



Bring Them Home for Christmas: Open Letter to President Trump Urging Him to Secure the Release of Armenian Hostages in Azerbaijan

Released on 15 December 2025

As the Christmas holiday approaches, the Lemkin Institute strongly urges U.S. President Donald Trump to take measures to secure the immediate release of Armenian prisoners being held illegally by Azerbaijan. These hostages have been all but abandoned by the outside world, despite the fact that they are being held by a state that has fought three genocidal wars against Armenians in the past five years. Their release would constitute a major humanitarian and geopolitical victory for the President and would strengthen his efforts to secure long-term peace in the South Caucasus and the Middle East.

Azerbaijan is of significant interest to U.S. foreign policy. It is an important oil supplier that offers land access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia while also sharing a border with Iran. President Trump's recent joint peace declaration for the region, signed onto in principle by the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan in August, is aimed at guaranteeing U.S. access to these regions via an uninterrupted "corridor" that would connect Azerbaijan with its western enclave of Nakhchivan and Türkiye through Armenia's Syunik Province.

It is essential that Azerbaijan understand that this peace is being brokered from a position of American strength. The continued detention of Armenian hostages in Azerbaijan is a slap in the face of the U.S. and its President. For years Azerbaijan has expected a rubber stamp from the White House no matter how outrageous its conduct.

We remind the U.S. President that in the 2020 war that it launched against the Republic of Artsakh and Armenia, Azerbaijani soldiers videotaped themselves committing atrocities against Armenian Christians that they proudly shared on social media.

We further remind the U.S. President that the Administration of his predecessor, Joseph Biden, was complicit in Azerbaijan's 2023 genocide of Artsakh Armenians, which resulted in their total disappearance from an ancestral home on which they have lived for over 3000 years.

We ask the President to take steps to turn this situation around before it comes back to bite his Administration, the United States, the South Caucasus, and the Greater Middle East.

Azerbaijan has grown far too used to embarrassing the United States. In September 2023 the Biden Administration warned it not to engage in "ethnic cleansing" in Artsakh only to watch impotently a few days later as Azerbaijan did exactly that. For over a year after Azerbaijan's invasion and genocide, the Biden Administration was unable to bring about the hostages' release while speaking boldly about "human rights." We believe that the Biden Administration's failure was in large part due to the fact that the former President was not taken seriously by Azerbaijan or its more powerful allies, Israel and Türkiye, who all assumed U.S. passivity.

As President Trump seeks to project U.S. strength globally, a successful effort to release Armenian Christian hostages from Azerbaijan would establish his authority over not only Azerbaijan, but also Israel and Türkiye, two U.S. allies that have made a habit of wagging the dog, no matter how illegal, immoral, or contrary to long-term U.S. national security interests their policies are.

Since launching the 2020 war against the Republics of Armenia and Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) and the renewed offensive against Artsakh in 2023, Azerbaijan has taken and held several Armenians in violation of international law. The total number is unknown but is estimated to be around 80 people. The detained include POWs who were supposed to be returned after the November 2020 Ceasefire Agreement as well as civilians, including Ruben Vardanyan, former Artsakh State Minister and renowned international humanitarian, who became a global spokesperson for the rights of Artsakh Armenians before the genocide.

Armenian detainees are being held in terrible conditions and are being denied due process. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been forced to close its country office. Being the only international body allowed to keep contact and visit Armenian hostages, its expulsion from Azerbaijan signals a deterioration of the already precarious situation these prisoners find themselves in. U.S.-based Freedom House has reported that Armenian detainees are subject to beatings, humiliations, and other forms of torture. In March of this year the European Parliament adopted a resolution that condemned the "unlawful detention," "inhumane and degrading treatment," and "sham trials" of Armenian hostages and called for their release. Such reports should have received stronger responses by the European Union and the U.S., especially coupled with Aliyev's intention to ignore the

standards set by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which he boldly declared to the world earlier this year.

The Republic of Armenia, which is involved in its own domestic crisis as the state cracks down on the Armenian Apostolic Church, one of the oldest Christian churches in the world, has not made an honest effort to press for the release of the hostages because its current leadership is both intimidated by Azerbaijan and by the hostages themselves, particularly Ruben Vardanyan, whose considerable courage during Azerbaijan's blockade won him the respect of a large swath of the Armenian population – in Armenia and in the diaspora. The United States must not allow Armenia's current leadership to prevent it from taking steps to shore up its respect and standing in the region – and the rest of the world.

We believe that supporting and securing the return of all the Armenian hostages will underscore President Trump's stated mission of bringing peace to the region and will buttress U.S. strength from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. While President Trump has repeatedly emphasized his role in promoting stability and preventing further conflict, this mission remains weak as long as an unknown number of Armenian POWs continue to be held in Azerbaijan.

When President Trump walks out of Baku with every single Armenian being detained there, he will demonstrate with great clarity that he is calling the shots – not Azerbaijan, not Armenia, not Israel, not Turkey. The impact of such an image – President Trump freeing men who have endured so much in the name of preventing the genocide of their people – would be immediate and global. It would reaffirm President Trump's commitment to protecting Christians who have endured years of injustice and would serve as a powerful reminder that the President has both the influence and determination to deliver real, lasting peace and to bring difficult conflicts to a meaningful resolution.

We remind the President that he promised to protect Armenian Christians during his campaign.

Armenian Apostolic Christians celebrate Christmas on January 6. We urge the U.S. President to bring the hostages home to their families before then.