

Safeguarding the People of Nagorno-Karabakh
Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman
Hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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Good afternoon and welcome to this hearing on safeguarding the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. We have an extraordinarily distinguished panel of witnesses, and I will introduce them in a moment, right now I want to recognize that we have in the room with us today many distinguished guests, representatives of the Armenian embassy, leaders of the Armenian church, of Armenian-American organizations, some of the most generous supporters of the Armenian community.

And many of these supporters are not of Armenian origin, but have recognized a peril to this community. They have rallied to their defense at a critical moment – they are taking responsibility. I want to thank you all, really, *from the bottom of my heart*, for coming here today to consider what can be done to *safeguard* and *sustain* the people of Nagorno-Karabakh.

As many of you will know, as the Soviet Union collapsed and Armenia and Azerbaijan were among those countries emerging out of it, Armenians and Azerbaijanis fought a war, from 1988-1994, driven in part by the fact that the boundaries of

the new Armenian and Azerbaijani states did not correspond to the ethnic boundaries.

At the end of the war, in which atrocities were committed by both sides, ethnic Armenians controlled an enclave within Azerbaijan – this is Nagorno-Karabakh, or Artsakh in Armenian. Nagorno-Karabakh seceded from Azerbaijan, though that was not widely recognized, and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh have defended it ever since, not permitting it to be integrated into Azerbaijan out of concern about what the government of Azerbaijan might do to them, and to their historical presence in Nagorno-Karabakh. We will hear testimony today on the reasonableness of this concern.

Suffice to say that the government of Azerbaijan does not accept this state of affairs in Nagorno-Karabakh, has repeatedly violated cease fires and attacked Nagorno-Karabakh, most aggressively in 2020, and, working together with the government of Turkey, has attained military dominance over Nagorno-Karabakh. It has also repeatedly broken agreements to permit access to Nagorno-Karabakh, via the Lachin Corridor, and for the past seven months has permitted only basic medical necessities and humanitarian food supplies – with an evident intention to create a humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The U.S. has been engaged in attempts to find a peaceful solution to this frozen conflict, along with Russia and France. But the process appears to be breaking down, and pressure is vastly ramping up on Armenians to give way to Azerbaijan and its partner Turkey. How far the U.S., Russia, and France will go to pressure Armenians to give way in Nagorno-Karabakh is not clear – but the opaqueness of these discussions is itself a sign of concern.

In Nagorno-Karabakh today we have a vulnerable small population, surrounded by vastly larger and more powerful military forces of Azerbaijan, backed up by Turkey. Since 2020 Azerbaijan has been tightening the noose on Nagorno-Karabakh, its forces have occupied much of the former territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and even territory of Armenia proper. The government of Azerbaijan has broken agreements on the Lachin Corridor, making it much more difficult to get people and goods in and out of Nagorno-Karabakh.

So, as our government is leading discussions with Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders, we in Congress have a responsibility in Congress to ask – where is this headed? What is the Azeri “quality of mind”? Above all, as these discussions continue, what would constitute adequate safeguards for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh? What is the administration doing to make sure that Stepanakert is not starved into submission, or ethnically cleansed.

Our country simply cannot accept a risk of genocide, or of ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh. That is what we mean by safeguards for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. I hope the administration recognize the grave responsibility it has taken on in this regard.

As Ambassador Brownback has said so well in his written testimony, the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh do have a right to survival in their ancestral homeland – “the right not to be driven out, starved out or blockaded by the government of Azerbaijan.” And as the Ambassador also says, the U.S. has the responsibility to hold the government of Azerbaijan accountable for its actions. “We have the capacity to stop this religious cleansing. We must use it.”