

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan remained poor. The government [continued](#) to arrest and imprison certain practicing Shi'a Muslims over their alleged connections to Iran. Most detainees faced dubious drug-related charges, which the government has reportedly used for years to target dissidents, including religious actors. In February, authorities arrested dozens of Shi'a Muslims, including clerics and members of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM)—an unregistered Shi'a Muslim group that opposes the government's control of religious practice. In September, a court sentenced MUM board member Agali Yakhyaev to seven years in prison for alleged drug possession, and authorities arrested MUM member [Ahsan Nuruzade](#) in October—less than a month after he completed a seven-year prison sentence motivated by his MUM association. At the end of the year, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan had identified 233 “believers” unjustly imprisoned for their religious practices or religiously based opposition to the government.

Detained religious actors accused law enforcement of threatening and wielding physical and sexual violence to elicit false confessions. Many Shi'a Muslims whom authorities arrested or sentenced or for whom appeals were rejected in 2024—including Yakhyaev, Jeyhun Balashov, and Samir Babayev—[claimed](#) law enforcement had planted drugs on, abused, tortured, and/or threatened to rape them during their initial arrests or in pretrial detention. In July, Rustam Gasimli, a member of the unregistered religious group Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL), accused police of sexually assaulting him and repeatedly beating him and his co-religionist. This incident happened after authorities arrested them

for a second time within a week for engaging in missionary activities. Shi'a Muslims, including MUM members, also alleged inhumane living conditions and other mistreatment while imprisoned.

Authorities took no apparent steps to investigate credible claims of abuse against freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) prisoners or to hold perpetrators accountable. In July, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) [stated](#) that it continued to receive allegations of “severe acts” of ill treatment and torture by Azerbaijani police officers and that authorities have taken no actions to end such practices. Previous CPT reports [concluded](#) that torture and other forms of physical ill treatment, corruption, and impunity remained “systemic and endemic” among Azerbaijan's law enforcement agencies.

Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) provided new satellite documentation of threatened religious sites in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In June, CHW reported the destruction of additional Armenian religious sites—including a 19th century church, two cemeteries, and other artifacts—since Azerbaijan retook control of the region. Also, in June, U.S. NGO Freedom House found Azerbaijan had carried out a “comprehensive, methodically implemented strategy to empty Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population and historical and cultural presence” during its 2020 and 2023 military operations and concluded Azerbaijan's actions constituted war crimes and crimes against humanity. Some repatriated Armenian prisoners of war reportedly endured mistreatment on a religious basis, including verbal abuse and confiscation and breaking of religious possessions, while in Azerbaijani captivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Azerbaijan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Azerbaijani government agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Main Department for Combating Organized Crime (also known as Bandotdel), and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States

under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and

- Facilitate an onsite visit by an independent international observer, such as the United Nations (UN), to Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories to inspect and document an inventory of cultural and religious heritage.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Introduce and pass legislation to amend the waiver authority ([Pub. L. 107-115](#),

title II) applicable to Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act to require specific improvements to religious freedom in Azerbaijan before the U.S. president can waive restrictions on security assistance to the country; and

- Hold a hearing in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and/or House Foreign Affairs Committee to highlight religious freedom issues in Azerbaijan, building on the findings of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [hearing](#) on Azerbaijan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Azerbaijan has an [estimated](#) population of 10.6 million. Approximately 96 percent of the population identify as Muslim, composed of around 65 percent Shi'a and 35 percent Sunni. The remaining four percent of the population consists of atheists, Armenian Apostolic, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox.

State Enforcement of Religion Law and Regulations Impacting Religious Freedom

The constitution characterizes Azerbaijan as a secular state and stipulates a separation between the state and religion. Nonetheless, the government continued to enforce its restrictive 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs, which subjects virtually all religious practices to intrusive state oversight. The law requires religious groups to register with the government to legally practice their religion, and they must have at least 50 members to qualify. Failure to register puts religious communities at risk of raids, arrests, and criminal prosecutions. Among other limitations, the religion law also mandates the official review and approval of religious materials, restricts who can engage in missionary activity, and requires state approval of religious leaders. Furthermore, the government has not allowed for alternative civilian service although the constitution provides for it. In practice, the government has instead imposed punishments such as exit bans on conscientious objectors—including Jehovah's Witnesses—for refusing military service.

In July, police in Baku detained 11 AROPL members, including Rustam Gasimli, over their public missionary activities and reportedly charged them with violating the regulations for religious organizations. Detainees alleged that investigators threatened them with rape should they continue their activities. Police reportedly have harassed other AROPL members for engaging in similar missionary activities.

In 2024, authorities ramped up their targeting of journalists, political activists, human rights defenders, and other perceived government critics in a massive crackdown. Like religious detainees, civil society actors accused law enforcement of physical and sexual assault, threats of sexual violence, mistreatment in prison, and inhumane prison conditions. In December, authorities arrested human rights defender Rufat Safarov under dubious pretenses days before he was scheduled to travel to the United States to meet with the U.S. Congress and receive an award from the U.S. Department of State for his human rights work. Safarov regularly criticized the Azerbaijani government's unjust imprisonment of nonconforming Shi'a Muslims.

The government used alleged possession of so-called religious "extremist" materials to target political opponents. In April, a court transferred academic and political activist Gubad Ibadoghlu from pretrial detention to house arrest following his July 2023 arrest on dubious allegations that included possession of religious "extremist" materials. Authorities reportedly refused to provide Ibadoghlu with proper medical care, resulting in his health deteriorating. A court later replaced his house arrest with police supervision.

International Attention

European governing and human rights bodies repeatedly raised concerns about Azerbaijan's human rights record, including incidents

related to religious freedom. In January, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) [refused](#) to certify the credentials of the delegation from Azerbaijan in part due to the Azerbaijani government's human rights violations related to prisoners of conscience and its military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. That same month, PACE [adopted](#) a resolution condemning Azerbaijan's reportedly systemic and widespread use of torture and other forms of ill treatment. Moreover, the [Council of Europe](#), the [UN Committee against Torture](#), the [European External Action Service](#), and the [European Parliament](#) denounced Azerbaijan's organized destruction of Armenian religious and cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh and its crackdown on civil society.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Azerbaijani bilateral relations in 2024 largely focused on securing a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with the U.S. government seeking a mediating [role](#). The United States expressed serious concerns about Azerbaijan's worsening human rights situation. Then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev [several times](#) throughout the year and repeatedly brought up general human rights concerns. In his April call with President Aliyev, then Secretary Blinken [welcomed](#) Ibadoghlu's transfer to house arrest and called for his full release, and then U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Mark Libby met with Ibadoghlu in May and October. In October, Ambassador Michael Kozak, a senior official at the State Department, [highlighted](#) Azerbaijan's abuse of Agali Yakhyaev at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Warsaw Human Dimension Conference. In December, then Secretary Blinken [honored](#) Safarov during the State Department's Human Rights Defender Award Ceremony and [called](#) for his immediate release.

Congress elevated human rights concerns in Azerbaijan throughout the year, including religious freedom issues. Members of both [houses of Congress](#) routinely called for the release and an end to the mistreatment of Ibadoghlu. In April, Representatives Dina Titus (D-NV) and Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) introduced the Azerbaijan Sanctions Review Act ([H.R. 8141](#)), which, if passed, would have required the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden to determine whether Azerbaijani officials who are mentioned in the bill participated in human rights abuses and qualified for sanctions under relevant U.S. law. In a June letter to then Secretary Blinken, more than 40 members of Congress requested that the State Department raise the issue of destroyed Armenian cultural heritage at every meeting with Azerbaijani officials, citing that country's actions against churches, monasteries, and religious artifacts in Nagorno-Karabakh. Lawmakers used Azerbaijan's hosting of the 29th Session of the Conference of Parties (COP29) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to [highlight](#) its worsening human rights record and [call](#) for the release of all prisoners of conscience. In September, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) led a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [hearing](#) on human rights in Azerbaijan, including religious sites under threat in Nagorno-Karabakh. In December, then Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) [condemned](#) Safarov's arrest and demanded his release.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [placed](#) Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom.

Commissioner dissent on Azerbaijan by Commissioner Vicky Hartzler

Azerbaijan is a secular nation whose Constitution guarantees religious freedom for all. It fosters tolerance between faiths and supports church operations through funding and its state committee of Azerbaijan religious affairs. However, along with this 'support' comes government control suppressing religious freedom. The government controls the publication and distribution of religious materials, requires registration, appoints imams to mosques, and writes the sermons for Muslim services.

The most egregious violations of religious freedom, however, are evidenced by the documented torture of some religious actors including beatings, threats of rape, and detention in horrid conditions. Armenian Christian prisoners are often targeted for brutal treatment including beatings, psychological abuse, lack of access to medical care and proper food, and religious persecution like the attempts to erase cross tattoos through burns. Other religious actors are impacted, as well. One individual who was arrested for distributing pamphlets promoting his Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light faith, was severely beaten, verbally assaulted, and raped with a baton. Police are not held accountable for these actions. This must change.

It is for these reasons that I believe the designation of Country of Particular Concern is more fitting. I am hopeful the government of Azerbaijan will take these concerns to heart, stop the torture, hold police officials accountable, and ensure people of faith can freely live out their faith.