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Armenian Bar Association Statement on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report: Turkey and Azerbaijan

The Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan continue to merit serious concern for their treatment of religious and cultural minorities.

In its 2026 Annual Report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended that the U.S. government maintain close scrutiny of Turkey for engaging in ongoing violations of religious freedom and consider appropriate monitoring mechanisms for Azerbaijan in light of mounting evidence of abuses affecting Armenian Christian heritage and religious life.

The 2026 Report noted that Turkey continues to impose structural restrictions on religious minorities, including limitations on clergy training, interference with internal religious governance, and barriers to property rights. These longstanding policies have particularly affected the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other Christian communities, contributing to a gradual erosion of religious pluralism. The Report further emphasized that administrative and legal obstacles, such as restrictions on residency permits for foreign clergy and the continued closure of the Halki Theological School, pose an existential challenge to the sustainability of historic Christian institutions in Turkey. Taken together, these measures risk undermining the ability of religious communities to function, educate clergy, and preserve their traditions.

In Azerbaijan, the Report highlighted growing concerns regarding the protection of Armenian religious and cultural heritage, particularly in and around the region of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh). Documented incidents include the destruction, alteration, or appropriation of Armenian churches, monasteries, and cemeteries, raising serious questions about compliance with international standards on cultural and religious preservation. The targeting of Armenian Christian heritage sites, some dating back centuries, has been accompanied by broader restrictions on access, monitoring, and independent verification, limiting transparency and accountability. These actions risk permanently erasing irreplaceable evidence of a historic religious presence in the region.

Notably, the Chair of USCIRF issued a dissenting view recommending that Azerbaijan be designated as a Country of Particular Concern, alongside countries such as North Korea, Pakistan, and Burma, due to the severity and trajectory of violations. The dissent also cited the arrest and prosecution of Armenians, raising due process concerns alongside broader patterns of repression. These developments, coupled with documented threats to religious heritage, underscore the urgency of increased international scrutiny.

The Armenian Bar Association underscores the importance of USCIRF's independent monitoring role and its engagement with affected communities. On February 19, 2026, USCIRF convened a special listening session in Los Angeles to hear directly from local stakeholders. At the initiative of the Commission's Vice Chair, several Commissioners traveled to California for this dialogue, with Glendale Council Member Ardy Kassakhian serving as the lead local

organizer. Such engagement is critical to ensuring that Armenia-related concerns are fully reflected in U.S. religious freedom policy discussions.

At this session, the Armenian Bar Association, through its Vice Chair, Steve Dadaian, delivered oral testimony and provided Commissioners and staff with copies of its “Dadivank” report, along with advocacy materials previously shared at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C. The Association also submitted written testimony calling for the release of Armenian prisoners detained in Baku and subjected to sham proceedings lacking due process and transparency. Additional advocacy emphasized the right of return of Artsakhtsis under international law and the urgent need to safeguard Armenian cultural and religious heritage in both Azerbaijan and Turkey.

The delegation expressed concerns regarding actions by the Armenian government affecting religious freedom, including allegations of crackdowns impacting the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The Armenian Bar Association’s engagement in international religious freedom advocacy extends back to 2020. Since then, under the leadership of former ArmenBar Chair Sonya Nersessian and former Board Member Claire Kedeshian, the Bar has participated in regular consultations within the broader international religious freedom community, contributed to multi-faith advocacy efforts, maintained an active presence at annual International Religious Freedom Summits, and supported the development of coordinated initiatives focused on Armenia-related cultural heritage concerns. These efforts reflect sustained collaboration between civil society and policy-focused institutions, recognizing the complementary roles of independent commissions such as USCIRF and broader advocacy platforms.