

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan trended negatively. The government continued to enforce its 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs, which required the registration of religious groups to operate legally and engage in worship, mandated the official review and approval of religious literature and other materials, and restricted who could engage in “religious propaganda” or missionary activity, among other limitations. In keeping with the previous year, the government yet again refused to register any non-Muslim religious community despite continued efforts by Protestant Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses to obtain official registration. The government only reported registering two mosques during the year.

Authorities continued to exert pressure on Muslims related to their religious activities, and they surveilled, fined, detained, and arrested those considered to have violated Azerbaijan’s religious regulations. In January and February 2023, courts [fined](#) four Muslim men on administrative charges for “illegally involv[ing] minors in the performance of religious rituals” after they brought their children to a shopping mall to participate in a religious celebration. Authorities subsequently arrested one of the four men on questionable drug trafficking charges. The Muslim Unity Movement (*Müsləman Birliyi Hərəkatı*) or MUM—a Shi’a Muslim group that has opposed the government’s control of religious practice—continued to experience harassment and persecution that many human rights defenders characterized as politically motivated. Over the course of the year, police [detained](#) the group’s members, placed them under administrative arrest, and subjected those who were detained or imprisoned to physical and psychological pressure. In several cases, MUM members claimed that authorities beat and tortured them. Following an armed attack in January on the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran, Iran, authorities conducted arrests across the country to counter alleged acts of espionage, efforts to overthrow the government, and drug trafficking. While officials asserted that the individuals arrested in these sweeps sought to establish a theocratic

state, human rights defenders contended that many were wrongly detained in likely connection to their criticism of the government’s religious policies. At the end of the year, a nongovernmental organization [identified](#) 183 persons as “peaceful believers” unjustly imprisoned in Azerbaijan due to their religious beliefs or activities, which marked a significant increase in that number compared to the preceding year.

Jehovah’s Witnesses still could not perform an alternative civilian service in place of carrying out mandatory military service, despite the provision of such an option in the country’s constitution. In some instances, Jehovah’s Witnesses experienced retaliation for attempting to exercise their right to conscientiously object in accordance with their religious beliefs. In June, the Supreme Court dismissed the appeal of [Seymur Mammadov](#), whose nine-month prison sentence had been converted to a one-year suspended sentence the previous year. Relevant government bodies refused to issue passports to other Jehovah’s Witnesses or imposed on them exit bans because they had failed to complete their military service.

The government continued to pose a threat to religious sites in and around the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. In May, the chairman of the official State Committee for Work on Religious Affairs Mubariz Gurbanli [urged](#) Armenian Apostolic priests to leave the Dadivank Monastery located in the Kalbajar region, falsely claiming that they had no ties to the religious site. Although a United Nations mission to the city of Khankendi in October [concluded](#) that it “saw no damage ... to cultural or religious structures,” other organizations remained concerned by the potential for damage or destruction in the region. In November 2023, Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW), a research initiative supported by Cornell University, [reported](#) damage to the historical Meghretsots Holy Mother of God Church in Shusha. That same month, CHW [released](#) satellite imagery that [indicated](#) probable damage to two Armenian cemeteries also in Shusha.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Azerbaijan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Work with the government of Azerbaijan to revise the 2009 religion law, as most recently amended in 2022, to comply with international human rights standards and to bring it into conformity with recommendations made in 2012 by the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe;
 - Assist the Azerbaijani government, in collaboration with international partners, to develop an alternative civilian service and permit conscientious objection in line with its constitution and pursuant to its commitment made to the Council of Europe and obligations under international human rights law; and
 - Allocate funding to the U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Embassy in Baku to restore, preserve, and protect places of worship and other religious or cultural sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise concerns, through public hearings and other actions, about Azerbaijan’s religious freedom and broader human rights abuses, including treatment of the MUM, directly with the Azerbaijani Embassy and other government officials and advocate for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [State Control of Religion in Azerbaijan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Azerbaijan](#)

Background

Azerbaijan has an [estimated](#) population of approximately 10.4 million. Nearly 96 percent of the population [identify](#) as Muslim, split between 65 percent who identify as Shi'a Muslim and 35 percent who identify as Sunni Muslim. The remaining four percent of the population consists of atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox. The constitution [characterizes](#) Azerbaijan as a secular state and stipulates a separation between the state and religion. Nonetheless, the government continued to play an active role in the management and oversight of religious activities throughout the country and subjected virtually all religious practice to strict state control. Throughout the year, various officials misleadingly sought to [promote](#) Azerbaijan as a "model of state-religion relations."

The government maintained and utilized a problematic conceptualization of the term "extremism," often levying charges of extremist activity against political opponents and those who dissented against or criticized the government. In July 2023, police [arrested](#) scholar Gubad Ibadoghlu on fictitious allegations that included the possession of religious "extremist" materials. In March 2023, the Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights expressed concern in a joint opinion that Azerbaijan [abused](#) such concepts to "restrict the legitimate exercise of the rights to freedom of religion or belief, expression, association, and peaceful assembly."

Crackdown on Muslims

The government routinely harassed, fined, surveilled, detained, arrested, and imprisoned Shi'a Muslims related to their religious activities and religious activism. Law enforcement agencies in particular targeted individuals affiliated with the MUM. The group reported that police [detained](#) or [arrested](#) dozens of its members, many of whom received brief sentences of administrative arrest. In March 2023, a court [sentenced](#) MUM member Mahir Azimov to four years in prison on charges of drug trafficking. In November, the same court [sentenced](#) MUM member Etibar Ismailov to nearly 10 years in prison on the basis of similar accusations. Other MUM members claimed that authorities [subjected](#) them to torture and "psychological pressure" while in custody. In July, guards reportedly [beat](#) MUM member Jeyhun Balashov, while in September, police allegedly [tortured](#) and threatened MUM member Agali Yakhyaev with sexual assault. In February 2023, the European Court for Human Rights [awarded](#) compensation to eight individuals with links to the group who experienced ill treatment while in custody that authorities failed to investigate.

In December, the Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan [documented](#) 183 individuals as "peaceful believers" wrongly imprisoned in connection with their religious beliefs, activities,

or activism. Many of the individuals included on that list were detained in early 2023 in mass arrests that the government carried out as part of a campaign to foil supposed espionage, treason, and drug-related crimes. However, observers claimed that authorities arrested numerous religious activists in those sweeps, with one [stating](#) that he "presume[d] that there are innocent people among the detainees, who were only practicing their religion, and perhaps criticized the government's policy regarding religious freedoms." Additionally, in March, Sabuhi Salimov of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan [died](#) in court after carrying out a hunger strike. In early 2023, another prisoner and leader of the Islamic Party, [Movsum Samadov](#), was [released](#) after he completed his 12-year prison sentence.

Threats to Religious Sites

International observers remained concerned by the potential for the damage or destruction of religious sites located in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian Apostolic priests [expressed fears](#) that the Azerbaijani government would specifically target their community's religious heritage throughout the region.

Key U.S. Policy

The subject of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan monopolized much of the U.S.-Azerbaijan bilateral relationship during the year, as the U.S. government continued to seek a convening and mediating role between the two countries. Throughout the year, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with President Ilham Aliyev on multiple occasions concerning the reopening of the Lachin corridor and the urgency of allowing humanitarian access to Nagorno-Karabakh. The U.S. Department of State also [hosted](#) both countries' foreign ministers as part of ongoing peace negotiations.

The U.S. government continued to highlight concerns for human rights in Azerbaijan. In February, the State Department spokesperson [called for](#) the expeditious release of Azerbaijani activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev and all other persons wrongfully imprisoned. In March 2023, officials from the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) [visited](#) Azerbaijan. At the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference in October, the principal deputy to the ambassador at large for IRF [criticized](#) Azerbaijan, describing it as a place where "religious observance is tightly regulated by the government, and state persecution has continued against some non-state-aligned religious communities, including both Shi'a and Sunni Muslim communities." During Azerbaijan's Universal Periodic Review, the United States once again [called on](#) Azerbaijan to "immediately release all persons incarcerated for exercising their human rights and remove undue restrictions on ... religious activists," among others. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$23 million for programs in Azerbaijan. On December 29, 2023, the State Department [placed](#) Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.

**Commissioner dissent on Azerbaijan by
Chair Abraham Cooper and Commissioners
Susie Gelman, Mohamed Magid, and Nury Turkel**

USCIRF has and does acknowledge religious freedom violations in Azerbaijan, along with violations by many other nations. It is important that issues related to freedom of religion or belief must be raised and addressed.

Last year, the U.S. Department of State listed Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List (SWL) for the first time. Through various discussions with officials at the State Department, they made it clear that in their assessment conditions in Azerbaijan are not at the level of a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). We too believe the conditions previously and currently under review and scrutiny do not rise to the level of CPC. For someone who has traveled multiple times to the region, we agree with the State Department's analysis and strongly disagree with USCIRF's ill-advised recommendation.