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**THE IMPORTANCE  
OF EVANGELISTS FOR  
TRUMP, AZERBAIJAN AND  
ARMENIAN**

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EVANGELISTS FOR TRUMP, AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA

Much can be said about the American Heartland and the influence that it has held on the soul of the United States for an enduring period of time. It can be said that the conservative, Christian sector of the US has been a very important counterweight to the more liberal tendencies on the coasts of the country. It has played heavily into the “blue state, red state” divide and expectedly given the US a more conservative character than some of the other Western nations of the modern day. Evangelical Christian community constitutes an important and weighty part of this conservative Christian sector. Evangelical Christianity is one of the Protestant confessions that gained its name from their pursuit of the implementation of the Scripture. Evangelical community makes up a significant portion of the US population. According to the 2014 survey of Pew research center the Evangelical percentage of the population is [25.4%](#) (about 81 million people). [The states](#) with most evangelical population are Texas (6.5 million), California (3.5 million), Florida (3million) etc. Although the influence of the white evangelicals has been less visible, it has a significant impact on political decisions. More importantly though, this conservative heartland of the US has held crucial levers of influence in Washington DC. Even going back as recently as the 2016 Presidential Election, the role that the evangelical community played for Trump’s victory was crucial, where the white evangelical support for Trump even [exceeded](#) ([81%](#)) that of born-again George W. Bush.

In turn, President Trump has made good to please this powerful base by appointing conservative judges and making sure his social policy is in line with that of this conservative segment. Trump has assembled nearly a theocratic administration most of whom are against church-state separation. One of Trump’s evangelical ambassadors is the Vice-president [Mike Pence](#)- a former Catholic Democrat who became Evangelical Republican, while in college. Another important Evangelical in today’s administration is the Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) who, together with Pence, cites evangelical theology as a powerful motivating force. While the influence of the evangelical base on conservative thought and domestic US politics is well expected, what has been another muscle of this group is their influence on not only domestic policy but also on foreign policy.

The main avenue of that foreign policy has been the US support for Israel. The support that the US conservative, Christian base has shown for Israel has been unparalleled and has been one could say the biggest asset for the State of Israel. For them, support for Israel comes straight from scripture and God’s blessing on them and on the United States is irrevocably connected with how the United States supports and “blesses” Israel. For these deeply faithful people, this is not just any other foreign policy matter, but a matter of following God’s will that can have eternal consequences for their souls. The tangible insight of their affection to Israel and Jews lies within

the Holy Land-Jerusalem. The latter is considered to be the "[touchstone of prophecy](#)". That prophecy implies the return of Jesus Christ and the beginning of the Rapture- the end times. According to the Life Way poll, 80% of evangelicals believe that the creation of Israel in 1948 would result in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy of Christ's return. Pat Robertson, one of the most famous fundamentalist evangelicals, [once said](#) after the former Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's debilitating stroke that "it was God's punishment for withdrawing from Gaza". This statement is just a testament of how deep the support and loyalty for Israel's interests this base has taken, going often even more extreme than mainstream Israelis and not even comparable to most American Jews who very often have had much more liberal views. In order to keep the high level of Evangelical support Trump undertakes pro-Israel policy. The result of this political line became the [recognition](#) of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the [recognition](#) of Israel sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights and the appointment of his son-in-law Jared Kushner (Jew by nationality) as his [senior adviser](#). These steps result in the [near abolishment](#) of the two-state solution.

## AZERBAIJANI ACTIVITIES

One must understand and appreciate this deep connection before we can realize the implications. The Azerbaijani lobby has been on a never-ending path of development in the US, as it has understood the importance of knowing the right people in the right places in order to influence American policy. Of course, such efforts require significant financial investment, which Azerbaijan has easily provided, which contrasts with the more grassroots lobbying efforts of the Armenian-American community mainly organized by the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) and Armenian Assembly of America (AAA). Azerbaijan has taken more interesting paths in its lobbying in recent years. Namely, forging close ties with the American Jewish communities in many directions. From cooperating actively with synagogues, to publishing pro-Azerbaijani articles in American Jewish media, to bringing groups of American Jewish dignitaries and religious figures to visit Azerbaijan, and to selling Azerbaijan as a "tolerant" and pro-Israeli state that needs the support of American Jews. Of course, the PR efforts have made a big point about Azerbaijan's Mountain Jew community and how well they are protected in the majority Muslim country. Overall, there are about [11000 Jews](#) residing mainly in Baku, Sumqayit, Oguz and the Krasnaya Sloboda, plus 5000 Ashkenazi Jews living mostly in Baku. The inroads with the Jewish community has been an active effort to forge close working ties with a very powerful pro-Israeli lobby in the US (Ilham Aliyev's [meetings](#) with the representatives of American Jewish organizations in New York) and in all be seen as a close friend of Israel as opposed to Armenia. Azerbaijan in this respect has quickly understood what levers of power can create significant influence in the US foreign policy establishment.

The outreach has been deep and piercing. There are a whole host of writers many of them connected with the Jewish community that on regular occasion write staunchly pro-Azerbaijan

articles in different publications, such as the [Jerusalem Post](#). Many of their writings also squarely aim against Armenia and often paint Armenia in a rather negative manner, not only as an “aggressor” and “enemy” against Azerbaijan, but also as a country that is hostile against the interests of Israel and the Jewish people. This PR campaign by Azerbaijan and their efforts to establish and maintain strong bilateral relations with Israel, more specifically, [high-level meetings](#), economic cooperation with considerable trade turnover of about [1.3 billion dollars](#), not to mention the arms sales to Azerbaijan (about [5 billion](#)), is very organized and purposeful. While the Israeli angle of Azerbaijan’s lobbying and PR efforts is by now well known, another more alarming and interesting avenue has been opened by the Azeris and that is the US evangelical community, the natural ally of the pro-Israeli direction. By imaging itself as a “model tolerant nation” and close ally of Israel, Azerbaijan uses this image to court the very powerful Evangelical community of the US. The so-called [policy of “Tolerance”](#) has become a part of a national strategy starting from the second presidential term of Heydar Aliyev. Since then the concept of tolerance gained a strong legal base (Article 48 of the Constitution, the Law “On religious freedom”). To make this imitation of tolerance more real they have even put forward the motto “from the tolerant country to the tolerant world”, despite their strong anti-Armenian propaganda in all possible platforms. The great tolerance towards Azerbaijan’s very small Jewish community was showcased to great proportions to this group in order to gain the awe and respect of the US evangelicals. The image of Azerbaijan as a unique, tolerant Muslim nation that stands with Israel was the main slogan to entice this group. One recent and notable culmination of such courting was the [visit of prominent US evangelicals](#) lead by New York based Rabbi Marc Schneier to Azerbaijan in March 2019. The news about this visit was [prominently published](#) in CBN News, a popular conservative evangelical religious television network in the US, under the title “Muslim Majority Azerbaijan Opens its Arms to Evangelical Leaders in the Name of Tolerance”. It should be noted that the founder of CBN News is the famous televangelist Pat Robertson. Making inroads with such a prominent network for this segment of US Christians is a very important development in the Azeri PR campaign.

Armenia and the Armenian community in the US need to realize both the danger and the irony of this new direction. Azerbaijan, out of all the countries, establishing closer relationships and lobbying opportunities with a conservative, Christian segment of the US population to use it against Armenia, the first Christian nation, which stands much smaller and vulnerable, surrounded by unfriendly countries. While the Armenian lobby in the US has focused on concentrated grassroots efforts, working with respective Representatives to push forward influence for a more pro-Armenian agenda, these latest lobbying efforts by Azerbaijan aim to cut through all of that and activate a much bigger lobbying force. The lack of a large and established Azeri community in the US has meant that Azerbaijan has had to adopt a more “top-down”

approach when it comes to lobbying. While indeed they have made efforts to also activate the Azerbaijan-American community through organizations such as the Azerbaijan American Alliance and through the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus, making inroads with the Jewish and the Evangelical communities has given and will continue to give Azeri lobbying more power, not to mention the professional lobby groups working on behalf of Azerbaijan that it is able to afford. Yet another real support for Azerbaijan comes from Turkish lobby, which is undeniably still powerful in Washington DC these days. The sophisticated PR that Azerbaijan has been able to employ in order to present itself as a model, tolerant nation to all religious groups should be seen as the epitome of hypocrisy. While the grassroots Armenian lobbying efforts through formidable organizations like the ANCA or AAA need to be continuously reinforced, there is a need to be a dynamic upgrade and reaction to the lobbying efforts that the foes of Armenia are taking. This should not only come from Armenian-American organizations but also from the Government of Armenia itself, which definitely realizes how crucial such lobbying levers in one of the most powerful countries in the world are. Effective lobbying in the US can bring forth concrete results and changes, as opposed to many other countries in the world; the professional lobbying efforts play a key role in bringing change in US foreign policy. Thus, investment from governments, like Azerbaijan has done, can go a long way to bring about more favorable policies from the biggest economy and military power in the world. This new avenue that has been opened by Azerbaijan to intensify relations with the US evangelical segment is something that needs to ring alarms in Yerevan. The Government of Armenia needs to be proactive in making sure this powerful community is not turned into an ally of Azerbaijan, as the repercussions for US policy in the region could be quite dire. Armenia, as the first nation that adopted Christianity and a nation, which has such a rich Christian heritage, for which so much blood has been spilled to protect, already has the PR naturally set to showcase to this community. Besides, Armenia has a significant potential to deepen the relations both with Israel and Evangelicals in the US. Particularly, Armenian Apostolic Church is also in charge of major Christian holy sites with the 12<sup>th</sup> century ST. James Cathedral being the heart of the Armenian community in Jerusalem. Armenian community in Israel consists of 11.000 Armenians, however Armenia does not have a resident ambassador in Israel. This issue deserves to be among the top priorities of Armenian foreign policy agenda. Strong ties with Israel together with the Armenian Evangelists in the USA (the Armenian Evangelical Church in New York founded in 1896 is the oldest Armenian institution in New York) will provide Armenia with a network to the GOP, with whom Armenians have traditionally looser ties than with Democrats. What is remaining is adopting a concentrated effort to build ties and open up to the Christian heartland of the US, which can be advanced both at a grassroots level but also in part at a Government level given the paramount importance of this relationship.

***This analysis is a result of cooperation between “LUYS” foundation and “Armenian Center for American Studies” NGO.***