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A Hanukkah Freedom Party With Human Rights Violators

By Jared Genser

On December 14th, the Embassy of Azerbaijan will co-host a Hanukkah party at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, DC, with the Conference of President of Major American Jewish Organizations. This celebration of “religious freedom and diversity” is another transparent attempt by Azerbaijan to portray itself as a stable, Western-facing democracy, an image designed to direct public attention away from its repeated human rights abuses and systemic corruption. Not only has the Azerbaijani government repeatedly imprisoned its critics and opponents, it has accelerated its repressive tactics over the past few months by placing greater restrictions on freedom of expression and religion.

The government’s full-scale attack on civil society can be traced back to 2011, but was renewed with vigor this past summer prior to a referendum which granted President Ilham Aliyev unprecedented powers, including the ability to dissolve parliament and call early elections, and extended his term in office. Numerous journalists and activists were arrested prior to the vote, adding to the more than 100 prisoners of conscience in the country. Dissent was further stifled two weeks ago when parliament approved a law outlawing defamation of President Aliyev; violators face up to two years in prison.

Azerbaijan promotes itself as a peaceful secular Muslim nation, an ally of Israel and the West. However, religious freedom is tightly controlled by the government. All religious groups in the country are required to register with central agency and report on their activities. Groups which do not comply are declared illegal and their members are subject to imprisonment. Activists who protest the government’s religion policy are often arrested and given lengthy prison terms based on false charges. Azerbaijan’s lack of respect for religious freedom has prompted the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to categorize Azerbaijan as a Tier 2 country, indicating serious violations. Other countries in this category include Afghanistan, Cuba, Russia, and Turkey.

Although Azerbaijan has shown a willingness to improve its human rights situation, as signaled by the release of more than a dozen prisoners of conscience earlier this year, it must do more. Given that the country's economy is in a vulnerable position at the moment, due to plummeting oil prices and lavish spending on events such as the European Olympic Games, it is understandable it craves global support.

However, the international community cannot ignore Azerbaijan's egregious violations of human rights. Hanukkah is the story of good triumphing over evil and the rededication of the Holy Temple. If Jewish leaders attend this celebration, they should take the opportunity to perform the *mitzvah rabah* of *pidyon shivuyim* (redemption of captives) and urge Ambassador Elin Suleymanov to have his government release dissidents like opposition leader Ilgar Mammadov, who is serving a seven-year sentence for his non-violent protests.

Jared Genser is founder of Freedom Now and a recipient of the Charles Bronfman Prize.