



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

K. GEORGE AND CAROLANN S. NAJARIAN, M.D.
ENDOWED LECTURE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

AN AMERICAN AMBASSADOR'S REFLECTIONS ON
U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN THE
MIDDLE EAST AND THE CAUCASUS

BY

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OCTOBER 25, 2012

FANEUIL HALL
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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It is truly an honor to be here tonight at Boston's historic Faneuil Hall and to speak at the third annual K. George and Carolann S. Najarian, M.D. Endowed Lecture on Human Rights — a public program of the Armenian Heritage Foundation — in celebration of the opening of the Armenian Heritage Park and of the central theme of the Greenway — the immigrant experience. I am reminded of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's brilliant speech he gave in 1938 to the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) at their beautiful Hall near the White House. As he looked over the blue-haired ladies in the audience, who were rightfully proud of their heritage, he described them as "fellow immigrants." As Roosevelt had claim to perhaps an even older heritage — descended from a Dutch family that came to New York City (then New Amsterdam) in the early 17th century — this was a particularly poignant remark.

Indeed, with the exception of the Native Americans, we are all immigrants and proud, each in our own way, of contributing to this great "melting pot" called the United States of America. I am the son of Armenian immigrants who survived the first genocide of the 20th century and miraculously found their way to our shores. As a first-generation American-Armenian, I always felt at an early age that somehow being the child of survivors who were given safe haven in America there was a special responsibility I had to fulfill. That is why I decided to go into public service and the Foreign Service as a career.

The subject of my remarks this evening is "An American Ambassador's Reflections on U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East and the Caucasus." Accordingly, I would like to share with you the insights of a foreign policy professional who has served at home and abroad and to comment on the foreign policy formulation process as it pertains particularly to United States policy in these regions of the world.

In a general sense, United States foreign policy has two basic points of reference.

The first source of policy is our adherence to and propagation of American values and principles as embodied by our Founding Fathers in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts was at Rice University earlier this month as part of the university's Centennial celebration and was asked what, in his view, was the most important part of the

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United States Constitution. Without hesitation he replied “The very beginning, ‘We the People.’” Indeed, that is the revolutionary concept. Not “We the Founding Fathers,” nor “We the State,” nor “We the Party.” The sovereignty of the people and their individual rights are at the heart of our democracy, along with the concepts of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” the rule of law, equality before the law, and equality of opportunity, amongst other rights such as freedom of speech and association. These are fundamental human rights.

These concepts translate themselves into our foreign policy and our public diplomacy where we strive to listen, learn, inform, engage and influence foreign audiences using this set of principles. In a broad sense, this policy approach is called “Wilsonianism” — after our 28th President Woodrow Wilson, who famously proclaimed that “The world must be made safe for democracy.” Wilsonianism advocates for an active global role by the United States through the spread of democracy, the opening of global markets and the creation of an international organization based on democratic principles and dedicated to keeping peace — the League of Nations at the time. Our human rights agenda overseas falls under this category.

The other point of reference in United States foreign policy formulation is our national security interests — sometimes referred to as the “Realist School.” Here the major factors influencing policy are geopolitics, economic and commercial interests, politico-military considerations, energy interests, counterterrorism, and cybersecurity, to name a few. Realists believe that sovereign states are the principal actors in the international system and that international organizations play a secondary role. Contemporary proponents of this school of thought include Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon.

United States foreign policy formulation is a creative tension between these two pillars of idealism and pragmatism. This tension dates back to the earliest years of the Republic and may be found, for instance, in the debate between Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams on the role the United States in supporting the independence movements of Latin America.

On some issues and points in history, these two pillars have aligned, as in Ronald Reagan’s confrontation of the deplorable record of human rights and human dignity in the Soviet Union.

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At other times, the course of idealism and pragmatism diverge. James A. Baker, III, the honorary chair of the institute of which I am the founding director, accommodates the two trends by using the phrase “principled pragmatism.” And to understand more profoundly United States policy toward the Middle East, the Arab Awakening and the Caucasus, one must indeed take both schools of thought into consideration.

United States Policy Toward Armenia and the Caucasus

Now allow me to turn to United States policy toward the Caucasus with a special focus on Armenia and its neighbors. United States policy toward Armenia incorporates the two basic trends I mentioned earlier: idealism and “Wilsonianism” on the one hand, and U.S. national security interests and pragmatism, on the other.

At this 20th anniversary year of the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan, we can take stock of Armenia’s situation domestically and internationally and the bilateral relationship between the United States and Armenia. Secretary of State James A. Baker, III, made a historic visit to independent Armenia in February 1992 and President George H.W. Bush stated that 1992 was a period full of “possibilities and hope” for the people of Armenia and the world. The challenge, he said, was to “sustain the peace and build a more prosperous and democratic future.” This remains the key objective today.

The challenge for Armenians in Armenia and throughout the diaspora is to work together to ensure that Armenia realizes the true fruits of independence by evolving as a truly democratic state living under the rule of law, providing its people with economic prosperity and security, and pursuing an enlightened foreign policy that maximizes Armenia’s great potential to be a cultural, economic, commercial, scientific and democratic center in the Caucasus and a regional bridge between the North and South and the East and West.

In this respect United States policy toward Armenia and the region is to promote democratic institutions, economic and social development, and conflict resolution. United States policy is guided by both the Wilsonian impulse for democracy and human rights and its national security

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interests in the region incorporating its relationships with Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia, among others. At times, this becomes a delicate balancing act, given the United States' position as a global power.

However, the United States has undeniably made a concerted effort to help Armenia during its difficult transition from totalitarianism and a command economy to democracy and open markets. The U.S. to date has provided Armenia with nearly \$2 billion in development and humanitarian assistance designed to promote economic growth, encourage democratic governance, improve public health, increase civic participation, and enhance Armenia's peace and security.

Despite the progress Armenia has made since independence, serious challenges remain. Public impatience has grown since the economic downturn as unemployment, inflation, poverty and the national debt increased — all of which has contributed to a very high level of emigration, a large problem for a country of less than 3 million people. Politically, Armenia fell 20 places, to 129th of 183 countries, in the worldwide corruption index over the past four years. Abroad, the country continues to be in conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabagh issue and the normalization of relations with Turkey has stalled.

According to the recommendations of the International Crisis Group, even under these difficult economic and political circumstances, Armenia has to be fully engaged if there is to be progress in securing peace and stability in the South Caucasus — not distracted by deep domestic political conflict, institutional breakdown and lack of popular trust. The government has implemented some measures to restore political stability, most significantly by releasing persons held on political grounds and entering into credible dialogue with the main opposition bloc, ANC. It has not, however, broken with the past by launching criminal proceedings against the perpetrators of that year's deadly violence. While some international organizations consider the chapter closed, it continues to polarize segments of society.

In my mind, the role of the Armenian diaspora in supporting Armenia's evolution is critical. Armenians living in countries that enjoy the fruits of liberty, democracy and the benefits of

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private market economies want, I am convinced, for Armenia to evolve as a strong and stable democracy endowed with freedom and the rule of law as the hallmarks of the Armenian political system. Armenia, since it became an independent republic in 1991, set out on this path. But its hard-won gains must be consolidated. These democratic ideals are real values that Armenians both in Armenia and in the diaspora hold to be dear. As Americans, we must be true to our values and must be strong advocates of democracy in Armenia.

Democracy and economic reform go hand in hand. The diaspora must promote Armenia's business environment, economic development and foreign investment in a more even and transparent manner. Although several diaspora investors (as well as around 70 U.S.-owned firms) are active in Armenia, much more needs to be done to encourage and facilitate investment from other Armenians in the diaspora who live in Europe, the United States, Latin America and the Middle East.

The domestic challenges facing Armenia are exacerbated by the international situation the country finds itself in. The Russia-Georgia conflict destabilized the Caucasus region and beyond. Russia is asserting itself in the "near abroad." While Armenia's relations with Russia will remain very important, Armenia must avoid becoming overdependent on Russia. Turkey is an emerging regional power, seeking to be part of the European Community and improving its relationship with the United States while strengthening its ties and influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Georgia and Azerbaijan are also actively pursuing stronger relations with the West. Iran's future direction remains problematic, but it is a major regional player and enjoys good relations with Armenia. Iran's policies will have important implications for Armenia, including the nuclear issue.

The single most critical national security and foreign policy issue for Armenia is the unresolved Nagorno-Karabagh issue. In a recent report on security in the South Caucasus, the Regional Studies Center, a leading think tank based in Armenia, concludes that the risk of "war by accident," based on threat misperception and strategic miscalculation, is being exacerbated by a steady upsurge in tension. These factors are impeding diplomacy and mediation that make it difficult to de-escalate and hard to "climb back down" from entrenched positions on both sides.

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A fragile balance of power and an escalating “arms race” — driven by surging Azeri defense spending — magnify the danger of new hostilities or a move to outright war.

Armenia, which is not endowed with natural energy resources like Azerbaijan, nevertheless feels compelled to keep pace with the government in Baku. One glimmer of hope in this respect is a 2011 Memorandum of Understanding, which aims at enhancing cooperation between the U.S. and Armenian experts to assess and develop Armenia’s unconventional and conventional energy resources, including shale gas.

Given this arms race and the stalemated Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk talks, the future is indeed problematic for Armenia. According to the RSC report the Azeris have proclaimed that they are preparing to attain combat readiness by 2014 — which coincides with the 20th anniversary of ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This timeframe is also geared toward possible Turkish-Armenian talks, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan’s possible bid for the presidency in 2014 and the impact of an estimated Azeri “oil peak” in 2014, although there will still be substantial gas reserves. While Azerbaijan is not ready for war, it is preparing for war, moving from bluff and bluster to real operations and possible renewed hostilities.

This problematic situation can be turned into an opening for diplomacy and negotiations. The emphasis must be on conflict resolution not just conflict management, which only delays addressing the core issues. In short, every effort must be made to enlarge the constituencies for peace — in Armenia and the diaspora, in Azerbaijan, in Turkey and in the international community.

Let me make clear that the period ahead is the time for diplomacy. And while there is now a window of opportunity, that window will not remain open for too long. The diaspora should strongly discourage the false idea that time is on Armenia’s side.

Looming large in the background of this overall situation is the strategic importance of Armenian-Turkish relations. Two major issues impede the establishment of these relations and

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historic reconciliation: the failure of reaching a negotiated agreement on the Nagorno-Karabagh issue, and the issue of the Armenian genocide, the first of the 20th century.

In my opinion the most pragmatic way to address the issue of the genocide is in the context of state-to-state relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey. What needs to be done is for all parties to engage in the process of reconciliation. Armenia cannot hope to achieve enduring peace and prosperity without full and normal diplomatic relations with Turkey. To its credit, the Armenian government has called for precisely that. I have been encouraged by Armenia's readiness to establish diplomatic relations with Turkey and opening the Turkish-Armenian border without preconditions. President Sarkissian's bold initiative with Turkish President Gul in 2009 in "soccer diplomacy" and their reciprocal visits were acts of statesmanship in an effort to explore a real improvement in bilateral relations.

This is not only in Armenia's interests but certainly also in Turkey's interests. The establishment of full and normal relations with Armenia can enhance significantly its international standing and foreign policy goals, e.g., with the EU. The Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and the Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey were signed on October 10, 2009. The protocols represented an unprecedented advancement in relations between Turkey and Armenia. However, failure to ratify them has been a significant bilateral, regional and international setback. Nevertheless, they remain a way forward and every effort must be made to revive the diplomatic process. We must encourage the next U.S. administration to take the lead in moving this process forward.

My friends, it is, as I said, the time for diplomacy and dialogue. Let us in the diaspora work to encourage the leaders in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey to take the path of statesmanship with the strong support of the international community and the Armenian diaspora. The stakes are too high — for Armenia, the other countries of the region, and, indeed, for the international community.

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We Armenians can never forget the past. To do so would be to deny ourselves. Our tragedies and triumphs, after all, are what have made us the people we are today. The Armenian genocide, in particular, casts a long shadow over our history. And it is only right that we mourn those who died, commemorate those who were displaced and seek acknowledgement of the horrors that befell them. Yet I believe that our first duty is to the future and, above all, to the youth of Armenia. We must do all we can to ensure that they enjoy lives of peace, not war; of abundance, not privation; of freedom, not oppression.

This is the challenge of historic reconciliation akin to what Nelson Mandela achieved in South Africa. Mandela is a hero of our time. We need leaders who can emulate him, not only in the Caucasus, but also in the Middle East and beyond.

Allow me to leave you with one thought and question, especially in this forum. What higher human rights can there be for Armenia but that its people enjoy domestic tranquility, prosperity and social justice, and live in peace and security with all its neighbors? That is the higher goal we should all be striving toward.

Thank you.