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OPINION

A Thuggish Regime Challenges the U.S.

Azerbaijan's attack on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is one more sign of trouble. Will the White House respond?

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In a Dec. 18 interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, State Department Assistant Secretary Tom Malinowski warned the government of Azerbaijan that its “crackdown on civil society” risked damaging relations with the U.S. Eight days later, prosecutors and police in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku raided the office of RFE/RL, known as Radio Azadliq in Azerbaijani. Authorities detained and questioned employees, seized equipment and files, and sealed off the premises. This is a direct challenge to the U.S., and the Obama administration should impose consequences on President Ilham Aliyev’s regime.

The Dec. 26 raid on RFE/RL, a congressionally funded news organization that reaches countries in the former Soviet Union and beyond, is the latest instance of Azerbaijan’s nasty campaign against journalists, opposition figures and activists—and increasingly against the U.S. In recent weeks Khadija Ismayilova, an intrepid journalist and contributor to Radio Azadliq, has been detained on spurious allegations: A man accused her of urging him to commit suicide, and she faces charges in a separate case for her reporting on blackmailing by the Azerbaijani secret services. A representative for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) called Ms. Ismayilova’s arrest “nothing but orchestrated intimidation.”



The President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev *AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES*

Azerbaijan has twice as many political prisoners as Russia and Belarus combined, and those two aren’t paragons of democracy. Among the most egregious cases are the July 30 arrests of activists Leyla and Arif Yunus; Ms. Yunus’s health is deteriorating rapidly, as she has been denied medical treatment for diabetes, high blood pressure and hepatitis. Her family says that Ms. Yunus’s weight has dropped from 150 pounds to 90.

While visiting a rights organization on Aug. 20, journalist Ilgar Nasibov was beaten unconscious by unknown assailants. Several leading opposition figures—including Ilgar Mamedov of the movement Republican Alternative and Tofiq Yakublu of Musavat—languish in prison on unsubstantiated charges. None of these political prisoners was part of an annual amnesty that President Aliyev issued last week.

The offices of several American and international nongovernmental organizations have been forced to close under enormous pressure from the Azerbaijani government, including IREX, the National Democratic Institute and Transparency International.

Last month, Ramiz Mehdiyev, the president's chief of staff, issued a virulently anti-American screed. He described Radio Azadliq as airing "anti-Azerbaijani programs distributing delusional statements." Mr. Mehdiyev also attacked the jailed Ms. Ismayilova, claiming that her "antistate" actions intended to "blacken" the image of the Azerbaijani government.

The Council of Europe's human-rights chief, Nils Muiznieks, has slammed the Azerbaijani government for what he's called "totally unacceptable" human-rights abuses. Several U.N. human-rights envoys in an August joint statement condemned the "criminalization of rights activists."

In response to the raid on Radio Azadliq, the American ambassador to the OSCE, Daniel Baer, tweeted that the raid is consistent with "behavior of weak, insecure corrupt governments and leaders." The U.S. Embassy in Baku issued a bland statement expressing "concern" over the closing of the RFE/RL bureau, a weak sentiment echoed by the State Department in Washington. A week later, the U.S. Embassy in Baku elevated its reaction to "alarmed."

President Aliyev's deputy chief of staff, Novruz Mammadov, responded angrily on Twitter to Mr. Baer's criticism, denouncing the U.S. as the "true birthplace of violence, and corruption."

Why does the Aliyev regime think it can get away with its abuses? Because so far it has. The Obama administration should put President Aliyev on notice by taking two significant steps.

First, authorities in Baku responsible for gross human-rights abuses should be denied visas to the U.S. and their financial assets should be frozen, as the U.S. has done with Russian officials under the 2012 Magnitsky Act. President Obama has the authority to deny visas thanks to an August 2011 presidential proclamation that bars entry to "persons who participate in serious human rights abuses." Officials in Baku certainly qualify, and Azerbaijani activists support the idea.

Second, the U.S. should call for political leaders to boycott the inaugural European Olympic Games, which the Aliyev regime will host in June. Mr. Aliyev [said](#) in a December 2012 statement that hosting the games is a "great historic event, a tremendous success."

The U.S. doesn't participate in the games, but encouraging European leaders to skip the ceremonies—as most did with Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#)'s Sochi Olympics in 2014—could deprive Mr. Aliyev of his moment of glory. Similarly, the corporate sponsors of the games, including BP, [Procter & Gamble](#) and [McDonald's](#), should think twice about supporting the Aliyev regime's pet project. Amid a crackdown against journalists and civil society inside the country and attacks against the U.S., now is not the time for business as usual with Azerbaijan.

Sandwiched between Russia and Iran, and linking the Caucasus and Central Asia to Europe and world markets, Azerbaijan is strategically important on energy and security. But as long as the Aliyev regime so badly mistreats its own people and defies the U.S., it should be made to understand that its actions come with a price.

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Corrections & Amplifications

An earlier version mistakenly included Oxfam among the nongovernmental organizations that had been forced to close.