

## **USCIRF Virtual Hearing on Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan**

Honorable Chair, esteemed members of the committee, and distinguished guests, My name is Arzu Geybulla of Free Voices Collective, and I am here today to bring urgent attention to the escalating and systematic persecution of religious individuals in Azerbaijan. The government of Azerbaijan has a deeply troubling and well-documented history of suppressing religious freedoms, particularly targeting its Muslim communities, under the cynical guise of national security and counter-terrorism. This is not merely an isolated incident; it is a calculated and ongoing strategy designed to consolidate authoritarian control and silence dissent. Indeed, the state of religious freedom in Azerbaijan is inextricably linked to the broader human rights crisis gripping the country. We observe a systematic dismantling of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, assembly, and association, alongside the widespread use of arbitrary arrests, torture, and politically motivated charges. Independent media outlets are systematically suppressed, journalists face fabricated charges like smuggling, and civil society organizations are paralyzed by restrictive laws and constant pressure. Human rights defenders, lawyers, and political activists are routinely targeted, swelling the ranks of what human rights groups estimate to be hundreds of political prisoners. This comprehensive crackdown creates an environment of fear where no dissenting voice, including those motivated by faith, is safe.

We have observed a consistent and chilling pattern employed by the Azerbaijani state: to label religious groups as "religious radicals," "terrorists," or "foreign agents." These labels are not based on verifiable facts but are convenient rhetorical tools used to legitimize egregious human rights abuses, unlawful arrests, and the systematic erosion of fundamental freedoms. This tactic, while refined over time, is far from new. As early as 2007, we witnessed the targeting of Wahhabi Muslims, who were conveniently framed within the prevailing global discourse of combating terrorism, thereby facilitating their repression. More recently, and with increasing intensity, non-conformist Shia Muslims have become the primary target, frequently accused of serving Iranian interests or engaging in an imagined "unchanging religious radicalism and terrorism."

The most prominent and widely documented example of this systematic repression is the "Nardaran events." On November 26, 2015, a large-scale and brutal police operation unfolded in the Nardaran settlement, a community renowned as a stronghold of devout Shia Muslims. This operation tragically resulted in fatalities, including police officers, and led to the mass arrest of over 70 individuals. The official justification provided by the Prosecutor General's Office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs was that an "armed criminal group" operating under the guise of religion, identified as the "Muslim Unity Movement" (MUM), sought to "forcibly change the constitutional order and create a religious state governed by Sharia law."

However, what immediately followed these arrests was a litany of egregious human rights violations that paint a far darker picture than the official narrative. Lawyers representing the detained individuals reported in harrowing detail that their clients were subjected to severe torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, often denied urgent and necessary medical care, and systematically deprived of their fundamental rights to a fair trial, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. These violations align with broader reports of torture and ill-treatment in Azerbaijani detention facilities, often used to coerce confessions. Despite these undeniable abuses and a clear disregard for due process, many of these individuals were subsequently convicted and sentenced to shockingly lengthy prison terms,

ranging from 10 to 20 years. The Supreme Court's final decision on March 1, 2018, cemented these unjust sentences.

The choice of Nardaran as the focal point for this crackdown was no mere coincidence. Nardaran is not only a vibrant center of Shia religiosity but also holds significant symbolic political weight, as it was the birthplace of the first political Islamic party in post-independence Azerbaijan, the Islamic Party, which itself faced state suppression. There had been long-standing tensions between the state and the people of Nardaran, who consistently resisted the government's repressive religious, political, and socio-economic policies. The state's narrative deliberately painted Nardaran as a hub of Iranian influence and a breeding ground for spies and terrorists, a narrative actively and aggressively propagated through state-controlled media to garner public support for the crackdown. This manipulation of information is a hallmark of the Azerbaijani government's control over public discourse, where independent media outlets are systematically stifled or forced into exile. The joint statement issued by state agencies on November 26, 2015, which would later be challenged for violating the presumption of innocence, unequivocally reflected the political motivations behind the operation.

Since the "Nardaran events," the Azerbaijani state has repeatedly used this incident as a convenient pretext to target non-conformist Shia Muslims, particularly those associated with the Muslim Unity Movement. The MUM, and its outspoken leader Taleh Bagirzade, have long been prominent critics of the Azerbaijani government, consistently accusing it of widespread corruption and authoritarianism. For this following his arrest Taleh Bagirzade and one other religious leader Abbas Huseynov were subject to systemic torture and inhumane treatment. meanwhile, in state propaganda, the MUM has been relentlessly depicted as a terrorist organization – one that allegedly opposes the very foundations of the state, seeks to establish religious rule, and is portrayed as a foreign-backed force, with alleged ties to Iran emphasized whenever deemed strategically necessary. This demonization extends beyond religious groups to all forms of political opposition, making any organized challenge to the ruling elite extremely perilous.

This disturbing pattern of repression tragically continued, indeed intensified, into 2023. In October of that year, coinciding with heightened geopolitical tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran, the Azerbaijani government escalated its crackdown on Shia Muslims. A joint statement issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State Security Service, and the General Prosecutor's Office on April 6, 2023, chillingly declared that "joint special complex operational measures were implemented to prevent criminal acts committed by a group of individuals by the Iranian special services in exchange for financial interest and through religious propaganda to destabilize the country." This official pronouncement served as the ominous prelude to a carefully orchestrated public relations campaign against Shia Muslims across state-controlled media outlets, further illustrating the government's control over information.

On May 1, 2023, various pro-government media outlets, including the APA Information Agency and "Musavat" newspaper, published identical information, complete with lists of accused individuals and their photographs, under sensational headlines such as "16 more people belonging to Iran's spy network were arrested." The accompanying text accused these individuals of promoting "religious radicalism" and other "disruptive activities" funded by narcotics sales, attempting to deepen "Karima State" relations, and using "drug addicts and superstitious people as tools for their dirty intentions." In May of this year, another article that [appeared](#) in a pro-

government newspaper alleged that the State Security Services successfully captured scores of Azerbaijani citizens in foreign countries on terrorism grounds and brought them to the country.

However, what is most damning is the stark contrast between these inflammatory accusations made in joint state agency statements and pro-government media, and the actual official charges brought against these individuals. While the media screamed "espionage" and "religious radicalism," many of the criminal cases opened against them related to various articles of the Criminal Code concerning drugs or narcotics. This tactic of using fabricated drug charges to silence critics is a common practice in Azerbaijan, used against journalists, activists, and other government opponents, not just religious figures. During this crackdown, dozens of Shia religious believers and activists were arrested, persecuted, and subjected to torture, ill-treatment, and degrading treatment. Based on case materials, we can confirm that most of them were held incommunicado and coerced into signing self-incriminating confessions.

This undeniable discrepancy between public accusations and official charges highlights a concealed ulterior motive on the part of the state. It unequivocally demonstrates that the arrests of these religious individuals were not based on the "good intention" of state agencies to combat crime; rather, the proceedings extend far beyond the stated drug charges, indicating a hidden agenda to suppress religious belief when it intersects with political activism. While precise figures are difficult to obtain due to the opacity of the process, lawyers estimate that between 40 and 50 people were formally arrested, though the actual extent of the repression, including those briefly detained and allegedly tortured without formal charges, likely involves hundreds more. This mirrors the broader crackdown on civil society, where hundreds of individuals are estimated to be political prisoners.

The cases we have discussed today—from the 2015 Nardaran events to the intensified crackdown in 2023—illustrate a deliberate, consistent, and chilling pattern in the Azerbaijani government's strategy to suppress religious dissent. While charges often involve terrorism, drug trafficking, or espionage, the true motive is unequivocally the silencing of religious groups that either challenge state authority or are perceived to align with hostile foreign powers, most notably Iran.

By framing religious Muslims as extremists or foreign agents, the government conveniently legitimizes the brutal repression of dissent under the pretext of national security. This insidious narrative, supported by state-controlled media and opaque legal processes, serves to obscure widespread human rights violations, including torture and unfair trials. The targeted persecution of non-conformist Shia Muslims, especially those linked to the Muslim Unity Movement, exposes how the state manipulates ideological identity to maintain absolute control rather than addressing legitimate grievances. Overall, incidents like the Nardaran case and the events of 2023 reveal a broader, deeply concerning trend of criminalizing religious belief when it intersects with any form of political activism, ultimately serving the government's overarching goal of eliminating any organized challenge to its centralized, authoritarian rule.

### **Policy Recommendations to the U.S. Government:**

Given the comprehensive nature of the human rights crisis in Azerbaijan, where religious freedom is but one facet of a broader repressive system, U.S. policy must adopt a holistic and robust approach:

#### **I. Strategic Designation and Diplomatic Pressure:**

- **Designate Azerbaijan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under IRFA:** The U.S. Department of State must designate Azerbaijan as a "Country of Particular Concern" for its severe violations of religious freedom. The systemic nature of abuses, including widespread torture, fabricated charges, and suppression of religious communities, clearly meets the CPC threshold. This designation is crucial for sending a strong signal and enabling a wider range of policy tools.
- **Integrate Human Rights into all Bilateral Engagements:** U.S. diplomats, from the Ambassador to consular officials, must consistently and robustly raise concerns about **all** human rights violations – including religious freedom, freedom of expression, assembly, association, and the existence of political prisoners – in all discussions with Azerbaijani government counterparts. This includes both private diplomatic channels and public statements. There should be no perception that human rights are secondary to other strategic interests.
- **Publicly Condemn Abuses and Name Perpetrators:** The U.S. government should issue strong and unequivocal public condemnations of the Azerbaijani government's human rights violations, specifically referencing cases like the Nardaran events, the 2023 crackdown on Shia Muslims, the arrests of independent journalists, and the persecution of civil society activists. Naming specific officials and highlighting individual cases of abuse can create tangible international pressure and demonstrate accountability.

## **II. Implement Comprehensive Sanctions and Accountability Measures:**

- **Utilize Magnitsky-style Sanctions for Broader Human Rights Violations:** The U.S. Treasury Department should actively investigate and, where appropriate, impose targeted sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act on Azerbaijani officials, including those in law enforcement, judiciary, and security services, who are responsible for gross human rights violations. This should encompass not only religious persecution but also torture, unlawful arrests, fabrication of evidence, suppression of free speech, and the arbitrary detention of political prisoners.
- **Restrict Visa Issuance for Implicated Officials:** The U.S. government should restrict visa issuance to Azerbaijani officials and their family members who are implicated in any human rights abuses, preventing them from traveling to the U.S. and enjoying its benefits.
- **Review and Condition All Non-Humanitarian Assistance:** The U.S. must thoroughly review all non-humanitarian assistance to Azerbaijan, including security assistance, and condition future aid on demonstrable, verifiable improvements across the spectrum of human rights, including religious freedom, freedom of expression, and the release of political prisoners. This leverage is critical to incentivize genuine reform.

## **III. Robust Support for Victims and Civil Society:**

- **Advocate for the Immediate Release of All Political Prisoners:** The U.S. government should consistently and publicly call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Azerbaijan, including religious activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition figures, who are imprisoned solely for their peaceful beliefs or activities.
- **Provide Direct Humanitarian and Legal Assistance:** The U.S. should actively explore and expand mechanisms to provide direct humanitarian and legal assistance to victims of religious persecution and broader human rights

abuses in Azerbaijan, as well as their families. This can be channeled through trusted international and local non-governmental organizations to ensure it reaches those most in need, covering legal defense, medical care for torture victims, and support for families.

- **Intensive Monitoring of Trials and Detentions:** U.S. embassy officials and other relevant agencies should intensify their monitoring of trials involving all political prisoners, including religious adherents, and vigorously seek access to detention facilities to observe conditions and gather information on reported abuses, including torture and ill-treatment.

#### **IV. Promote Rule of Law, Transparency, and International Scrutiny:**

- **Support Independent Media and Civil Society:** The U.S. government must significantly increase its support for independent media, human rights organizations, and civil society groups in Azerbaijan that are working to document and expose human rights abuses, despite the highly restrictive and dangerous environment. This includes funding for investigative journalism, advocacy, research, and legal aid.
- **Call for Comprehensive Legal and Judicial Reform:** The U.S. should publicly call on the Azerbaijani government to undertake comprehensive legal and judicial reforms, aligning its laws with international human rights standards. This includes amending restrictive laws on religion, association, and expression, eliminating politically motivated charges, and ensuring genuine judicial independence.
- **Encourage Multilateral Pressure and Coordination:** The U.S. should actively work with international partners, including the European Union, the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE, to raise collective concerns about the human rights situation in Azerbaijan and to coordinate diplomatic pressure and advocacy efforts for systemic change. The U.S. should also leverage Azerbaijan's aspirations for international events, such as COP29, to press for concrete human rights improvements.

By adopting these comprehensive policy recommendations, the U.S. government can send a clear, unified, and powerful message that the systemic persecution of religious individuals and the broader human rights crisis in Azerbaijan are unacceptable, and that the United States is unwavering in its commitment to upholding human rights as universal and indivisible.

Thank you.