azerbaijan

PERSECUTION 101



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Draconian laws on religious organizations and military action against its neighbor Armenia, including the desecration of Christian religious sites, make Azerbaijan a serious threat to religious freedom in the Caucuses

After a decades-long war with Armenia, its Christian neighbor to the west, Azerbaijan now holds the disputed territory Nagorno Karabakh territory. Held by Armenia since the immediate post-Soviet era, the territory was full of Christian ethnic and religious heritage sites now controlled by Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, the ironically named 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs places heavy restrictions on religious activity, bringing Muslim religious practice under the control of the state, largely criminalizing non-Muslim religious practice, and criminalizing proselytization. On the heels of its military victory in Nagorno Karabakh and with significant geopolitical support from Israel, Russia, and Turkey, Azerbaijan looks set to continue its path toward decreased religious freedom.



QUICK FACTS

Type of Government
Presidential
Republic

Head of Government
President Ilham
Aliyev

Total Population
Approx. 10.42 million
(2023 estimate)

Religious Demography
97.3% Muslim - 10.13 mil
2.6% Christian - 271,000
0.1% Other - 10,000

Ethnic Demography
91.6% Azerbaijani
2% Lezghin
1.3% Russian
1.3% Armenian
1.3% Talysh
2.4% Other



TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Regulation of Religious Affairs

The Azerbaijani government heavily regulates religious groups in the country and has failed to recognize any non-Muslim groups for legal status.

Military Incursions

The Azerbaijani military has taken the disputed Nagorno Karabakh region from Armenia, including important Armenian cultural and religious sites.



ICC IN AZERBAIJAN

ICC's work in the Caucasus region has largely focused on Azerbaijan's neighbor to the west, Armenia, and the Christian population there that continues to be impacted by Azerbaijani aggression in the region. Even beyond the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia continues to be threatened by an aggressive and empowered government in Azerbaijan, prompting concerns of further military escalations.

In addition to long-term advocacy on the topic of Armenia's territorial sovereignty and the threat to Armenian cultural and religious sites, ICC has also traveled in Armenia to work with local churches and community leaders there.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Afghanistan

Strategically located on Iran's northern border and possessed of large oil and gas reserves, Azerbaijan has managed to create a place for itself on the international stage despite its longstanding refusal to abide by international norms of freedom and democracy. Unfortunately, this has left little space for free religious expression in the country and has allowed it to restrict freedom of religion with impunity.

By comparison, neighboring Armenia—the first country in the world to declare itself a Christian nation—has little geopolitical clout. Though traditionally supported by Russia, Armenia has increasingly found itself ignored and deprioritized not only by Russia but by the rest of the world, much of which has deep economic and security ties with Azerbaijan. As a result, Azerbaijan has been able to trample on important Christian heritage sites in Armenia and seize land long held by Armenia.

Despite much shared history and culture, Iran and Azerbaijan—the only Shia Muslim countries in the world—have a longstanding dispute along several fronts. Modern-day Azerbaijan was part of Iran until the early 1800s, and the resulting split left about 15 million ethnic Azerbaijanis in northern Iran, or about 50% more than in Azerbaijan itself.

Any tension resulting from this demographic anomaly, though, is overshadowed by Azerbaijan's close ally, Israel, and its willingness to allow Israel access to Azerbaijan for military and intelligence operations against Iran. In exchange, Israel sells Azerbaijan weapons, becoming the country's largest weapons provider in the years leading up to the 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia is sandwiched between Azerbaijan to the east and Turkey to the west. The two countries have long maintained close ties, brought together by a shared Turkic ethnicity, a strong predominance of Islam among their populations, and economic interests. Several major pipelines carry significant amounts of oil and natural gas to and through Georgia Turkey, bypassing Russia and making Azerbaijan a critical economic partner for Europe especially in light of tensions over Russia's war in Ukraine.



These economic ties have enabled Azerbaijan to aggress against Armenia in ways that could not have been imagined earlier. From 2000 to 2014, Azerbaijan boasted the fastest-growing economy in the world year after year, allowing it to acquire advanced weapons systems and eclipse Armenia militarily. The pipelines also seem to have emboldened it geopolitically—just months after the decades-long project to build a gas corridor out of Azerbaijan to Europe was completed in 2020, it launched an attack on Armenia to seize Nagorno Karabakh and surrounding territories.

Domestically, Azerbaijan passed a so-called religious freedom law in 2009 creating a complex series of regulations on religious groups and stringent penalties for any groups out of compliance. The law brings Islamic religious practice under the strict control of the state and essentially outlaws all other religious groups. The law was amended in 2022 and also criminalizes proselytization along with a host of other vaguely defined offenses such as "religious extremism."

While Islam—Shia Islam, in particular—is favored, the government's authoritarian impulses lead it to persecute all religions, seeing religion as something to be tolerated only within the very narrow confines of the state. With little to stop it, Azerbaijan seems set to continue expanding persecution within its borders and beyond.

Resources and Reports

State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Azerbaijan Chapter

USCIRF 2024 Annual Report – Azerbaijan Chapter

ICC - The Fall of Artsakh and the Ancient Roots of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict



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