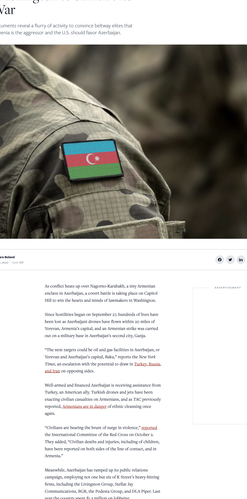
How Azerbaijan is Lobbying Washington to Sanitize its War

Documents reveal a flurry of activity to convince beltway elites that Armenia is the aggressor and the U.S. should favor Azerbaijan.



Barbara Boland
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As conflict heats up over Nagorno-Karabakh, a tiny Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan, a covert battle is taking place on Capitol Hill to win the hearts and minds of lawmakers in Washington.

Since hostilities began on September 27, hundreds of lives have been lost as Azerbaijan drones have flown within 20 miles of Yerevan, Armenia's capital, and an Armenian strike was carried out on a military base in Azerbaijan's second city, Ganja.

"The next targets could be oil and gas facilities in Azerbaijan, or Yerevan and Azerbaijan's capital, Baku," reports the New York Times, an escalation with the potential to draw in Turkey, Russia and Iran on opposing sides.

Well-armed and financed Azerbaijan is receiving assistance from Turkey, an American ally. Turkish drones and jets have been exacting civilian casualties on Armenians, and as TAC previously reported, Armenians are in danger of ethnic cleansing once again.

"Civilians are bearing the brunt of surge in violence," reported the International Committee of the Red Cross on October 5. They added, "Civilian deaths and injuries, including of children, have been reported on both sides of the line of contact, and in Armenia."

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has ramped up its public relations campaign, employing not one but six of K Street's heavy-hitting firms, including the Livingston Group, Stellar Jay Communications, BGR, the Podesta Group, and DLA Piper. Last year the country spent $1.3 million on lobbying.

Armenia traditionally lobbies through American community groups, and has just one firm working for them, Akeson and Bird. The contract was signed September 16, so it's unclear how much money they will spend petitioning Washington this year, but documents reveal they haven't spent any money lobbying since 2018.

Azerbaijan, on the other hand, lobbies in much the same manner as a Gulf State—though with considerably less resources—and has a long history of expensive lobbying efforts.

In an attempt "to whitewash its dictatorial image...the autocratic government of Ilham Aliyev has unleashed spin-doctors, doped reporters, and hid one of the most brazen pushes to abuse American lobbying loopholes of any foreign government," wrote Casey Michel in 2018.

For years, lobbyists on the dime of Azerbaijan have met with universities, think tanks, and members of Congress. They've arranged the placement of favorable op-eds in outlets like The Hill, the Washington Times, the Daily Caller, National Review, the Washington Post, and the New York Times. These articles were initially published without disclosing the authors' financial ties to Azerbaijan.

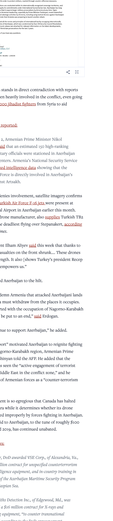
While oil-rich Azerbaijan's lobbying slowed after 2016 due to the collapse of its currency, Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) documents reveal a flurry of recent activity aimed at convincing Washington elites that Armenia is the aggressor and that the U.S. should favor Azerbaijan in the conflict.

When American lobbying and public relations firms are hired by foreign countries, they are legally required to register their clients with the Justice Department under FARA. They are also required to provide a list of the activities they undertaken on behalf of the foreign country.

Azerbaijan's hired K Street guns are distributing what are euphemistically referred to in FARA documents as "informational materials." These materials could be more accurately described as propaganda. The documents distributed on Capitol Hill highlight Armenia's "provocative actions," its "illegal" role in the conflict, that Armenia allegedly "kills Azerbaijan civilians, including children," and how "Armenia's leaders have been actively undermining the ongoing peace process."

The documents lobbyists distribute on Capitol Hill make some bombastic claims: that "Armenia has long been involved with Middle Eastern terrorism," that "Azerbaijan has been consistent in urging substantive and result-oriented negotiations in order to achieve a breakthrough in the conflict," and that "Turkey is not directly involved and is not a party to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict."

FARA Informational Materials, 10/2/2020, by Barbara Boland · on Scribd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