

**Ranking Member Gregory W. Meeks  
Opening remarks**

**Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia hearing  
“Iranian Influence in the South Caucasus and the Surrounding Region”**

**December 5, 2012**

Thank you Chairman Burton, for holding this hearing, which I am sad to say is likely your last on this committee, after almost three decades of service in the House of Representatives. Mr. Chairman, it has been an honor to serve on this subcommittee with you, and I hope that you will continue to prosper and enjoy life with your wonderful wife and your family.

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We are dealing with an important question today, as the South Caucasus region represents a complex web of both regional alliances and conflicts, bitter rivalries, varying degrees of western orientation, disparate economic trajectories and a potential venue for instability or even violence.

In terms of viewing the South Caucasus region from the perspective of this subcommittee, it is important to note that some of our strongest instruments, the Euro-Atlantic institutions of NATO and the European Union, have a weak presence in this region, and therefore are not as influential as they are in the Balkans, for instance. Ultimately, this means that Europe and the United States have less leverage in the region.

This allows other countries in the region to compete for political, economic and military influence. I believe that Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia represent trustworthy allies of the United States, but I realize full well that their bilateral relationships are complicated, and that they all have to take their immediate neighborhood into account.

With only two open borders, and one of them being with Iran, Armenia faces the constant threat of isolation, and this is a core driver in managing Armenia’s relationship with Iran.

Azerbaijan has a sizeable Diaspora in northern Iran, but a vastly different strategic, social and political orientation than Iran’s leadership. Despite a potential religious kinship between Iran and Azerbaijan, Iran has historically sided with Armenia over the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore, Azerbaijan enjoys a solid relationship with Israel, which further distances Baku and Tehran from one another.

Georgia has the strongest western orientation in the region, and my sense is that this will remain intact even after their change of government. But like any other country, Georgia is seeking economic opportunities everywhere, including potential trade or investment relations with Iran.

I believe there is a potential for Iran to exploit the complicated relationships between each of these countries, and that others in the region have interests that compete or overlap with Iran. Simultaneously, each of the South Caucasus nations play an important role in western relations with Iran, particularly their ability to comply with international sanctions, and I think it is important for US policy towards the region to find ways to facilitate and strengthen this compliance.

Russia appears to want to limit both the influence of the United States and Turkey in the South Caucasus, so I am curious to hear our panel's views on how Russia and Iran manage their relationship in the region.

I have followed with great interest Turkey's attempts to normalize relations with Armenia, and my sense is that such a step holds the greatest potential to improve both stability and prosperity in the region. Lifting Armenia's isolation would not only allow Yerevan greater independence from Iranian and Russian influence, it would also be mutually beneficial for Turkey and Armenia in a number of ways. I am interested in hearing the panel's perspectives on whether this is an issue the Turkish and Armenian governments might be able to re-engage on.

What we can all agree on, is that it is in no one's interest to see a nuclear armed Iran, and I look forward to exploring how the South Caucasus region can help the United States and Europe to prevent this outcome.

Thank you, I yield back.