
Azerbaijan Gains Little from Hiring Expensive US Lobbying Firms

By Harut Sassounian

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The government of Azerbaijan, using its considerable oil income, has been waging a propaganda campaign to win over U.S. politicians and denigrate Armenia and Artsakh (Karabagh).

To accomplish these twin objectives, Azerbaijan has spent millions of dollars over the past three years to hire several major lobbying firms, such as the Livingston Group; JWI; Chlopak, Leonard, Schechter & Associates; and Melwood Communications. In addition, the consulate general of Azerbaijan in Los Angeles hired Sitrick & Company over a year ago and later replaced it with the Tool Shed Group, founded by Jason Katz, the former director of public affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

While Azerbaijan's embassy, with the support of its lobbying groups, has been targeting top U.S. officials in Washington, D.C., its consulate in Los Angeles has been more interested in countering the political influence of California's large Armenian community. Fortunately, neither the embassy nor the consulate has had much success.

Recently, the embassy of Azerbaijan tried to get Members of Congress to go on record condemning Armenia for the alleged killings of hundreds of Azeris in 1992 during the Artsakh war. Despite concerted efforts by its high-powered lobbying firms, Azerbaijan succeeded in convincing just 1 out of 535 members of the House and Senate to do so. Congressman Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.), the co-chair of the Congressional caucus on Turkey, was the only member of Congress who made remarks about this highly controversial incident.

Azerbaijan was even less successful in California, despite its heavy investment of time, money, and manpower. Back in 2005, Azeri President Ilham Aliyev appointed Elin Suleymanov, a graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, as Azerbaijan's first consul general to Los Angeles. Suleymanov told the Azeri Press Agency that one of his key assignments was to counteract the political clout of California's Armenian community. He promptly wrote a letter to the owners of a theater in Los Angeles, requesting the cancellation of an Artsakh-related event organized by a local Armenian group. The diplomat's complaint was summarily dismissed and the event took place as scheduled.

Suleymanov's failure cannot be attributed to his lack of enthusiasm and energy. He has actively tried to promote Azerbaijan's interests, while missing no opportunity to belittle Armenia and Artsakh. The lobbying firms hired by his government have arranged for him to tour Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Michigan, Oregon, Wyoming, and parts of California to deliver speeches to university students, greet local politicians, and have guest editorials published under his name in obscure newspapers.

Suleymanov even visited the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana and claimed that there are racial similarities between Azerbaijanis and Native Americans. A student at the University of Montana quoted Suleymanov as stating that Native Americans actually originated from the region of Azerbaijan and that is why the consul general "felt a certain kinship for tribal people of the U.S., like brothers or cousins."

A major accomplishment of Azerbaijan's lobbying firms was arranging the visit of four California legislators to Baku in September 2007. Reciprocally, several members of Azerbaijan's parliament and a minister have visited California more than once in the past three years.

Nevertheless, despite Azerbaijan's intensive lobbying of California legislators, only 1 out of 120 members of the State Assembly and Senate agreed to send a letter to President Aliyev in February 2009 expressing sympathy for "the victims of Khojali." This letter, signed by assemblyman Felipe Fuentes, was copied from a draft provided by lobbyist Jason Katz. It was noteworthy that Katz had raised the possibility of sending friendly legislators on junkets to Azerbaijan.

California state assemblyman Paul Krekorian (D-Glendale) worked to prevent other legislators from signing the Azerbaijani letter by alerting his colleagues about the falsehoods contained in it. The lone letter signed by Fuentes was hailed by Suleymanov as a major victory for Azerbaijan. The Azeri media disseminated that letter worldwide, misrepresenting it as a condemnation of an alleged "genocide" committed by Armenians!

The government of Azerbaijan and its representatives in the United States do not seem to realize that it is not in their best interest to denigrate and provoke the influential Armenian community in California. It was no mere accident that Suleymanov's recent appearance at California State University at Northridge was greeted with a student protest.

Should Azerbaijan's consul general and his hired guns continue to disseminate falsehoods about Armenia and Artsakh in the western U.S., Armenian Americans could neutralize the propaganda by establishing a public affairs office for Artsakh in LA, as a branch of the one now operating in Washington, D.C.
