



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.

Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan

Overview

Religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan remain highly restricted. Azerbaijan continues to enforce its draconian religion law, which criminalizes unregistered religious activities and grants the government control over registered religious organizations. Azerbaijan continues to imprison Shi'a Muslims who do not recognize government-controlled Muslim institutions and figures. Azerbaijan's ongoing repression of independent civil society, especially journalists and human rights defenders, has resulted in less reporting and credible information on human rights and religious freedom within the country. Both detained religious and civil society actors have reported torture, sexual assault, inhumane living conditions, and other mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement and prison authorities. Historic Armenian religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions remain threatened following Azerbaijan's retaking of the territories in 2020 and 2023.

This report provides updates on the religious freedom situation in [Azerbaijan](#) and highlights recent cases of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations.

Background

Azerbaijan has an [estimated](#) population of 10.6 million. Azerbaijan has no official state religion. Approximately 96 percent of the population identify as Muslim, composed of around 65 percent Shi'a and 35 percent Sunni. While most Azerbaijanis identify as Muslim, scholars [estimate](#) that only 20 percent of the population engage in some form of religious practice. The remaining four percent of the population consists of atheists, Armenian Apostolic, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox.

The government of Azerbaijan has invested significant resources to improve its image on the international stage through [religious tolerance promotion](#). The country routinely hosts and participates in conferences dedicated to fostering interfaith relations, and government officials regularly tout the country's interfaith harmony between government-backed, perceived "traditional" religious groups. These efforts, however, attempt to conceal the state's systematic violations of religious freedom and failure to uphold its FoRB commitments under international law.



Religion Law

Regulations

The government intensively [regulates](#) religious life through its law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs (religion law). Religious communities must register with the State Committee on Affairs with Religious Associations (SCARA), the government body responsible for regulating religious affairs in the country. In accordance with the law, SCARA works closely with the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), a government-controlled foundation tasked with overseeing Islamic practice and Muslim public life. In recent years, however, authorities have [transferred](#) several of the CMB's responsibilities to SCARA, including the appointment and removal of religious leaders in mosques.

The religion law's statutes are overly burdensome, vague, and highly restrictive. Religious communities face a requirement of 50 adult Azerbaijani citizens to register with the state to practice their religion legally. Foreigners and noncitizens are prohibited from missionary activities without explicit state permission. Religious communities require government approval for producing, importing, and exporting religious literature. They also need consent from authorities before sending citizens abroad for religious education. Muslim communities must submit to a single unified leadership under the CMB, and imams are required to recertify their government-licensed credentials every five years. Violating various aspects of the religion law can result in administrative and criminal penalties, including fines and imprisonment.

Despite repeated revisions to the religion law over recent years, none of those reforms have addressed concerns about the law's compatibility with international law and have instead only solidified government control of the religious sphere. Additionally, Azerbaijan still has not implemented an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors, despite Article 76 of Azerbaijan's Constitution explicitly allowing alternative service and Article 4 of the religion law vaguely granting a similar waiver on religious grounds.

Enforcement

Authorities strongly regulate Muslim religious activities. The government appoints imams that conform to its approved interpretation of Islam and enforces the CMB's dates for religious observances and festivals. In July 2025, Shi'a Muslim activists claimed that the government had placed restrictions on Ashura-related religious activities that did not occur on the day the CMB recognized as the holiday. The month prior, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and SCARA released a joint statement reminding citizens that religious activities for the Islamic month of Muharram must take place in mosques and furthermore discouraging parents from bringing their children to such activities.

Some non-Muslim groups, like nondenominational Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, still face registration issues. While Jehovah's Witnesses have legal registration in Baku, they have not been granted official registration for their communities outside of the capital. In July 2024, SCARA registered the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the only non-Muslim community registered since December 2020.

Unofficial agreements and good relations with SCARA leadership have prevented registered non-Muslim communities from being subjected to the religion law's strictest requirements. For example, despite not being registered outside of Baku, Jehovah's Witnesses are allowed to meet for religious worship outside of areas of official state registration with SCARA's unofficial permission. Registered non-Muslim communities routinely rely on SCARA to resolve community disputes with law enforcement who continue to harass them for exercising their FoRB rights protected under international law. Such informal agreements with SCARA, however, lack legal authority and are subject to SCARA's arbitrary enforcement.

Unregistered religious communities and foreigners who engage in missionary activities face issues with law enforcement. According to government statistics published in Azerbaijani state media, authorities in 2024 opened criminal cases against 97 individuals for "illegal religious propaganda" and opened administrative cases against another 51. During these proceedings, authorities reportedly seized 255 pieces of religious materials. In June 2025, the State Security Service and State Migration Service had announced the deportation of three foreign citizens for organizing religious meetings and engaging in missionary activities for "non-traditional religious movements" in violation of Azerbaijan's religion law.

Police detain members of the unregistered religious group Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) for engaging in missionary activities. In July 2024, police in Baku detained AROPL members Rustam Gasimli and Nariman Shabanzade for distributing religious materials. A court subsequently sentenced the two to 30 days in prison reportedly for hooliganism and disobeying police. While in police custody, Gasimli alleged that police sexually assaulted him and repeatedly beat him and Shabanzade. In April 2025, police reportedly detained at least two AROPL members for unfurling banners in a square with religious slogans and imagery.

The government stringently regulates religious materials. SCARA grants only 45 stores approval to sell religious literature. Azerbaijani state media reported that the government in 2024 had reviewed nearly 4,000 titles of religious literature for import and distribution and refused to allow 139 books for "promoting religious intolerance, hatred and discrimination." It also prevented the publication of 26 religious materials after reviewing 227. Authorities in 2024 also reportedly provided control stamps for more than 756,000 copies of nearly

1,200 titles of religious literature. Control stamps—which are required for all religious literature—can cost roughly double the price of the piece of religious literature itself, imposing an unnecessary financial burden for registered religious communities.

The government has largely stopped detaining Jehovah's Witnesses for conscientious objection. However, dozens of military-age male Jehovah's Witnesses have reportedly received travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country, in apparent retaliation for their conscientious objection.

Shi'a Muslim Activists

Azerbaijan continues to imprison Shi'a Muslims who operate outside the government's preferred interpretation of Islam and more generally criticize authorities. While Azerbaijan is a majority Shi'a Muslim nation, the government has targeted Shi'a Muslims who do not recognize the state-backed religious authority of Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade and the CMB and instead seek religious instruction from alternative religious leaders, both inside and outside the country. Many of these Shi'a Muslims who do not recognize the state's religious authority openly criticize the Azerbaijani government on matters not inherently related to religion.

As of June 2025, the nongovernmental organization Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan had identified 241 Shi'a "believers" unjustly imprisoned for their religious practices or religiously based opposition to the government. While the government has accused these detained nonconforming Shi'a Muslims of being spies and agents of Iran following a deterioration of Azerbaijani-Iranian relations in 2023, most detainees face dubious drug-related charges, which authorities have a history of using to target political dissent. Several Shi'a Muslims have claimed law enforcement had planted drugs on, abused, tortured, and/or threatened to rape them during their initial arrests or in pretrial detention. While imprisoned, Shi'a detainees have reported medical neglect, law enforcement's harassment of prisoner family members, mistreatment, and inhumane living conditions.

In January 2025, plainclothes officers detained Shi'a activist Elvin Zeynalov and—according to eyewitness accounts from his family—planted drugs on him after bringing him home. Human rights activists allege that authorities targeted Zeynalov for providing financial support to the families of Shi'a and other political prisoners. In June 2025, the Baku Grave Crimes Court

reportedly sentenced Zeynalov to three years and six months in prison on drug-related charges. That same month, law enforcement detained and allegedly abused Elgiz Mammadov, a member of the unregistered Shi'a group the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) that the government has targeted for years. A court sentenced him to four months of pretrial detention on drug-related charges. Authorities had previously [arrested](#) and allegedly sexually assaulted Mammadov in 2022 after he protested the trial of one of his fellow MUM colleagues.

Independent Media and Civil Society

The government's targeting of certain devout Shi'a Muslims coincides with a much broader crackdown on independent civil society, resulting in less reporting and credible information on the country's human rights situation, including related to religious freedom. Azerbaijan consistently ranks at the bottom of indices documenting the status of human rights and corruption. In February 2025, nongovernmental organization Freedom House once again characterized the country as "not free" and ranked it alongside the likes of other authoritarian states for its low level of political rights and civil liberties.

As of July 2025, Azerbaijan is imprisoning at least 25 journalists. In May 2025, authorities arrested Voice of America journalist Ulviyya Guliyeva (known as Ulviyya Ali) on spurious smuggling charges in retaliation for her work. During her interrogation, police allegedly physically assaulted her and threatened her with sexual violence in an attempt to get her phone's password. Voice of America, a U.S. government-funded international media outlet and broadcaster, had consistently reported on the detention of Shi'a Muslim activists. In June 2025, the Baku Grave Crimes Court sentenced seven journalists to between seven and a half and nine years in prison on fabricated charges tied to their alleged work for Abzas Media, a local independent Azerbaijani news outlet that reports on human rights issues. Journalist Polad Aslanov remains imprisoned on a 13-year prison sentence for his reporting on Azerbaijani State Security Service officials demanding bribes from Shi'a Muslim pilgrims traveling to Iran and Iraq.

Several human rights defenders remain in prison for their work. In December 2024, authorities arrested Rufat Safarov, the founder of local human rights organization Defense Line, 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 imprisonment of nonconforming Shi'a Muslims. In March 2025, authorities arrested Bashir Suleymanli, head of the Civil Rights Institute, one of Azerbaijan's remaining human rights organizations. In July 2025, a court extended Suleymanli's pretrial detention for several months.

Similar to Shi'a Muslim and other religious detainees, detained civil society actors accused authorities of physical and sexual assault, threats of sexual violence, torture and mistreatment in prison, and inhumane prison conditions. Additionally, some nongovernmental organizations have claimed Azerbaijani prison authorities have refused religious materials to and confiscated religious materials from those imprisoned. According to [international law](#), all prisoners—regardless of crimes they are accused or convicted of—should be afforded certain religious freedom rights, including the right to possess religious books, meet with religious representatives, and attend religious services provided in prison. In August 2024, prison authorities allegedly [assaulted](#) imprisoned peace activist Bahruz Samadov after he requested a Bible. In June 2025, the Baku Grave Crimes Court sentenced Samadov to 15 years in prison in a case human rights activists view as baseless.

Religious Sites in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh Region

Armenian religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories—an area internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan—remain at risk after Azerbaijan forcibly displaced an estimated 100,000 mostly Christian ethnic Armenians in a 2023 military offensive to retake the region. As of June 2024, Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) [identified](#) eight destroyed and another eight damaged religious sites, including churches, cemeteries, and other artifacts. Azerbaijani officials have legitimized the destruction and modification of Armenian religious heritage by falsely claiming that such heritage is Caucasian Albanian. CHW has also [identified](#) destroyed and damaged Azerbaijani mosques and mausoleums—which Azerbaijan has sought to conserve or restore in recent years—while Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories were under Armenian control from 1994 to 2020.



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Conclusion

Azerbaijan's religious freedom violations remain systematic and ongoing. The government's total control of religious life and affairs leaves no room for independent religious affiliations, expression, or activities. Broader human rights issues in the country pose significant challenges to documenting religious freedom violations. In 2025, USCIRF recommended that the State Department maintain Azerbaijan on the Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom. The State Department placed Azerbaijan on the Special Watch List for the first time in December 2023.

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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.