

AZERBAIJAN

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, Azerbaijan's government committed severe violations of religious freedom. Authorities [enforced](#) the country's highly restrictive religion law, which criminalizes unregistered religious activities and grants the government full control over registered religious organizations. The religion law furthermore mandates the official review and approval of religious materials, restricts who can engage in missionary activities, and requires state approval of religious leaders, among other limitations.

In April, law enforcement in Nakhichevan reportedly raided a Protestant worship service for gathering without state permission. Courts later reportedly fined five Azerbaijani citizens 1,500 manat (\$882) each and fined and deported a family of foreign citizens over the incident. Also in April, police in Baku reportedly detained members of the unregistered religious group Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light for unfurling banners with religious slogans and imagery in a public space. In June, the State Security Service and State Migration Service announced the deportation of three foreign citizens for organizing religious meetings and engaging in missionary activities for "non-traditional religious movements." In July, Shi'a Muslim activists claimed that the government had placed restrictions on Ashura-related religious activities that did not occur on the day the state-controlled Caucasus Muslim Board recognized as the holiday. The government continued not to process the registration applications of several nondenominational Protestant groups and still has not granted Jehovah's Witnesses registration outside of Baku.

Azerbaijan has yet to implement an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. Dozens of military-age male Jehovah's Witnesses who reject military service on religious grounds have received travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country, and in July, a court sentenced Jehovah's Witness [Elgiz Ibrahimov](#) to one year in prison for refusing to serve in the military in accordance with his religious beliefs. An appeals court later released him on probation.

Azerbaijan continued to unjustly imprison more than 200 Shi'a Muslims who practice their religion outside the government's preferred interpretation of Islam. Most Shi'a detainees face dubious drug-related charges, which authorities have a history of using to target political dissent. Many Shi'a detainees have accused law enforcement of torture and other abuse during their arrests and imprisonment. In June, law enforcement detained and allegedly abused [Elgiz Mammadov](#), a member of the unregistered Shi'a group the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM), which the government has targeted for years. Authorities had previously [arrested](#) and allegedly sexually assaulted Mammadov in 2022 after he protested the trial of one of his fellow MUM colleagues. In July, a court sentenced MUM member [Tarlan Sayyadov](#) to three years in prison on drug-related charges. In August, police arrested six women reportedly while distributing alms and protesting in commemoration of the Shi'a holiday of Arba'in. Officers allegedly threatened the women with sexual assault and forcibly removed one woman's hijab.

Historic Armenian religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories remain at risk following Azerbaijan's retaking of the territories in 2020 and 2023. As of July, satellite imagery identified eight destroyed and another 10 damaged religious sites, including churches, cemeteries, and other artifacts. Additionally, family members have reported that Armenian prisoners are prevented from receiving religious items, such as the Bible; however, the Azerbaijani government has claimed prisoners have access to religious materials.

In February, a USCIRF delegation traveled to Azerbaijan to survey religious freedom conditions and meet with government officials. While the Azerbaijani government has been willing to engage with USCIRF, it has not made any significant progress since then to address USCIRF's recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Azerbaijan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Azerbaijani government agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Main Department for Combating Organized Crime (also known as Bandotdel), and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and

visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- Enter into a memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Department of State and the Azerbaijani government to develop and implement strategies to improve religious freedom and other human rights within the country; and
- Allocate funds to programs that document and/or report on religious freedom and related human rights violations in Azerbaijan, such as Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

The U.S. Congress should:

- Set conditions on foreign military financing and other security assistance to Azerbaijan, requiring specified improvements in religious freedom and related human rights;
- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, and other actions; and
- Advocate for freedom of religion or belief prisoners of conscience, including supporting individuals in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission Delegation Visit:** Baku in February 2025
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

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. 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.

Civil Society Crackdown

Azerbaijan's ongoing repression of independent civil society, especially journalists and human rights defenders, has resulted in less reporting and credible information on religious freedom and related human rights within the country. In March, authorities arrested Bashir Suleymanli, head of the Civil Rights Institute, one of Azerbaijan's remaining human rights organizations. In May, authorities arrested VOA journalist Ulviyya Guliyeva (known as Ulviyya Ali) on spurious smuggling charges in retaliation for her work. Guliyeva had consistently reported on the human rights issues in Azerbaijan, including the detention of Shi'a Muslim activists. During Guliyeva's interrogation, police allegedly physically assaulted her and threatened her with sexual violence. In June, a court sentenced seven journalists to between seven and nine and a half 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. As of the end of the reporting period, Azerbaijan was imprisoning around 25 journalists.

International Bodies and Mechanisms

European bodies regularly highlighted Azerbaijan's human rights record, including on cases related to religious freedom. In July, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) [ordered](#) Azerbaijan to compensate Vugar Rafiyev for violating his freedom of religion or belief after authorities fined him and others for gathering to study the writings of Muslim theologian Said Nursi in 2017. In September, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) [visited](#) Azerbaijan to examine detainee conditions. The CPT had [criticized](#) Azerbaijan in 2024 for failing to cooperate with the organization and implement its recommendations. In October, the ECHR [ruled](#) that Azerbaijan had wrongfully disbarred human rights lawyer Yalchin Imanov for publicly commenting in 2017 on torture allegations made by his client, MUM leader Abbas Huseynov.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Azerbaijani bilateral relations primarily focused on securing a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with the U.S. government playing a mediating role. In August, President Donald J. Trump [hosted](#) Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan at the White House for peace talks. There, both countries [entered](#) into memoranda of understanding with the United States meant to facilitate peace through economic development, trade, and defense cooperation.

The Trump administration's cuts to broader human rights programming and U.S.-funded international media impacted organizations that documented or reported on religious freedom violations in Azerbaijan. A funding freeze for the U.S. Agency for Global Media resulted in the shutdown of VOA and a major reduction in reporting from RFE/RL. Organizations receiving funding from NED reported major disruptions to their operations as NED's funding was temporarily paused amid the administration's review of foreign aid.

Congress elevated human rights concerns in Azerbaijan throughout the year, including related to religious freedom. In March, 60 bipartisan members of Congress [urged](#) U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio to enforce prohibitions on U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan under [Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act](#) in part due to Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian religious heritage in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In April, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) led a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [hearing](#) on human rights in Azerbaijan following its hosting of the United Nations' annual climate conference. In July, more than 80 bipartisan members of Congress urged Secretary Rubio to ensure the safe return of Armenians displaced during Azerbaijan's 2023 military campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh. The letter mentioned Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian religious sites in the region.

In September, Representatives Dina Titus (D-NV) and Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) reintroduced the Azerbaijan Sanctions Review Act ([H.R. 5369](#)), which, if passed, would require the Trump administration to determine whether Azerbaijani officials mentioned in the bill participated in human rights abuses and qualified for sanctions under relevant U.S. law. Some of the Azerbaijani judges mentioned in the bill have been involved in sentencing Shi'a Muslim activists. Members of both the [House](#) and [Senate](#) introduced bipartisan resolutions condemning Azerbaijan's crackdown on civil society and mistreatment of academic and political activist Gubad Ibadoghlu, who faces charges in relation to his alleged possession of religious materials.

The U.S. Department of State last [placed](#) Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023.

Chair Vicky Hartzler Dissent on Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan should be designated a Country of Particular Concern rather than Special Watch List due to its ongoing, egregious, and severe violations of religious freedom. The country outwardly claims to support religious freedom, yet inwardly does the opposite. It tortures its citizens, controls religious activity, expels independent media and the Red Cross, and destroys religious heritage sites.

Control of religion involves government approval for the publication and distribution of religious materials, requirements on the registration of churches, appointments by the government of imams to mosques, and government writing of sermons for Muslim services.

Shi'a religious actors imprisoned for their faith have been subjected to beatings, threats of rape, and detention in horrid conditions. The nearly two dozen Armenian Christian prisoners from Nagorno-Karabakh, who were tried behind closed doors without adequate legal counsel, have received beatings, psychological abuse, lack of access to medical care and proper food, denials of Bibles, and the erasure of cross tattoos through burning. Police are not held accountable for these actions.

In addition, Azerbaijan continues to destroy religious monuments and churches in Nagorno-Karabakh, erasing over 2,000 years of Christian presence in that area. Satellite imagery has identified eight destroyed and another 10 damaged religious sites as of July, including churches, cemeteries, and other artifacts.

Azerbaijan's treatment of religion and its people needs to change. If Azerbaijan wants to be a full partner with the United States and advance shared economic and strategic goals, it needs to take meaningful steps to truly embrace religious freedom.