



Embassy of the United States of America

Office of Public Affairs

Baku, Azerbaijan

83, Azadlıq Prospekti

Phone: +(99412) 498 03 35

AZ1007 Bakı, Azərbaycan

Fax: +(99412) 498 93 12

URL: <http://azerbaijan.usembassy.gov/>

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Statement by Ambassador Morningstar on the Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Since my arrival in Baku as Ambassador, I have made an effort to become more familiar with this wonderful country, its people and history. Most recently, I traveled to Nakhchivan, and I have also made visits to Lenkoran, Sheki, Oguz, Quba and Lahij. It has been an opportunity to see this country's diverse cultural heritage up close, an experience that I think is important for anyone coming to live and work in Azerbaijan.

The history of the region is a difficult one. The Nagorno Karabakh conflict resulted in thousands of deaths and severely altered the physical landscape of the region, including sites of historical, religious and cultural significance.

When I was in Nakhchivan, I discussed at length with local authorities one such site in Julfa, where, according to evidence from credible sources, an ancient Armenian cemetery was desecrated or destroyed. I regret that the authorities, citing security reasons, made it impossible for me to visit the site and personally see what is there.

The preservation of the region's heritage is essential for a peaceful future. Too many monuments have already been damaged or destroyed throughout the region as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

I am nevertheless heartened by stories of efforts to protect each country's heritage. Today in Baku, for example, I visited the Armenian Cathedral of St. Gregory the Illuminator, where I learned about the church's history and the preservation of books and manuscripts in the Armenian language. There is also the story of the former Armenian village of Kerkenj and Azerbaijani village of Dzuynashogh whose communities swapped land and agreed to look after the other's sites, including cemeteries. The United States supports efforts in Azerbaijan and Armenia to protect the historical archives of each other's communities in their countries. For example, next week Armenian and Azerbaijani archivists will be in the United States on a joint program to learn more about preservation of cultural artifacts. These types of efforts deserve recognition and we will do our best to support any such efforts in the future.

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