



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: AZERBAIJAN

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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State Control of Religion in Azerbaijan



Overview

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has included Azerbaijan in its congressionally mandated Annual Report every year since 2013. In May 2023, USCIRF *recommended* yet again that the U.S. Department of State include Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List (SWL) in light of the government's severe violations of religious freedom. When the State Department in November 2022 *made* its designations pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, it declined to designate Azerbaijan.

Although Azerbaijan has in recent years *ceased* some problematic practices regarding state interference in its people's practice of their religion or beliefs, the government has shown little interest in reforming laws and policies that violate Azerbaijan's international human rights commitments. Within the last three years, the government has twice amended its religion law to introduce new restrictions on a variety of



religious activities. Officials have likewise devoted significant effort to *promoting* a narrative of “religious tolerance” that *showcases* the generally positive societal relations among religious groups considered “traditional” to Azerbaijan while obscuring the state’s responsibility and failure to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief for everyone. Moreover, some officials have disconcertingly *suggested* that Azerbaijan’s structure of pervasive state control of religion could serve as a “road map” or model for other countries.

This report provides an update on religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan in 2023. It describes the legislative framework that facilitates the official regulation of religious practice, concerns for religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh, the ongoing repression of Shi’a Muslim religious activists, and the impact of the government’s refusal to allow conscientious objection.

Lack of Respect for Religious Freedom and Related Human Rights

Azerbaijan consistently ranks at the bottom of indices documenting the status of human rights. In recent years, Freedom House has repeatedly *characterized* the country as “not free” and *ranked* it alongside the likes of other authoritarian states for its austere low-level of political rights and civil liberties. Authorities continued to severely *curtail* political opposition in the country and to detain on spurious charges those critical of the government. In July 2023, police *arrested* academic Gubad Ibadoghlu on fictitious charges related to the possession of counterfeit money and religious “extremist” materials. The international community, including

many members of the U.S. Congress, have *called for* his immediate and unconditional release. That same month, a non-governmental organization *estimated* the detention of as many as 202 political prisoners in Azerbaijan, of whom the overwhelming majority constituted “peaceful believers” or religious activists targeted in connection with their religious activities. The State Department has regularly *documented* in its yearly Human Rights Reports credible allegations of torture, restrictions on free expression and the media, harassment of journalists, and a de facto ban on peaceful assembly, among other serious human rights concerns.

Moreover, Azerbaijan allegedly continued to *commit* war crimes and other abuses in the context of its conflict with Armenia over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, an area internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. Beginning in December 2022, ethnic Armenians living in the region *faced* severe food, fuel, and medicine shortages due to a partial blockade of the Lachin corridor—a key transport route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia—that the Azerbaijani government converted into a complete blockade in June 2023. The critical humanitarian crisis led numerous organizations and other voices to *warn* that the situation under these conditions risked the prospect of ethnic cleansing. In September, Azerbaijan *launched* a military offensive to forcibly retake the region, leading to the mass exodus of more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians.

Legislative Limits on Religious Freedom

The government continued to subject virtually all religious practice to stringent state oversight in line with the

country's 2009 law "On Freedom of Religious Beliefs," which has for years required the registration of religious groups to be able to operate legally and engage in worship. The registration process itself is complex and burdensome, having set an arbitrary membership threshold of at least 50 members for a religious group to even qualify for registration. A failure to register puts the community at risk of raids, detention, arrest, or fines. In 2023, the official State Committee for Work on Religious Affairs (SCWRA) reported [registering](#) only two Muslim mosques and not a single non-Muslim community. The latter [marked](#) the continuation of a trend in which the government has refused to register any religious minority community for the last three years. Some communities of Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Christians have sought official registration for years and continue to encounter obstacles.

The government has also made several other religious activities contingent on official government approval; for instance, the religion law mandates that religious literature and related materials be reviewed and approved by an official body prior to its production, import, export, distribution, and sale in the country. Without approval, such activities are punishable under the criminal code with a fine between 5,000 and 7,000 manats (\$2,941 to \$4,118) or imprisonment for up to two years. The law also prohibits non-Azerbaijani citizens from engaging in "religious propaganda" or missionary activity without explicit state permission. A citizen who has received an Islamic education abroad must similarly obtain the express approval of the government before leading Islamic prayers or other religious activities or face fines or imprisonment.

In the last three years, the Milli Məclis—Azerbaijan's parliament—has on two separate occasions adopted amendments to the religion law that introduced new restrictions on religious practice that President Ilham Aliyev quickly signed into law. In 2021, the set [included](#) provisions that barred parents from forcing children to practice religion, banned persons in official positions from carrying out professional religious activities, instituted state approval of religious leaders and the re-attestation of Muslim religious leaders every five years, required religious communities to suspend their activities in the absence of an appointed religious leader, placed limitations on religious communities' ability to establish institutions of religious learning, conditioned the organization of religious pilgrimages abroad on notifying the government, and largely restricted religious activities with few exceptions to a community's registered legal address. In 2022, the government [adopted](#) amendments

that removed the nominally independent Caucasus Muslim Board's (CMB) authority to appoint imams and gave that power instead to the SCWRA, abolished the CMB's right to register mosques, and codified state oversight of donations to religious entities.

Religious Sites in Nagorno-Karabakh

Many organizations remained concerned about the protection and preservation of religious sites throughout the region of Nagorno-Karabakh and other neighboring territories that have in recent years come back under Azerbaijani control. For instance, the International Court of Justice [ruled](#) in February that Azerbaijan must prevent incitement and the promotion of racial hatred and discrimination against Armenians and "take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and artefacts." USCIRF raised the religious freedom implications of failing to protect religious sites directly with government officials.

In the summer, Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov [stated](#) that ethnic Armenians may keep their culture "if they integrate into Azerbaijani society and governmental structures like other ethnic and religious minorities." Others, however, have spoken more forcefully against a continued Armenian presence in the area. In May 2023, the chairman of the SCWRA Mubariz Gurbanli explicitly [called](#) for Armenian priests to abandon the Dadivank Monastery in the Kalbajar region as he falsely claimed that they had no connection to the site. While a United Nations mission to Nagorno-Karabakh completed in October 2023 [reported](#) that it "saw no damage...to cultural or religious structures," human rights organizations continued to [urge](#) the government to ensure protections for religious and cultural sites and rights.

Continued Pressure on Muslims

Authorities continued to routinely surveil, fine, detain, and arrest Shi'a Muslims throughout the year. Religious freedom nongovernmental organization Forum 18 [reported](#) in early 2023 that at least seven Shi'a Muslims faced administrative charges for "illegally involv[ing] minors in the performance of religious rituals" when they brought children to a religious celebration at a shopping center. In January and February 2023, courts fined at least four of the men involved and later arrested one of them on charges of drug trafficking.

The government has particularly targeted the unregistered Muslim Unity Movement (*Müsəlman Birliyi Hərəkatı*) or MUM, a group that has criticized the government's repressive policies toward religion and whose persecution many human rights defenders believe to be politically motivated. The group reported during the year that authorities [detained](#) tens of its members, sentenced many of them to administrative arrest, [searched](#) the home of another, and subjected detained or imprisoned members to physical and psychological pressure. In July, reports emerged that guards beat MUM member Jeyhun Balashov, while in September, MUM member Agali Yakhyaev claimed that authorities [tortured](#) him and threatened him with sexual assault. In the summer, a court additionally [sentenced](#) MUM member Mahir Azimov to four years in prison on drug-related charges. Earlier in the year, in February 2023, the European Court of Human Rights had [awarded](#) compensation to eight individuals associated with the movement on the basis that officials did not investigate their claims that they had experienced ill-treatment while in government custody.

In January 2023, an armed [attack](#) on the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran contributed to a dramatic rise in tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran. In the ensuing months, law enforcement throughout Azerbaijan carried out mass arrests of individuals the government at various stages accused of espionage, planning to overthrow the government, and drug trafficking. Officials [asserted](#) that such acts were carried out “under the veil of religion” and that persons who portrayed themselves as deeply religious were engaged in efforts to establish a theocratic state. While Iran has consistently engaged in malign activities and supported terrorism throughout the region, Azerbaijan has been known to levy false charges of collaborating with foreign powers to jail its political opponents and critics, making it difficult to discern the veracity of the allegations. Observers have maintained that hundreds of religious activists were detained as part of the sweep, with one human rights defender [telling](#) Eurasianet that he “presume[d] that there are innocent people among the detainees, who were only practicing their religion, and perhaps criticized the government's policy regarding religious freedoms.” As of October 2023, the Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan [categorized](#) 171 persons as “peaceful

believers” wrongly imprisoned in connection with their religious beliefs or activities.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Conscientious Objection

Law enforcement agencies continue to sporadically detain and threaten Jehovah's Witnesses who are found sharing their religious beliefs with others. In some instances, police have brought Witnesses into local police stations for questioning or to pressure them to cease such activities.

Jehovah's Witnesses often face punishment for exercising their right to conscientiously object to mandatory military service. Although Azerbaijan's constitution provides for an alternative civilian service, it has not provided such an option in practice and has prosecuted conscientious objectors for “evading” military service. In 2022, authorities respectively detained and imprisoned Witnesses [Royal Karimov](#) and [Seymur Mammadov](#) after they refused to carry out their military service. Although Karimov was eventually released, a court sentenced Mammadov to nine months in prison before converting his sentence to a one-year suspended sentence. The Supreme Court [dismissed](#) his appeal in June 2023. Throughout 2023, other Witnesses continued to receive summonses to fulfill military service and, in some cases, experienced retaliation in the form of passport denials or exit bans.

Conclusion

The Azerbaijani government has unfortunately erased the little progress it had made for religious freedom by passing increasingly restrictive amendments to its religion law, continuing to require and deny official registration to several religious groups, harassing and arresting Shi'a Muslim religious activists, and refusing to permit conscientious objection. The United States should pressure Azerbaijan to address its severe violations of religious freedom and place the country on the State Department's Special Watch List until the Azerbaijani government amends its 2009 law “On Freedom of Religious Beliefs” in line with international human rights standards and ceases other policies and practices that routinely infringe upon its citizens' freedom of religion or belief.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.