

## WRITTEN TESTIMONY

### ANDREA PRASOW

Good morning, Chairman Smith and members of this commission. Thank you for inviting me to testify. I would also like to offer my condolences to Chairman McGovern for his loss—his family is in our thoughts.

My name is Andrea Prasow and I am the executive director of Freedom Now, an organization dedicated to protecting individuals and communities from government repression. For many years, Freedom Now has worked to assist human rights defenders in Azerbaijan and sought freedom for political prisoners there. I had the honor of appearing before this commission in September when [I shared the testimony of Azerbaijani human rights activists](#) who so feared reprisals that they were unable to use their own names. At the time, those activists raised concerns regarding the deteriorating human rights situation in Azerbaijan, which included the detention of journalists and civil society representatives, the shuttering of independent news organizations and nongovernmental organizations, and the inhumane prison conditions that many detainees suffered. My previous testimony occurred just two months before Azerbaijan hosted the UN Climate Conference, COP29. We hoped that with the eyes of the world on them – coupled by robust pressure from other nations – the Azerbaijani authorities would use the opportunity of a global stage to address their human rights abuses and come into compliance with international obligations.

Azerbaijan was a troubling choice to host a global climate conference. The oil-rich country's economy and political stability depend heavily on fossil fuel production. Moreover, President Ilham Aliyev's authoritarian regime has a long history of political repression, media censorship, and crackdowns on civil society—practices that directly undermine the open, multistakeholder environment necessary to achieve COP's goals for climate action and environmental justice.

In September 2024, we therefore organized over 50 climate and human rights organizations to launch the [Demand Rights at COP campaign](#) to spotlight the regime's abuse of human rights and demand that Azerbaijan address these issues before and during the conference. We warned that if the United States and the rest of the international community did not take concrete steps to hold President Aliyev accountable to his international obligations, we would likely see a further escalation of an already dire human rights situation. Five months after COP29 ended, I am sorry to say that we were right.

The campaign worked to raise the public's and policymakers' awareness in the lead up to COP29, increase [visibility for political prisoners](#), and ensure that [media coverage](#) appropriately recognized that Azerbaijan's repressive policies were tied to the failure of COP29 to meet its climate goals. Policymakers in the EU, UK, and U.S. - including members of this Commission – publicly demanded the release of political prisoners. But ultimately none were freed and the Azerbaijani government further tightened restrictions on civil society participation at COP29. President Aliyev [brazenly defended](#) his energy policies and expressed hostility towards Europe, with [direct attacks on France and the Netherlands](#). His stance made clear that Azerbaijan's governance was not just out of step with the climate goals of COP29 but growing increasingly isolationist. If media reports are correct, Aliyev has recently [put himself forth as a mediator](#) in international conflicts, but his attitude towards the West has not changed; a speech this month condemning Western countries and international institutions' "interference" shows his attitude has hardened.

So, too, has his intention to eliminate any dissent and independent speech. Azerbaijani activists have documented over 350 political prisoners in the country as of April 2025. Alarming, this number has grown significantly since I last appeared before this commission seven months ago, with several of the arrests occurring after COP29 concluded. This includes:

- More than a dozen media workers affiliated with independent news outlets **Meydan TV** and **Toplum TV**;
- **Ulvi Tahirov**, the deputy director of the Baku School of Journalism;

- **Rufat Safarov**, a human rights defender and recipient of the U.S. Secretary of State's 2024 Human Rights Defender Award; and
- **Azer Gasimli**, the founder of a think tank dedicated to human rights education.

The government has also added aggravating charges and/or handed down lengthy sentences to several political prisoners who had been languishing behind bars for months and, in some cases, years. In January 2025 alone, courts handed down the following sentences:

- 10 years for pro-democracy activist **Bakhtiyar Hajiyev**, who was arrested in December 2022;
- 6.5 years for human rights activist **Rail Abbasov**, who was arrested in September 2023;
- 8 years for labor activist **Afiaddin Mammadov**, who was arrested in September 2023.

To be clear, these sentences were imposed for fabricated charges. But to hold up the veneer that its attacks are justified, the government has launched propaganda campaigns full of disinformation about some media outlets, NGOs, and even individuals it opposes. Recent actions by the Trump administration have handed the Aliyev regime new fodder by appearing to validate his claims that, for example, USAID was a corrupt agency. Civil society representatives have been called in for questioning about their association with USAID and last month, prominent human rights defender **Bashir Suleymanli** was arrested on the charges that he had obtained and disguised grant funds from USAID and other U.S. institutions through “criminal means” – a charge he denies.

For decades the U.S. supported – on a bipartisan basis – RFE/RL, an institution that provided independent news and helped to counter the Aliyev regime's propaganda and expose the government's human rights abuses and corruption. The decision to cut off funding to RFE/RL in the midst of Azerbaijan's crackdown on independent media leaves little opportunity for independent voices. The closure of Turan News Agency in February was the end of all local, independent media, which have either been forced to

close or flee. Those operating in exile – organizations that still play a critical role in reaching domestic Azerbaijani audiences – are also facing significant financial pressure as a result of U.S. foreign aid cuts.

Among the hundreds of political prisoners in Azerbaijan are **Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu**, a prominent academic, a critic of Azerbaijan's oil and gas industry, and an anti-corruption expert. He was detained for months and eventually released to house arrest shortly after it was reported that Congress was considering human rights sanctions against Azerbaijani officials – a reminder of the influence this body can have. As of last week, Dr. Ibadoghlu remains under house arrest and is unable to travel.

Also detained is **Farid Mehralizada**, an economist and journalist abducted in Baku in May 2024. He was first accused of “conspiring to smuggle foreign currency” in connection with the case against Abzas Media despite that outlet's assertion that Mehralizada had no direct involvement in Abzas. In August 2024, he was additionally charged with illegal entrepreneurship, money laundering, tax evasion, and document forgery. If convicted, he could face up to 12 years in prison.

The Aliyev regime's efforts to silence critics is also exemplified by the case of **Akif Gurbanov**, chair of the Institute of Democratic Initiatives (IDI) and spokesperson for the Third Republic Platform. He was blocked from registering IDI as an NGO and harassed for its work. In May 2021, the [European Court of Human Rights ruled](#) that Azerbaijan's Ministry of Justice had violated his and other organizations' freedom of association by refusing to register them for alleged administrative shortcomings. But in March 2024, following a police raid on IDI and related offices, Gurbanov and his team were arrested for allegedly smuggling foreign currency. Their pre-trial detention was repeatedly extended and they report facing threats from officials to cease criticizing President Aliyev. By January 2025, Gurbanov's indictment expanded to include charges of illegal entrepreneurship, money laundering, and tax evasion.

Also detained is **Tofiq Yagublu**, an opposition leader and longtime critic of Aliyev. He was arrested in December 2023 on fraud charges, which he and his family deny. During his trial he expressed fear for his life; he was convicted and sentenced to nine years in prison last month. In protest, he began a hunger strike on April 1 and is in critical condition. Yagublu has been detained by Azerbaijani authorities multiple times and sentenced in three different cases on politically motivated charges.

There are hundreds of others like them.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's repression does not stop at its own borders. In August 2023, economist **Fazil Gasimov** was arrested in Turkey and extradited to Azerbaijan for alleged connection with Ibadoghlu's case. He was sentenced to nine years in prison last month. Other reports of attacks on Aliyev's critics – including the fatal stabbing of Mahammad [Mirzali](#) in France, an attack on blogger in Germany, and threats sent to Tural [Sadigli](#) regarding his family members back in Azerbaijan – are suspected of ties to Aliyev's regime, though I note we do not have any independent evidence of this. Ironically, the incidence of transnational repression is relatively rare because many journalists and civil society activists can't seek refuge abroad, as the government has imposed travel bans on critics for allegedly having ties to pending criminal cases. In most cases, these individuals are unaware the travel bans exist until they attempt to leave the country, at which point they are arrested under the fabricated charges. This happened to **Iqbal Abilov**, a member of an Azerbaijani minority group and an academic visiting from Belarus for a wedding. He was not allowed to leave the country in June 2024 and weeks later was arrested on charges of treason. This widespread use of travel bans has effectively made Azerbaijan an open-air prison for many.

Unfortunately, Azerbaijan will continue its crackdown on civil society and abuse of human rights unless the U.S. and others take a stronger stance to counter these actions. We urge Congress and the administration to:

- **Use all public and private diplomatic opportunities to speak out** about the worsening situation for civil society and human rights in Azerbaijan – including the cases of individual political prisoners – and call on the government to correct course;
- **Condition certain areas of foreign assistance on measurable human rights improvements**, including the immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners;
- **Impose targeted sanctions, including travel and financial restrictions, against perpetrators of human rights abusers in the government.** Sanctions are an important tool at the United States' disposal. Both the U.S. President, under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and the Secretary of State have powers to impose targeted sanctions. Any potential reorganization of the State Department should ensure sanctions and other essential human rights tools can continued to be implemented.
- **Urge the Azerbaijani government to stop the use and/or threat of criminal prosecution as a tool to suppress critics and repeal or reform restrictive laws and regulations governing NGOs and their funding.** These repressive tactics have silenced free expression and effectively undercut civil society's ability to operate legitimately.
- **Allocate adequate funding to support independent media, lawyers, and human rights defenders both in Azerbaijan and in exile.** Providing access to emergency assistance and longer-term capacity building is critical to ensuring a robust and resilient civil society endures, carrying on the mission to create a free and democratic society in Azerbaijan.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear here today. I look forward to any questions.