



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

July 2025

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS IN AZERBAIJAN

Vicky Hartzler
Chair

Asif Mahmood
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Ariela Dubler

Mohamed Elsanousi

Maureen Ferguson

Stephen Schneck

Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singhsinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

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

On June 5, 2025, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing: [*Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan*](#). USCIRF Then Chair Stephen Schneck and Commissioner Vicky Hartzler led the hearing, which included testimony from members of civil society and academia. Witnesses discussed current religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan as well as potential policy options for the U.S. government. Commissioners Mohamed Elsanousi and Asif Mahmood also participated in the hearing.

[*Then Chair Stephen Schneck*](#) opened the hearing by emphasizing the concerning situation for religious freedom in Azerbaijan. He discussed Azerbaijan's highly restrictive religion law, pointing out that reforms to the law have only solidified government control over religious communities. Then Chair Schneck also highlighted Azerbaijan's imprisonment and mistreatment of a record number of devout Shi'a Muslims following a deterioration of relations with Iran as well as the destruction of Armenian religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions.

[*Commissioner Vicky Hartzler*](#) offered additional comments, delving into USCIRF's policy recommendations to the U.S. government to address Azerbaijan's religious freedom record. She called for sanctions against government officials and agencies involved in severe violations of religious freedom. Commissioner Hartzler stressed the need to have independent, international observers visit the Nagorno-Karabakh region to make an inventory of all religious sites. She also reiterated the critical role Congress must play—through legislation and advocacy—to advance religious freedom in Azerbaijan.

[*Audrey L. Altstadt*](#), Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, emphasized that Azerbaijan's religious freedom and human rights abuses stem from the government's desire to preserve its autocratic power system under President Ilham Aliyev. She explained the state's relationship with Islam, its mechanisms for control of Muslim institutions, and its fears of Islam as a means of opposing government corruption and criticizing authorities. Dr. Altstadt stated that the U.S. government should raise human rights and due process issues with Azerbaijani authorities and furthermore limit U.S. investments in the country should Azerbaijan fail to meet standards.

[*Felix Corley*](#), Editor of Forum 18 News Service, provided an overview of the major religious freedom violations the Azerbaijani government perpetuates. He stressed that Azerbaijan's current political system is based on total control of all nongovernment activities, including within the religious sphere. Mr. Corley recounted the government's regulations for religious communities to engage in religious activities legally, including registration requirements and state approval of religious literature. He emphasized



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that the country's majority Muslim population faces the tightest control mechanisms. Mr. Corley ended his remarks by acknowledging the important role that funding from the National Endowment for Democracy has played in supporting Forum 18's work to monitor and report on religious freedom issues.

[Arzu Geybull](#), an independent journalist and Co-founder of Free Voices Collective, recounted the Azerbaijani government's history of legitimizing human rights abuses against the Muslim population under the guise of national security and counterterrorism. She emphasized that the state of religious freedom in Azerbaijan is intrinsically linked to the country's broader human rights crisis, including the government's targeting of journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers, and political activists. Ms. Geybull recommended that the U.S. government adopt a holistic approach to these issues by integrating human rights into all bilateral engagements, imposing U.S. sanctions on perpetrators, and providing humanitarian and legal assistance to victims of government human rights abuses, among other policy recommendations.

[Husik Ghulyan](#), Lead Researcher at Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW), explained his work documenting damaged and destroyed religious sites in the Nagorno-Karabakh

region. He stressed the threat to Armenian religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh given Azerbaijan's total erasure of Armenian cultural heritage in the Nakhchivan region between 1998 and 2005. Dr. Ghulyan also recounted Azerbaijan's cultural appropriation of Armenian heritage through its false historical narratives about Caucasian Albania. He concluded his testimony by stressing that Azerbaijan's treatment of cultural heritage should play a role in shaping U.S.-Azerbaijani relations.

Following witness testimonies, Then Chair Schneck led a question-and-answer session to discuss religious freedom developments and potential policy options for the U.S. government. During this session, witnesses discussed the religious freedom implications of Azerbaijan's forced removal of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. They also discussed the government's broader crackdown on civil society as well as the political reasons behind Azerbaijan's arrests of Shi'a Muslims. Witnesses described Azerbaijan's promotion of the country's religious harmony as a public relations campaign inclusive of religious groups it exerts total control over.

Then Chair Schneck concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimony.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency 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.