

Azerbaijani Kleptocrats Have Been Getting Their Money's Worth in Washington for a Long Time

Texas Congressman Henry Cuellar's not the only lawmaker illicitly involved with the regime, he's just the one who (maybe) got caught.



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Azeri President Ilham Aliyev: His corrupt regime has benefited from an illicit lobbying campaign that has bought him many friends in Washington.

Casey Michel /
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Late last week, seemingly out of the blue, the FBI raided the Texas home of sitting Democratic Congressman Henry Cuellar. While the details of the raid and related subpoenas remain scant, all signs point to yet another story of how kleptocratic dictatorships access and influence American policymakers—with none of us any the wiser.

According to ABC News, the subpoena at the heart of the case targeting Cuellar centers on a range of Texas-based companies linked directly to his wife, Imelda Cuellar. Additionally, investigators sought records regarding “cultural advocacy organizations,” many of which are tied directly to the regime in Azerbaijan, as well as information about Azerbaijan’s national oil company and an American named Kemal Oksuz.

If the details gleaned thus far about the move against Cuellar seem to be strange, that’s completely understandable. After all, Azerbaijan—an oil-rich dictatorship dedicated to enriching its ruling elite and smothering any democratic progress—is hardly a country that those who reside in Cuellar’s district of Laredo should have any reason to have more than a passing familiarity with. But pull back a bit, and take a closer look through Cuellar’s recent record, and a different picture comes into focus.

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As reporting elsewhere has detailed, the regime in Azerbaijan has consistently stood at the center of scandal after scandal as it pertains to illicit lobbying campaigns—and not just in the United States. Last year, parliamentarians in Germany were forced to resign after secret payments they’d received from Azeri

officials came to light. Just a few years ago, allegations of illicit funding campaigns tied directly to Azerbaijan rocked the Council of Europe, leading to an unprecedented investigation into the country's "caviar diplomacy."

But it's here in the good old U.S. of A. that Azerbaijan has had the greatest success covertly influencing policy and policymakers, with both constituents and regulators caught unawares. For instance, in 2013 nearly a dozen sitting House representatives flew on an all-expenses-paid junket to Azerbaijan, where they met with Azeri dictator Ilham Aliyev and received everything from silk scarves to DVDs extolling the regime's supposed political foresight. It was, as one reporter recounted, "among the biggest concentrations of American political star power ever seen in the Caucasus."

According to paperwork filed at the time, the financing for the trip appeared to come from a pair of nonprofits that were purportedly working to strengthen links between the U.S. and Azerbaijan. But as investigators later discovered, those nonprofits were actually fronts for the regime in Baku to directly bankroll the American officials' trip and to whitewash the country's dictatorship in the process.

As the U.S. Office of Congressional Ethics later detailed, the secret funding was one of the most breathtaking ethics violations Washington had seen since Jack Abramoff. (Later asked about whether the nonprofits simply funneled Azeri government funds, one of the trip's organizers memorably sputtered, "I mean, to be honest, it seems ... like so, yes. I mean, we didn't accept it maybe, but yes we did. What can I say?") At the center of the scam stood Oksuz, who later pleaded guilty to attempting to oversee the financing scheme.

This is where Cuellar comes into the story. While the Texas representative didn't attend the superstar junket in 2013, The Intercept reported that he and his wife had flown to Azerbaijan a few months earlier in a parallel trip sponsored by one of the same sham nonprofits, splurging to the tune of nearly \$20,000. Not long later, Cuellar spearheaded an agreement between the Laredo-based Texas A&M International University and another of the fraudulent Azeri nonprofits, claiming it was merely an "educational and cultural organization." Along the way, as The Daily Beast found, Oksuz donated thousands to Cuellar's election campaigns—and Oksuz's son was later hired as Cuellar's intern.

Azerbaijan got its money's worth. Not only was Cuellar the co-chair of the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus, but he emerged as one of the dictatorship's key allies in Congress. Cuellar routinely defended the regime against external criticism, even claiming that Azerbaijan was a "strong ally of the United States." He raced to Azerbaijan's aid during the country's incursion into the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2020.

Despite the distance between Austin and Azerbaijan, it's not difficult to see why Baku targeted a figure like Cuellar. As *The New Republic's* Kate Aronoff details at length, oil was the name of the game. Cuellar admitted as much in 2013, claiming, "Here's something Azeris have in common with Texans: They are a rich, oil-producing nation." As with other American officials feted in Azerbaijan on the regime's dole, Cuellar routinely stumped for Azeri oil interests—helping the regime profit that much further.

Now Cuellar appears to be at the center of yet another illicit lobbying campaign linked back to the government in Azerbaijan—and another prong in Azerbaijan's years-long campaign of subterfuge in Washington. While there's still no formal allegation about either Cuellar or his wife, nor any indication Cuellar knew at the time that the supposed nonprofits financing his own travel were funnels for regime funds, at this point, there's enough smoke in the room to choke on it. (Cuellar's office says the congressman will cooperate fully with the investigation.)

But if and when more details of Cuellar's role in pushing pro-Azerbaijan policies in Washington comes to light, it will just be additional confirmation that the dictatorship in Azerbaijan has relied on a far broader playbook than diplomacy alone—and that the avenues for influencing Congress are far wider than official meetings. This is a government that's stood at the center of covert lobbying campaigns targeting American media and clandestine relationships with American academics who pushed pro-regime messaging in Washington. This is a regime that has shown, time and again, just how porous supposed oversight remains—and how wide-open American officials remain for regimes willing to foot the bill.

One question, then, remains: Will the case targeting Cuellar change anything moving forward? Given the geopolitical upheavals in the region, Azerbaijan

likely doesn't have much to worry about regarding its links in Washington. This is a crying shame: Azerbaijan is one of the purest examples of a kleptocratic dictatorship on this planet; Baku and its paid-off agents have shown, time and again, that lobbying regulations (and calls for things like basic democratic protections) are mere suggestions, meant to be ignored if pockets are deep enough. Even if Cuellar falls, Azerbaijan still has other friends willing to whitewash its regime.

Then again, American officials have in recent years shown unprecedented willingness to target these subterranean influence networks. And there's hardly reason to think Cuellar would be the last tendril of Azerbaijan's broader campaigns. At a certain point, something will have to break. And whether Azerbaijan will be able to find enough paid-off agents to repair that breach will be anyone's guess.

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