



FREEDOM NOW

***Freedom Now To Protest Hanukkah Party Co-Hosted by Embassy of Azerbaijan and Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations***

Washington, DC — On Wednesday December 14th, Freedom Now and other human rights organizations will gather in front of the Trump International Hotel at 11th & Pennsylvania Avenues from 3:30-4:30 pm to highlight the continued repression of civil society and independent voices in Azerbaijan. The organizations assemble on the occasion of a Hanukkah party co-hosted by the Embassy of Azerbaijan and Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations to celebrate “religious freedom and diversity.”

“We strongly condemn Azerbaijan’s egregious violations of human rights,” said Freedom Now founder Jared Genser. “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 (great deed) of pidyon shivuyim (redemption of captives) and urge Ambassador Elin Suleymanov to have his government release its political prisoners.” Earlier this week, Genser had an oped in *The Forward* entitled “A Hanukkah Freedom Party With Human Rights Violators” about this event.

Azerbaijan’s full-scale assault on civil society can be traced back to 2011, but was renewed with vigor this past summer prior to a referendum which extended President Ilham Aliyev’s term in office and granted him unprecedented powers, including the ability to dissolve parliament and call early elections. Numerous journalists and activists were arrested prior to the vote. Dissent was further stifled two weeks ago when parliament approved a law outlawing online defamation of President Aliyev.

Religious freedom is tightly controlled by the Azerbaijani government. All religious groups in the country are required to register with a 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 it as a Tier 2 country, indicating serious violations. Other countries in this category include Afghanistan, Cuba, Russia, and Turkey.

More than 150 prisoners of conscience remain in jail in Azerbaijan, including lawyer Ilgar Mammadov, serving a seven year prison sentence related to a blog post he published criticizing the government, and youth activist Bayram Mammadov, sentenced last week to 10 years in prison on fabricated drug charges. For more information on Freedom Now’s work on Azerbaijan, please visit our website: <http://www.freedom-now.org/>

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*Our mission is to free prisoners of conscience through focused legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts.*