tons of grain a month. When Russia blocked Ukraine's Black Sea ports, that figure dropped to just 300,000 metric tons. The deal brokered by Turkiye and the United Nations between Russia and Ukraine to resume Ukraine's agricultural exports via the Black Sea is an essential contribution to global food security. In just a few months of operation, this deal has facilitated over 400 ships safely crossing the Black Sea, shipping over 11 million metric tons of agricultural exports to global markets—that's over 1 billion loaves of bread per month. The deal has concretely improved global food security, lowering prices, stabilizing markets, and increasing availability. The Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) operates as a humanitarian, market-driven mechanism and the Joint Coordination Centre in Istanbul organizes the flow of ships through the safe channel. World Food Programme shipments do receive priority, but otherwise the mechanism supports food traders, and purchases flow around the world.

With U.S. assistance, the UN World Food Program has made shipments of Ukrainian wheat to the Horn of Africa and Yemen, areas suffering from severe drought and conflict. More than half of the Ukrainian wheat exported under the BSGI has reached developing countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Question. How are we communicating the importance of this deal's extension?

Answer. The Black Sea Grain Initiative has been a tremendous success and the United States is undertaking several efforts to communicate the importance of the deal's extension. In a joint statement with the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom and High Representative of the European Union Josep Borrell on 14 November, Secretary Blinken highlighted our commitment to global food security and the imperative of renewing the Black Sea Grain Initiative. We have worked closely with the international community, bilaterally and through the G20, to communicate the importance of renewing the agreement. The G20 Leaders' Declaration embraced the agreement's work to address food insecurity in developing countries and emphasized the importance of its renewal. We have also worked through our embassies and consulates to engage locally on the BSGI through print and social media to increase public awareness of the benefits of the BSGI as we continue to address a global food crisis exacerbated by Russia's unjustified invasion of Ukraine.

GPA is working with colleagues throughout the Department and interagency—specifically USAID—to identify and amplify regional, country, and community stories which highlight the positive impact of the deal's extension and U.S. food security efforts. GPA is also working with partners like the U.S. Agency for Global Media to produce radio editorials to target audiences with limited access to internet. Regional bureaus and our Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs also distributed tailored content to our Missions to develop targeted and country-specific messaging.

Question. How are we countering Russian disinformation that Western-led sanctions are causing food insecurity?

Answer. Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem persistently works to deflect attention from the Kremlin's responsibility for worsening global food insecurity by blaming sanctions, when Putin's own behavior is the problem. Kremlin officials, often in concert with the PRC and other malign actors, heavily target the regions most affected by the food crisis—the Middle East and Africa. The GEC works to counter Moscow's disinformation and propaganda through a whole-of-society and

whole-of-government approach. We sponsor programs globally that promote independent media and expose malign actors. Our analyses also provide our posts with the tools they need to best reach audiences and tailor our efforts to counter the spread of disinformation.

GEC continuously monitors these disinformation narratives and tactics. In June, GEC publicly exposed Russia's efforts in a public report entitled "Russia's Disinformation Cannot Hide Its Responsibility for the Global Food Crisis." The report was published on the Department's Disarming Disinformation website in 10 languages and has been cited by international media.

Part of addressing disinformation is actively getting ahead of it. To that end, the Department of State implemented a public messaging campaign which included: seven Senior Official press briefings; 14 food security videos and 24 ShareAmerica stories; 10 USAGM Radio programs; and 22 public statements and addresses by Senior Officials, including by Secretary Blinken.

RESPONSE OF MS. KAREN DONFRIED TO A QUESTION
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

Question. September 2022 Azerbaijan attack on Armenia: In September 2022, Azerbaijani forces launched a series of cross-border attacks into Armenia proper. Azerbaijani officials claimed without providing evidence that Azerbaijan was responding to an Armenian "provocation," while some in Armenia expressed concern that Azerbaijan was seeking to seize territory in Armenia. U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said early on that the United States had seen "significant evidence of Azerbaijani shelling inside Armenia and significant damage to Armenian infrastructure," and satellite mapping by NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management Systems showed heavy fire in multiple locations inside Armenia.

At the hearing, I asked about the Biden administration's assessment of the September 2022 conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and specially asked about the aggressor. The response was that the Administration does not have an assessment.

Does the Biden administration contest the public reporting regarding overwhelming evidence that Azerbaijan was the primary instigator and aggressor towards Armenia in the September 2022 conflict?

Answer. Our focus during and since that fighting in September 2022 was to help the parties find a way to cease hostilities and to continue working towards a durable peace agreement. Toward this end, the United States has not publicly taken a position on how the September violence began, though we noted at the time and have continued to highlight that there was significant damage done to civilian infrastructure in Armenia as a result of Azerbaijani shelling. We have repeatedly called on Azerbaijani troops to return to their initial positions.

RESPONSES OF MS. KAREN DONFRIED TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR BILL HAGERTY

Question. Energy Security: Assistant Secretary Donfried, the European Commission signed a memorandum of understanding with Azerbaijan to double imports of Azeri natural gas by 2027. Several Southeastern European countries, such as Bulgaria, have offered to facilitate the movement of natural gas further into Europe. What is the State Department doing to support the increase of flow of natural gas from Azerbaijan into Europe?

Answer. Strengthening U.S. energy ties with Azerbaijan and other Caspian countries is an important part of our responsibilities. We continue to engage at all levels with Azerbaijan officials to discuss how we can work together to meet global energy demand. We welcome Azerbaijan's efforts to expand its support for European energy security.

Caspian natural gas already plays a valuable role in ensuring energy security in Europe—and the more that resources in one region can be shared with another, the more all benefit. It is the reason that expanding natural gas as well as electricity interconnections is a significant opportunity for the Caspian region, as well as a boost for exports to world markets.

The Southern Gas Corridor continues to be a powerful example of what can be achieved when the right amount of political will, coordinated investment, regional cooperation, and technological innovation come together. The pipeline has helped Türkiye, Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria increase energy security and reduce over-reli-

ance on one supplier. The steady and reliable deliveries of the Southern Gas Corridor are important for the stability and diversification of European markets.

Question. China Undersea Cables: Assistant Secretary Donfried, the Chinese Communist Party is expanding its foothold in the Caucasus by connecting China to Europe—through undersea cables and cable landing stations in the Caspian Sea—making information that moves along these Chinese-built systems potentially exploitable. AzerNews reported in September 2022 that Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan will lay undersea fiber-optic cables along the Caspian Sea seabed between their two countries with further connectivity into Europe via the Black Sea.

The Ministry of Digital Development of Kazakhstan announced that the cables would provide transit for the Chinese Internet to Europe. What is the State Department doing to engage with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other European countries to address the information security concerns raised by China’s construction and maintenance of these undersea fiber-optic cables?

Answer. The Administration strongly supports an open, interoperable, secure, and reliable Internet by promoting inclusive, rights-respecting, multi-stakeholder models of internet governance and pro-competitive, pro-innovation digital economy policies and regulations. We encourage Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other European countries to evaluate proposed infrastructure to ensure the CCP and other entities are unable to exploit these interconnections to harm information security, and further encourage the use of only trusted vendors of telecommunications infrastructure for subsea cables in the Caspian Sea.

In Azerbaijan, the United States routinely engages with the government, private sector, and ICT operators to discuss the importance of information security and the risks from the PRC. Although Huawei and other PRC technology are active in Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan’s internet traffic provider Azercell announced that they will continue its relationship with Finland-headquartered Nokia in October 2022.

Question. Huawei: Assistant Secretary Donfried, as you know, Huawei and other CCP-directed telecommunications companies pose significant threats to national security and economic security of the United States and our Allies and partners. Huawei has established multiple “Huawei ICT [information and communications technologies] Academies” in Azerbaijan to train Azeris and further proliferate its influence through a global educational program. Moreover, Huawei ICT Academies reportedly can now be found in 72 countries. In December 2021, Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Digital Development and Transport, ADA University, and Huawei agreed to create a joint research and development venture to foster Azeri technology experts under Huawei’s tutelage.

What is the State Department doing to engage with European allies and partners in order to monitor and address Huawei’s expansion of ICT instruction?

Answer. Azerbaijan’s population of 10 million represents a significant future market of tech consumers and, to support Azerbaijan’s independence, their access to free and open technology is in the U.S. interest. We regularly encourage Azerbaijan to look beyond cost and assess their vulnerability to malign PRC influence including in the technology space. While there is a commercial demand for Huawei and other PRC technology, the U.S. actively engages with the government, private sector and ICT operators to highlight the importance of information security and the risks from the PRC, as well as the benefits of relying on trusted vendors of ICTS technology. Huawei’s engagement at four Azerbaijani universities is limited, and the U.S. Embassy continues to promote study in the United States for Azerbaijani students. Azerbaijan is positioning itself as a hub of trade, transit, and telecommunications. Azerbaijan will be a focal point for new east-west telecommunications lines across the Caspian Sea, and making Azerbaijan a key player in helping provide an information pathway that does not transit Russia and not dependent on PRC technology. Azerbaijan is also investing in the ICT sector, providing an opportunity for U.S. business.

THE ARMENIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY AND
U.S. POLICY PRIORITIES IN THE CAUCASUS

presented by

TEREZA YERIMYAN, GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS DIRECTOR
ARMENIAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF AMERICA

Thank you, Chairman Menendez and Ranking Member Risch. We are grateful for this Committee’s strong leadership on constructive U.S. engagement in the

Caucasus and its enduring support for the national security and democratic aspirations of the Armenian nation.

In the wake of Azerbaijan's 2020 ethnic-cleansing of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh), and amid Baku's ongoing occupation of sovereign Armenian territory, we ask the Committee to press the Biden administration to abandon its reckless policy of false-parity, and, instead, forthrightly condemn Azerbaijan's aggression.

The oil-rich Aliyev regime must be held accountable, through the immediate cessation of U.S. military aid and the investigation of its invasions, atrocities, and war crimes. These actions must be matched with a robust aid package to meet pressing humanitarian and developmental needs in Artsakh. In terms of U.S.-Armenia bilateral ties, we seek a paradigm shift in relations that prioritizes the security and viability of Armenia and Artsakh in the face of existential regional threats.

We respectfully submit the following policy recommendations to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the hopes that they will help inform and guide the panel's constructive discourse on U.S. interests in this region.

First and foremost, we call upon the Committee to end U.S. military aid to Azerbaijan (including, but not limited to, Section 333 (Capacity Building), Foreign Military Financing, and International Military Education and Training), via statutory prohibitions, reversal of Presidential waiver authority, and the full enforcement of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act. In addition, the Departments of State and Defense must meet their statutory reporting requirements—as per the recommendations of the General Accountability Office's recent report—in connection with the Biden administration's decisions to waive this law, despite Azerbaijan ethnically cleansing Artsakh, occupying Armenia, illegally detaining and abusing of Armenian POWs, and desecrating Christian Armenian holy sites.

We also ask that the Committee conduct oversight of the Administration's decision not to provide desperately needed, direct U.S. humanitarian assistance to Artsakh, where the at-risk Armenian population is facing continued aggression and chronic water, energy, healthcare, and food insecurity. The United States should never enforce an Azerbaijani veto against American humanitarian aid to vulnerable Armenians in Artsakh. Congress should appropriate no less than \$50 million for programs within Artsakh.

As a follow up to questions asked by Chairman Menendez, but not answered by Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, during a July 21, 2021 Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, we seek clarity on two key points: 1) Has the Administration undertaken any investigation into the discovery of as many as 10 U.S. components in the Turkish Bayraktar UAVs used by Azerbaijan to attack civilians in Artsakh as potential violations of U.S. arms export control restrictions and other U.S. and international laws, and; 2) Has the Administration investigated reports that Azerbaijan used prohibited munitions (white phosphorus, cluster bombs) and deployed Turkish-recruited mercenaries from Syria against Artsakh?

With regard to cultural preservation and religious freedom, we encourage the Committee to ask the Biden administration if it has provided funding, access to satellite imagery, or other assistance to academic, civil society, and other groups monitoring, preserving and protecting the rich Armenian Christian heritage across Artsakh, including areas currently under the control of the Azerbaijani military?

In the wake of U.S. recognition of the Armenian Genocide, we ask this Committee to determine how Congressional and White House affirmation has actually been reflected in Biden administration policy, with a special focus on American diplomatic efforts to end Ankara's denials and obstruction of justice for this crime.

We encourage this Committee to support key legislative initiatives, among them S. Res. 797, condemning Azerbaijan's aggression and calling for an end to U.S. military aid to Azerbaijan. In terms of the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, conferees should include: 1) the Cardenas-Schiff-Sherman Amendment (introduced in the Senate as #SA 6441), requiring an investigation of Azerbaijani war crimes (U.S. parts in Turkish drones, foreign mercenaries, prohibited munitions, abuse of prisoners of war); and 2) the Pappas-Pallone Amendment (Senate versions: #SA 5754 and #SA 6345) placing restrictions on F-16 sales to Turkey.

As the Committee considers President Biden's nominees for U.S. Ambassador to Armenia and Azerbaijan, we strongly recommend a focus, during the confirmation process, on strengthening Armenia's security and holding Azerbaijan accountable. U.S. policy toward Armenia must align with the security and viability of Armenia and Artsakh in the face of existential regional threats, while U.S. policy on Azerbaijan should prioritize accountability for its past and ongoing crimes. Our current flawed U.S. policy in the Caucasus offers lectures on democracy to democratic Armenia, ships U.S. tax-payer funded military aid to dictatorial Azerbaijan, and provides no assistance at all to at-risk Artsakh. That has to change.

Thank you for your kind consideration of our testimony. We stand ready, as always, to support the work of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to strengthen the long and enduring friendship of the American and Armenian peoples.

AZERBAIJAN'S DESTRUCTION OF ARMENIAN CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS
AND SUPPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

PRESENTED BY THE ARMENIAN BAR ASSOCIATION¹

Thank you, Chairman Menendez, and Ranking Member Risch for this opportunity.

In September, 2020, Azerbaijan launched an unprovoked military offensive against the Armenian population in Artsakh (also referred to as Nagorno-Karabakh). The attack was timed to launch in the middle of the COVID pandemic and in the few weeks before the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. The eyes of the United States and international communities averted, the aggression drew little attention and has evaded any accountability. To this day, Azerbaijan's aggression remains unchecked.

In November, 2020, a ceasefire statement brokered by Russia mandated that Armenians (governed by the Republic of Artsakh) cede control of portions of Artsakh and adjacent territories to Azerbaijan. While the ceasefire statement brought a temporary standstill, the current situation leaves many Armenian monuments and religious places of worship at heightened risk of destruction.

Azerbaijan has a lengthy, documented history of denying the existence of, and intentionally destroying, Armenian cultural and religious heritage and monuments. From 1997 to 2006, Azerbaijan deliberately obliterated nearly all traces of once prevalent Armenian culture in an area known as Nakhichevan. They razed Armenian medieval churches, thousands of ancient carved cross-stones (*khachkars*), and historical tombstones.² Video footage from 2005 depicts Azerbaijan destroying the surviving portions of the medieval necropolis of Djulfa, that housed tens of thousands of Armenian cross-stones (dating back to the sixth century A.D.).³ The cross-

¹The Armenian Bar Association is an international non-profit organization of judges, attorneys, law professors, law students, and legal professionals. It has issued a comprehensive report (<https://armenianbar.org/heritage/>) on the issues discussed in this testimony in addition to reports on Azerbaijan's racial discrimination (<https://armenianbar.org/programs/united-nations-initiative/azerbajians-racial-discrimination-against-ethnic-armenians/>) against Armenians, its treatment of POWs (<https://armenianbar.org/programs/united-nations-initiative/armenian-pows-and-civilians-held-captive-by-azerbaijan/>) and its responsibility in carrying out arbitrary executions (<https://armenianbar.org/programs/united-nations-initiative/extrajudicial-summary-or-arbitrary-executions/>) of ethnic Armenians.

²Special investigation: Declassified satellite images show erasure of Armenian churches (<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/06/01/special-investigation-declassified-satellite-images-show-erasure-of-armenian-churches>), *The Art Newspaper* (June 1, 2021); Christina Maranci, "The Medieval Armenian Monuments in Nagorno-Karabakh Must be Protected" (<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/medieval-armenian-monuments-nagorno-karabakh/>), *Apollo Magazine* (December 9, 2020); Dale Berning Sawa, "Monumental loss: Azerbaijan and 'The Worst Cultural Genocide of the 21st Century'" (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/01/monumental-loss-azerbaijan-cultural-genocide-khachkars>), *The Guardian* (March 1, 2019); Nora McGreevy, "Why Scholars, Cultural Institutions Are Calling to Protect Armenian Heritage" (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/metropolitan-museum-scholars-call-protection-cultural-heritage-nagorno-karabakh-180976364/>), *Smithsonian Magazine* (November 24, 2020).

³Simon Maghakyan and Sarah Pickman, "A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture" (<https://hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture/>), *Hyperallergic* (February 18, 2019); "Destruction of the Armenian Cemetery of Djulfa" (https://www.icomos.org/risk/world_report/2006-2007/pdf/H@R_2006-2007_09_National_Report_Azerbaijan.pdf), *ICOMOS Heritage at Risk*; "Azerbaijan: Famous Medieval Cemetery Vanishes: IWPR reporter confirms that there is nothing left of the celebrated stone crosses of Jugha" (<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azerbaijan-famous-medieval-cemetery-vanishes>), *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*; "When the World Looked Away: The Destruction of Julfa Cemetery" (https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-julfa-cemetery-destruction-unesco-cultural-heritage/30986581.html?fbclid=IwAR38guzAYkn3_fnSCPl3XoD8iBeNxJ0dcjcw4fb4V8HW9ZvNLzNKn-uwM0M), *Radio Free Europe* (December 10, 2020); Kate Fitz Gibbon, "World Heritage Committee Meeting in Baku Will be Hosted by Cultural Destroyers" (<https://culturalpropertynews.org/unesco-exposed/>), *Cultural Property News* (March 19, 2019); "Azeri Soldiers Vandalized a Cemetery in Nagorno-Karabakh, Rekindling Fears of Destruction of Armenian Heritage" (<https://www.archyde.com/azeri-soldiers-vandalized-a-cemetery-in-nagorno-karabakh-rekindling-fears-of-destruction-of-armenian-heritage>), *Archyde* (November 27, 2020); "Silent Erasure: A Satellite Investigation of the Destruction of Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nakhichivan, Azerbaijan" (<https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/index.php/report>), *Caucasus Heritage Watch* (September, 2022).

stones are listed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity,⁴ and are used for devotional and worship purposes by Armenian Christians and pilgrims in addition to documenting the history of the region.

Experts predicted that in the aftermath of the 2020 war, Azerbaijan would continue its official policy of cultural erasure.⁵ Unfortunately, that prediction has proven prescient. Artsakh is endowed with a deeply rich cultural history, including thousands of religious sites and monuments, many dating back thousands of years. While Russian peacekeeping forces monitor some Armenian places of worship (most notably Dadivank, a 7th-9th century monastic complex with a cathedral rebuilt in the 13th century—discussed below), they do not provide protection for a great many other Armenian religious sites, leaving them extremely vulnerable.

Caucasus Heritage Watch, a non-profit research organization led by archeology professors from Cornell University and Purdue University, utilizes satellite imagery to monitor and document destruction in Artsakh since the November, 2020 ceasefire statement. As of October 2022, Caucasus Heritage Watch has documented the complete destruction and erasure in July, 2022 of the Saint Sargis Church, and the partial destruction of other sites.⁶



Under the pretext of its “reconstruction,” Azerbaijan has also begun its campaign of removing evidence of Armenian presence from the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Cathedral—a landmark of Armenian cultural and religious identity in Shushi—that Azerbaijan shelled repeatedly and intentionally during the war with high precision weaponry.⁷ Part of the “reconstruction” of the cathedral has included removal of its domes, which are architecturally distinctive as Armenian Apostolic.⁸ Azerbaijan’s “reconstruction” “without input of [the cathedral’s] congregation” has been admonished by USCIRF⁹ as no members of the Armenian Apostolic Church have been consulted.

⁴“Armenian cross-stones art. Symbolism and craftsmanship of Khachkars (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/armenian-cross-stones-art-symbolism-and-craftsmanship-of-khachkars-00434>),” UNESCO.

⁵“Artsakh: Cultural Heritage under Threat (<https://newsletters.hyperallergic.com/profile/sunday/issues/sunday-edition-artsakh-cultural-heritage-under-threat-419872>)” Sunday Edition of Hyperallergic magazine (February 28, 2021).

⁶“Caucasus Heritage Watch: Monitoring Report #4 (<https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/index.php/report>),” Caucasus Heritage Watch (October, 2022).

⁷“Artsakh Ombudsman Second Interim Public Report on the Azerbaijani Atrocities Against the Artsakh Population in September to October 2020 (<https://artsakhombuds.am/en/document/735>)” (October 18, 2020); “Azerbaijan: Attack on Church Possible War Crime (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/azerbaijan-attack-church-possible-war-crime>),” Human Rights Watch (December 16, 2020).

⁸“Azerbaijan “distorting” Ghazanchetsots Cathedral under the guise of “restoration”—Artsakh Ombudsman (<https://en.armradio.am/2021/05/03/azerbaijan-distorting-ghazanchetsots-cathedral-under-the-guise-of-restoration-artsakh-ombudsman/>),” Public Radio of Armenia (May 3, 2021); Twitter postings (<https://twitter.com/simonforco/status/1413860566960017410>) from Azerbaijani Diplomat Nasimi Aghaev.

⁹USCIRF Concerned by Azerbaijan Religion Law Amendments, Condition of Ghazanchetsots Cathedral (<https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscifr-concerned-azerbaijan-religion-law-amendments-condition>), Press Release (May 17, 2021)

During war



After war



Many acts of ruin and destruction have been documented since November, 2020, including vandalism, graffiti, desecration, disfigurement of key features of religious monuments (domes and crosses), and the destruction of cemeteries and cross-stones.¹⁰ In 2021, the BBC documented the complete elimination of another church—Zoravor Holy Mother of God Church located near the village of Mekhakavan (Jebrayil), now under Azerbaijani control.¹¹ Notably, many of the photos and video stills of vandalism and destruction originate with and feature *Azerbaijani* military personnel. To deny the existence of Armenian cultural and religious heritage, many sites are falsely represented as “Albanian-Udi” including by official authorities.

In addition to the threat of eradication of religious sites, Armenian Christians cannot safely return to Artsakh under Azerbaijani occupation for pilgrimages, services, monastic life, and custodianship. The following statistics obtained from church officials show the levels of activity within some of the main churches and monasteries in pre-war 2019 and 2020 (for the first 9 months before the Azerbaijan’s aggression) as compared to the post-war period during under Azerbaijan’s control, which, among other things, has blocked all access to the sites, resulting in the ceasing of Armenian baptisms and marriages. Vibrant religious communities have entirely disappeared.

¹⁰ Rob Lee, Twitter post (<https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1327791527507144705?s=20>) (November 14, 2020); Sascha Duerkop, Twitter post (<https://twitter.com/saschaduerkop/status/1329754063064489986?lang=en>) (November 20, 2020); “Azerbaijanis destroy Armenian cross-stone in occupied Artsakh village,” Public Radio of Armenia (January 12, 2021); “Azeri Soldiers Vandalized a Cemetery in Nagorno-Karabakh, Rekindling Fears of Destruction of Armenian Heritage (<https://www.archyde.com/azeri-soldiers-vandalized-a-cemetery-in-nagorno-karabakh-rekindling-fears-of-destruction-of-armenian-heritage/>),” Archyde (November 27, 2020); Tigran Balayan, Twitter post (<https://twitter.com/tbalayan/status/1327676346315706369?s=20>) (November 14, 2020); “The Azerbaijani military servicemen are vandalizing the Armenian church of St. Yeghishe in the Mataghis region of Artsakh (<https://www.ombuds.am/en-us/site/VideoGalleryView/520>),” Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia (March 29, 2021); “Ad Hoc Public Report on the Armenian Cultural Heritage in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh): Cases of Vandalism and At Risk of Destruction by Azerbaijan (<https://artsakhombuds.am/en/document/792>),” Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh (January 26, 2021); “Damage to Cultural Property Means Damage to the Cultural Heritage of All Mankind (<https://artsakhombuds.am/en/news/500>)” Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh (March 25, 2021); “Azerbaijanis Remove Cross from Spitak Khach Church in Occupied Hadrut (<https://asbarez.com/azerbaijanis-remove-cross-from-spitak-khach-church-in-occupied-hadrut/#:%7E:text=A%20video%20shared%20on%20social%20media%20clearly%20shows,another%20Armenian%20church%20as%20belonging%20to%20the%20Udis.>),” Asbarez.com (January 27, 2022); “Azerbaijani soldiers vandalize Armenian church in Artsakh village (<https://www.panorama.am/en/news/2022/02/08/church-vandalism/2637757>),” Panorama—Armenian news (February 8, 2022).

¹¹ “Nagorno-Karabakh: The mystery of the missing church (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56517835>)”

Church or Monastery Name	Number of Baptisms				Number of Marriages			
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019	2020	2021	2022
St Savior (Ghazanchetsots) Church in Shushi	382	235	0	0	86	22	0	0
Hovhanness Mkrtych (John the Baptist, also known as the Green Church)	69	78	0	0	38	4	0	0
Dadivank Monastery	156	682	0	0	9	5	0	0
St Resurrection Church of Berdzor	7	8	0	0	5	4	0	0
St Mary Church of Hadrut	25	18	0	0	7	5	0	0

Dadivank is a large, medieval monastic complex, a center for literary production, and was an active religious site, where worshippers and pilgrims would regularly attend mass up to the beginning of Azerbaijan's offensive.¹²

After the November, 2020 ceasefire statement, under the protection of Russian peacekeepers, Armenian monks remained in the monastery and pilgrims were, for a time, allowed to visit. But the situation at Dadivank swiftly deteriorated. From April, 2021 to the present, Azerbaijan has refused to allow pilgrimages there. In a report entitled "*We are left alone with you, Lord.*" *Clergymen of Dadivank await Armenian pilgrims*, the situation in Dadivank is documented from the perspective of the handful of monks remaining there.¹³ Although this site is monitored by tens of Russian peacekeepers, the freedom of religion and use of sacred Dadivank is rendered impossible as the monks are surrounded by hundreds of Azerbaijani troops, are subject to psychological intimidation, are taunted and tormented, have unsteady phone access, and are unable to freely leave the grounds of the monastic complex for fear of altercations.¹⁴

In September, 2021, Armenia lodged with the Registry of the International Court of Justice ("ICJ") a request for indication of provisional measures regarding the violations by Azerbaijan of the International Convention of December 21, 1965, on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. During the ICJ proceedings, Azerbaijan indefensibly denied the very existence of Armenian cultural heritage. In December, 2021, in its decision on provisional measures, the Court ordered that Azerbaijan "*shall protect the right to access and enjoy Armenian historic, cultural and religious heritage, including but not limited to, churches, cathedrals, places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and other buildings and artefacts, by inter alia terminating, preventing, prohibiting and punishing their vandalism, destruction or alteration, and allowing Armenians to visit places of worship.*" Flouting the provisional order, Azerbaijan subsequently announced the creation of a special committee that would act to purge traces of Armenian heritage.¹⁵

To date, Azerbaijan has denied UNESCO's monitors access to the area notwithstanding UNESCO's multiple requests. USCIRF has recommended that the State Department include Azerbaijan on the Special Watch List.¹⁶ However, there are still

¹²Cultural Heritage Is Caught Up in the Conflict Over Nagorno-Karabakh (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/dadivank-monastery-nagorno-karabakh>), *Atlas Obscura* (December 10, 2020)

¹³Menk Menag Enk Mnatsel Kez Hed, Der: Dadivanki Hokevoragannere Hay Oukhdavorneri en sbassoum (<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31346025.html#comments>) (Translated: "*We are left alone with you, Lord.*" *Clergymen of Dadivank await Armenian pilgrims*), *Azadutyun News Channel* (July 7, 2021)(Translation available upon request). See also "In Nagorno-Karabakh, Land Mines, Bulldozers and Lingering Tensions (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/25/world/europe/azerbaijan-armenia-nagorno-karabakh.html>)," Anton Troianovski, *NY Times* (July 25, 2021) (describing situation at Dadivank).

¹⁴The civilian population of Artsakh is also subject to psychological intimidation and propaganda encouraging them to leave their ancestral lands. "Interim Report on Violations of the rights of Artsakh people by Azerbaijan in February–March 2022 (<https://artsakhombuds.am/sites/default/files/2022-03/Ombudsman-Report-English.pdf>)," Human Rights Defender of Artsakh (2022).

¹⁵Simon Maghakyan, "Emboldened by Ukraine Crisis, Azerbaijan Escalates its War on Armenian Heritage Sites (<https://hyperallergic.com/709512/azerbaijan-escalates-its-war-on-armenian-heritage-sites/>)," *Hyperallergic Magazine* (February 4, 2022). After international criticism, Azerbaijani authorities attempted to walk back their initial statements concerning this committee.

¹⁶"United States Commission on International Religious Freedom—2022 Annual Report (<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022%20Annual%20Report.pdf>)"—USCIRF (April 2022)

no assurances that Armenian cultural and religious heritage sites will be protected in territories that are under Azerbaijan's occupation, and there are no mechanisms to allow for Christian pilgrims to access the Armenian religious sites.¹⁷ Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian cultural and religious heritage is squarely within a broader systematic effort and pattern by Azerbaijan to: (1) deprive Armenian Christians of the ability to exercise their fundamental right to freely exercise their religion, (2) ethnically cleanse Artsakh of Armenian people and worshippers, and (3) erase the record of Armenian history and heritage and any evidence of Armenian presence from the region.

Our purpose in making this submission is to inform you of these activities which advance Azerbaijan's policy of cultural genocide against the Armenians of Artsakh. The Armenian Bar Association is committed to bringing attention to atrocities committed by Azerbaijan and documenting them in our reports. We are available to provide additional information to you upon request and hope that you will find this information helpful in connection with any policy or action you are considering involving Azerbaijan and its government.



¹⁷Civil society groups such as Save Armenian Monuments (<https://savearmenianmonuments.com/>), Monument Watch (<https://monumentwatch.org/en/>) and AUA Artsakh Heritage Project (<https://artsakh-heritage.aua.am/>) have been raising awareness of these issues.