

World
Watch
Research

Azerbaijan: Full Country Dossier

February 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Introduction

World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2022 Situation in brief / Azerbaijan

Brief country details

Azerbaijan: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
10,179,000	247,000	2.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Azerbaijan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	60	56
WWL 2021	56	61
WWL 2020	57	53
WWL 2019	57	50
WWL 2018	57	45

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Azerbaijan: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties
Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Clan oppression	One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

The government of Azerbaijan monitors the activities of religious groups closely. Officially, the country is secular and religion is tolerated. However, the level of surveillance is so high that Christians in Azerbaijan do not know whom to trust anymore. Russian Orthodox churches experience the least problems from the government as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Azerbaijani population. It is the indigenous Christians with a Muslim background who are bearing the brunt of persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- Azerbaijani forces attacked a church in the city of Shushi on 8 October 2020 during the Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities, in what appears to be a deliberate targeting. (Source: [Human Rights Watch - HRW, 16 December 2020](#))
- Two elderly Armenian Christian civilians were beheaded by Azerbaijani armed forces. They were residents aged 69 and 82 from the villages of Madatashen and Azokh in Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenian: Artsakh). (Source: [International Christian Concern - ICC, 16 December 2020](#))
- Saint John the Baptist Church, also known as Kanach Zham, reportedly faced partial demolition by Azeri troops just days after Shushi came under their control. This vandalism against Armenian Christian heritage sites adds to the list including Ghazanchetsots Cathedral of Shushi, St. Astvatsatsin Church of Mekhakavan, and others. (Source: [ICC, 29 March 2021](#))

Specific examples of positive developments

There were no positive reports about freedom of religion in Azerbaijan during the WWL 2022 reporting period.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Human Rights Watch - HRW, 16 December 2020 - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/azerbaijan-attack-church-possible-war-crime>

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: International Christian Concern - ICC, 16 December 2020 - <https://www.persecution.org/2020/12/16/beheaded-armenian-christians-identified/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: ICC, 29 March 2021 - <https://www.persecution.org/2021/03/29/azeri-vandalism-armenian-church-incites-plea-protection/>

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / Azerbaijan

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/azerbaijan/	14 September 2021
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17043424	14 September 2021
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/AZE	14 September 2021
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/azerbaijan/	14 September 2021
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf	14 September 2021
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	14 September 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/nations-transit/2021	14 September 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2021	14 September 2021
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-net/2020	14 September 2021
Garda World country report	Garda World	https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/azerbaijan	14 September 2021
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/azerbaijan	14 September 2021
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#az	14 September 2021
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2020	https://rsf.org/en/azerbaijan	14 September 2021
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/aze	14 September 2021
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators	HDI 2020	http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/AZE	14 September 2021
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2020	https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/	14 September 2021
USCIRF 2021 country reports	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Azerbaijan%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf	14 September 2021
World Bank country report	World Bank	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/azerbaijan	14 September 2021

Recent history

Azerbaijan declared independence from the former Soviet Union on 30 August 1991, with Ayaz Mutalibov, former First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, becoming the country's first president. Elections in June 1992 resulted in the selection of Popular Front Party (PFP) leader Abulfaz Elchibey becoming the country's first democratically elected, non-Communist president.

The early years of Azerbaijan's independence (1992-1994) were overshadowed by the war waged between the ethnic Armenian majority living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (backed by Armenia) and the army of Azerbaijan. By the end of hostilities in 1994, Armenians controlled up to 14–16% of Azerbaijani territory. A cease-fire was reached, but the problematic issue was never resolved. There have been periodic outbreaks of military activity and, as a result, there is a huge distrust of everything Armenian in Azerbaijan.

President Elchibey was formally deposed by a national referendum in August 1993, when the National Council conferred presidential powers upon its new speaker, Heydar Aliyev, former First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party (1969–81) and later a member of the Soviet

Union's Politburo, the KGB, and USSR Deputy Prime Minister (until 1987). Aliyev was elected to a 5-year term as president in October 1993 with only token opposition. Aliyev won re-election to another 5-year term in 1998, in an election marred by serious irregularities.

Azerbaijan's Constitution was changed at the end of 2002. This was done to make it possible for the son of the 80-year-old president, Ilham Aliyev, to succeed his father who was admitted to a Turkish hospital in July 2003, suffering from heart problems. In August 2003, Ilham Aliyev was appointed premier. In the October 2003 presidential elections, Ilham Aliyev was announced winner while international observers reported several irregularities. He was re-elected to a third term as president in October 2013. He then launched a crackdown on opposition elements. In April 2018 President Aliyev secured a fourth term with opposition parties boycotting the elections.

On [25 September 2020](#) a new war erupted between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region (Asia News, 27 September 2020). This time, the Azerbaijani army managed to defeat the Armenians. A peace agreement was announced on [12 November 2020](#), which meant that Nagorno-Karabakh returned under the authority of Azerbaijan, while 2,000 Russian soldiers would protect the Armenian population (Jamestown Foundation, 12 November 2020). Since then there have been various incidents along the frontline. One of the most recent examples is the skirmish that occurred on 17 August 2021. (Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - [RFE-RL, 17 August 2021](#))

Christians in Azerbaijan have been under close surveillance for decades now. Restrictions in Azerbaijan are so oppressive, that Azerbaijani Christians find it easier to evangelize in neighboring Iran than in their own country.

Political and legal landscape

Azerbaijan is a semi-presidential republic, with the President of Azerbaijan as the head of state, and the Prime Minister of Azerbaijan as head of government. Executive power is exercised by the president and the government. Legislative power is vested in both the government and parliament. The Judiciary is nominally independent of the executive and the legislature. Since 2008, the Constitution of Azerbaijan was amended, abolishing any term limit for the office of president. Since 21 February 2017, Ilham Aliyev's wife Mehriba was [appointed](#) vice-president of Azerbaijan (RFE-RL, 21 February 2017).

Azerbaijan has a Constitution and parliament, but in fact all power lies in the hands of the president. All opposition and human rights movements and independent media are very much restricted in Azerbaijan, and it is not unusual for opposition politicians and journalists to be imprisoned. Azerbaijan is currently ruled by President Ilham Aliyev, who came to power in October 2003, succeeding his ailing father Heydar Aliyev (see above: *Recent history*).

The government, foreign apologists and religious leaders (coerced or co-opted by the regime) use claims of what is called "tolerance", "dialogue", "multiculturalism" and similar terms to deny the reality of the serious human rights violations occurring in the country. For example, delegations of religious leaders are used for propaganda when the government seeks

international trade agreements. The regime and its foreign apologists even claim that other countries should promote "the Azerbaijani model of tolerance". (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018](#))

The government regularly invites delegations from human rights organizations and international political institutes like the EU, UN and others. These visitors are then provided with a program to visit cities and meet with well-selected representatives of the people of Azerbaijan (including representatives of the registered churches), who confirm the government's claims about tolerance. However, it is not possible for delegations to meet with members of the opposition (since these are in prison) or people from churches that do not have registration. The result is that from time to time very favorable reports on Azerbaijan are published, also by the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) after an [official visit](#) in April 2017 (WEA, 10 April 2017).

In line with the president's reform agenda and at his request, the ruling New Azerbaijan Party dissolved parliament on 2 December 2019 and agreed to hold early parliamentary elections. On the same day, the Constitutional Court ruled that the chief executive's request for the parliament's dissolution was legally valid, and the head of state, in turn signed a decree to schedule early elections for 9 February 2020. Opposition parties, including Musavat and REAL, nominated candidates for the election (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 27 January 2020](#)). It came as no surprise that in these elections President Ilham Aliyev's ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) increased its share by four seats in the single-chamber legislature and only one opposition candidate won a seat (Source: [RFE-RL, 9 February 2020](#)).

According to US State Department IRFR 2020:

- "The constitution stipulates the separation of religion and state and the equality of all religions. It also protects the right of individuals to express their religious beliefs and to practice religious rituals, provided these do not violate public order or public morality. The law prohibits the government from interfering in religious activities; it also states the government and citizens have a responsibility to combat 'religious extremism' and 'radicalism'. The law specifies the government may dissolve religious organizations if they cause racial, national, religious, or social animosity; proselytize in a way that 'degrades human dignity'; or hinder secular education."

According to USCIRF 2021:

- In 2020: "The Azerbaijani government continued to regulate religious activity through its 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs (religion law), requiring all religious communities to register in order to operate, mandating state approval for religious literature and related materials, and placing limitations on certain other religious activities. In 2020, the Azerbaijani government reportedly registered 14 religious communities, including two Christian communities. It did not, however, provide registration to all unregistered communities—such as some Jehovah's Witnesses and Lutherans—despite initial impressions that they would finally receive registration within the year."
- "The government continued to imprison individuals related to their religious activism. Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that maintain lists of political prisoners in the country estimate that between 43 and 51 current prisoners are religious activists."

On 16 June 2021, President Ilham Aliyev signed into law [Religion Law and Administrative Code changes](#) introducing new restrictions on freedom of religion and belief. These include requiring the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations to approve the appointment of all non-Islamic religious leaders and to take part in the re-attestation of all clerics of the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board every five years. The new controls come on top of strict controls that the regime already imposes on all exercise of freedom of religion and belief by anyone, anywhere in Azerbaijan. Any meeting by a group of people without state permission is illegal, as are meetings held in venues without state approval. Religious teaching is similarly restricted. All religious literature must undergo pre-publication censorship by the State Committee. Those who violate these state controls face punishment. (Source: Forum 18, 17 June 2021)

There are no religious political parties in Azerbaijan. As a result, Christians do not play a part in Azerbaijani politics.

The government has also taken up the task of keeping its image intact by vigorously opposing any reports critical of the country published in other countries - including reports concerning the persecution of Christians. In 2013 The Azerbaijani embassy in Germany approached the German Open Doors Development office to ask how it was possible that their country had ended up on the Open Doors World Watch List, an index indicating high, very high and extreme levels of Christian persecution in various countries. They repeated these moves after the publication of WWL 2016. Denials of reality are a routine tactic of the government and its apologists.

Religious landscape

Azerbaijan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	247,000	2.4
Muslim	9,797,000	96.2
Hindu	300	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	8,600	0.1
Bahai	2,100	0.0
Atheist	5,800	0.1
Agnostic	117,000	1.1
Other	1,800	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

According to the World Christian Database (accessed April 2021), 96.2% of the population are Muslim and only 2.4% Christian. Azerbaijan is unique among the former Soviet republics in having a large majority of Shiites (85% of the country's Muslims) and a small minority of Sunni Muslims (15%). However, it would be wrong to call Azerbaijan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence: The government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and has put Islam under very strict control. Most of the Muslim population would seem to follow Islamic traditions purely as a form of culture. In a [2006–2008 Gallup poll](#), only 21% of respondents from Azerbaijan stated that religion is an important part of their daily lives (TodayAZ 12 February 2009). This makes Azerbaijan the least religious Muslim-majority country in the world.

Christianity in Azerbaijan is perceived with some hostility. This has historical reasons: Russian imperialism, Armenian enmity and Western neo-colonialism are all regarded as a blemish to the nation. Due to the massive emigration of Armenians and Russians since 1991, churches in Azerbaijan have seen a marked decrease in numbers. Another weakness of the Christian witness in Azerbaijan is that it is severely divided. There is little cooperation and much division between the various denominations. This plays into the hands of the government because it makes the Church weaker.

In addition to the restrictions contained in published laws, many faith communities have found that there are also unwritten restrictions. Without indications of approval from senior regime figures, groups are unlikely to be allowed to exercise freedom of religion and belief. This prevents communities from legally existing and carrying out activities such as opening places of worship, recovering property confiscated in Soviet times, holding public events and publishing religious literature. (Source: [Forum 18, Religious Freedom Survey, November 2018](#))

Azerbaijan uses a special government agency, the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), to supervise (and restrict) religion. To function as a religious group, it is necessary to register with the SCWRA. This requires the signatures of 50 official members. Furthermore, the SCWRA must approve of all religious literature and materials before it may be produced, imported or distributed.

The registration process, which started after a set of laws regulating religious affairs was introduced in 2009, seemed to have ground to a halt for many years, leaving many re-registration applications unanswered. Some religious communities have found that compulsory re-registration means de-registration. For example, the Baptist Union had 10 registered congregations in 1992; after a series of compulsory re-registrations with ever decreasing numbers of congregations being accepted, only one congregation (in Baku) was finally re-registered in 2015. All the other congregations which lodged repeated applications had received rejections (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018](#)); however, there was some movement in 2020: Aliabad's Baptist community, denied legal status for 25 years finally began open worship in January 2020. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations wrote that it had "no objection" to meetings once a week for two hours (Source: [Forum 18, 27 March 2020](#)). On the whole, however, State Committee officials continue to deny state registration to religious communities that do have the 50 adult citizens required to lodge an application. Religious communities have long complained of the State Committee's arbitrary

and opaque decision-making processes (Source: [Forum 18, March 2020](#)).

According to US State Department IRFR 2020:

- "The administrative code prohibits 'clergy and members of religious associations from holding special meetings for children and young people as well as the organizing or holding by religious bodies of organized labor, literary, or other clubs and groups unassociated with holding religious ceremonies'."
- "The law restricts the use of religious symbols and slogans to inside places of worship."
- In 2019: "There were a total 963 registered communities at the end of the year, of which 37 were non-Muslim – 26 Christian, eight Jewish, two Baha'i, and one the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. The SCWRA also said 2,250 mosques, 14 churches, and seven synagogues were registered. There were 23 Christian prayer houses (worship spaces that did not have the status of a church), one Baha'i house of worship, and one Krishna Consciousness house of worship in the country at year's end."

According to USCIRF 2021:

- "The reemergence of active fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories in late September prompted serious concerns about the preservation and protection of Armenian places of worship and other religious sites in those areas. In October, Azerbaijani forces reportedly targeted and shelled the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in the city of Shusha two times, resulting in extensive damage to that building and possibly constituting a war crime. Azerbaijan claimed that during the fighting, Armenian forces damaged various religious and cultural sites as a result of shelling as well. Following the November 10 ceasefire and the cession of some territories to Azerbaijan, media outlets documented the apparently recent vandalization and destruction of Armenian cemeteries and gravestones. That same month, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev pledged to protect Christian churches and specified that 'Christians of Azerbaijan' would be given access to those places of worship."

Economic landscape

According to World Bank data:

- **GDP growth (annual):** 1.5%. Azerbaijan's GDP growth has been declining since 2010.

Azerbaijan is one of the richest countries in the former Soviet Union with an unemployment rate of only 5.4% and a relatively small percentage of the population living below the poverty line (6%). Mining and hydrocarbon industries account for well over 95% of the Azerbaijani economy. There is an urgent need for diversification, but no significant steps in this direction have been taken yet. Despite massive oil wealth, much of the population remains [in poverty](#) (Forum 18, 7 November 2018). Transparency International (CPI 2020) describes corruption in the country as "rampant", and has uncovered large-scale bribery of foreign politicians and others to deny the regime's serious human rights violations.

According to the CIA Factbook:

- Azerbaijan's high economic growth has been attributable to large and growing oil and gas exports, but some non-export sectors also featured double-digit growth, including construction, banking and real estate. Oil exports through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Novorossiysk and Baku-Supsa pipelines remain the main economic driver, but efforts to boost Azerbaijan's gas production are underway.

In July 2015, Russia stepped up its pressure on Azerbaijan by extending the area under Russian control in South Ossetia in Georgia southwards. Now more than 1.5 kilometers of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the main export line, is under Russian control. Another factor having a major impact on Azerbaijan is the drop in the price of oil since 2014. The collapse of oil prices and oil demand along with the economic shutdown imposed to fight the COVID-19 pandemic have put even more strain on Azerbaijan's economy. The upheaval on the global oil market has exposed fragilities in Azerbaijan's banking system as four of its banks were recently put under temporary administration of the central bank and others had their capital requirements relaxed. The government has introduced economic and social packages to mitigate the consequences of the crisis; however, growth forecasts in 2020 remain pessimistic. (Source: [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 16 June 2020](#))

Christians in Azerbaijan have no special position in the country's economy and they are just as affected as the rest of the population by the deteriorating economy.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards) and the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Azerbaijani 91.6%, Lezghin 2%, Russian 1.3%, Armenian 1.3%, Talysh 1.3%, other 2.4% (2009 est.). Note: The separatist Nagorno-Karabakh region is populated almost entirely by ethnic Armenians
- **Main languages:** Azerbaijani (Azeri) (official) 92.5%, Russian 1.4%, Armenian 1.4%, other 4.7% (2009 est.). Note: Russian is widely spoken.
- **Urban population:** 56.8% of total population (2021)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.8%

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI 2020):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.756, ranking 88
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 73.0 years
- **Expected years of schooling:** 12.9 years (13.0 for females, 12.8 for males)
- **Employment to population ratio (% ages 15 years and older):** 62.8%
- **Population in multidimensional poverty, headcount (thousands – for the year of the survey):** not available
- **Gender inequality index:** 0.943
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 63.4, Male: 69.7.

Azerbaijan ranked 129th in the 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index of 180 countries (CPI 2020). Corruption is endemic at all levels of administration and government and Christians have to face its effect on a daily basis – if they want to get anything done they must be prepared to pay bribes. Unregistered groups suffer most since they know that their activities are illegal and that they need to bribe officials to look the other way. Facing growing public discontent concerning corruption, the mismanagement of the economy and the handling of the COVID-19 crisis, president has responded by cracking down on the opposition. (Source: [RFE-RL, 30 July 2020](#))

People interested in the Christian faith can obtain materials in their own language. The fact that the Azeri language is related to Turkish means that many materials in Turkish can also benefit Christians in Azerbaijan. Another important factor is the presence of more than 12 million Azerbaijanis in neighboring Iran. This has provided an opportunity for outreach.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2021):

- **Internet usage:** 78.2% penetration - survey date: June 2021
- **Facebook usage:** 42.4% penetration - survey date: June 2021

According to World Bank's country profile:

- **Mobile cellular subscriptions:** 103.9 per 100 people (2018)

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated 24 August 2020):

- "The Azerbaijani economy has a major dependence on oil resources and the ICT industry. The COVID-19 pandemic and oil price slump is expected to result in an economic contraction of 2.2% in 2020, and slow recovery afterwards. The telecom sector is also exposed to the risk of delays in infrastructure and the launching of services based on new technologies, including 5G."
- "The mobile market is concentrated, with Azercell, Bakcell, and Azerfon together accounting for around 95% of the market. Azercell has trialled 5G, though other MNOs plan to defer 5G until there is greater market demand, instead opting to focus on the extensive reach of LTE to carry increasing data traffic."
- "The mobile sector has seen considerable development in network expansion, though growth in the number of subscribers has been inconsistent in recent years, partly in line with the economic vagaries. The subscriber base fell in 2016 and 2017, and though it has recovered since the pace of growth is expected to be slower in 2020 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Growth during the next five years will be bolstered by the emergence of 5G though it is expected to be progressively slower as the market matures and the penetration rate rises."
- "In line with development in the mobile market, the number of mobile broadband subscribers has grown rapidly over the past five years, supported by widespread rollouts of

LTE infrastructure and the promotion of an attractive range of packages by the MNOs. Moderate growth is predicted over the next five years, driven by increasingly faster speeds and, from about 2022, from emerging 5G networks."

- "Fixed-line broadband market penetration has grown slightly over the last five years. Over the next five years growth is expected to continue to follow the same trend."

The media are under state control and since September 2014, the authorities have required that official guidelines are adhered to, which has made it impossible to legally criticize government policies (Source: [RFE-RL, 9 September 2014](#)). In July 2016, the independent TV station ANS TV had its license revoked for allegedly expressing support for US-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen at the time of the failed coup against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ([Reuters, 29 July 2016](#)).

According to Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020, Azerbaijan is listed as '*not free*' with a score of 38, a slight deterioration compared to the previous year. Due to infrastructural challenges, Internet connections are of low quality and out of reach for many. The state remains in control of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector. The government manipulates the online information landscape, having blocked most websites that host unfavorable news coverage. In practice, human rights are not respected online, and those who voice dissent online can expect prosecution if they reside in Azerbaijan, or intimidation if they live abroad. Internet access is under surveillance and the government does block foreign websites at times. One example was the blocking of the website of Radio Free Europe in 2017 (Source: [RFE-RL, 12 May 2017](#)). However, such blockages of websites by the regime are rare. This means that Azeri Christians usually have the opportunity to access foreign Christian websites. Since there are more cell phones in Azerbaijan than people, this offers opportunities for Christian mission via SD cards. Foreign Christian radio (medium and short wave) and television stations (satellite) can also be accessed from within Azerbaijan.

Security situation

The [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office](#) (FCDO, accessed 14 September 2021) warns against civilian travel to:

- Nagorno-Karabakh;
- The rayons of Zengilan, Jabrayil, Qubadli, Lachin and Kelbajar. Western areas of Khojavand, Fuzuli and Aghdam rayons;
- within 5km of the border with Armenia.

Radical Islam

On 31 January 2017, the security forces in Azerbaijan killed four alleged Islamic militants suspected of plotting terror attacks. The suspects were killed in a shoot-out during a search operation that was launched after they opened fire at security forces. A fifth alleged member of the group was taken into custody. According to the security service, the suspects were connected to an unspecified religious extremist group abroad and planned a series of terrorist attacks on Azerbaijan's territory (Source: [RFE/RL, 1 February 2017](#)).

On 4 November 2018 Azerbaijani police killed two alleged Islamic militants in Ganca, Azerbaijan's second-largest city. They were killed after they refused to stop their car and opened fire at police (Source: [RFE-RL, 5 November 2018](#)).

In July 2019, the Islamic State group (IS) posted a video of the oath taken by Azerbaijani militants to the leader of the IS. This was the first IS video purportedly from Azerbaijan. The video showed three men holding weapons with IS symbols set up behind them. Azerbaijani fighters are known to have supported IS forces abroad, one of whom was reportedly captured in Syria in 2018 (Source: [Caucasian Knot, 3 July 2019](#)).

Christians in Azerbaijan have not suffered much from radical Islamic activity.

The Nagorno-Karabakh enclave

Prior to the outbreak of war in September 2020, the conflict with Armenia over the [Nagorno-Karabakh enclave](#) had never been settled and only a fragile ceasefire was in place (Source: [Caucasian Knot, 8 July 2020](#)). The two countries held occasional talks to try to find a solution for this longest-running conflict in the former Soviet Union. The enclave is populated mostly by Armenians and many Armenian Christians fled Azerbaijan since the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh erupted in the 1990s. Altogether about one million people had been displaced and more than 35,000 killed as a result of the conflict.

The Karabakh conflict erupted three times in 2020. On 24 February 2020 one Azerbaijani soldier was killed by Armenian fire in the Gazakh district. A spokesman for the Armenian Defense Ministry said that one Armenian serviceman was slightly wounded in the fighting (Source: [RFE-RL, 24 February 2020](#)). Much more serious was the fighting that occurred on 12 July 2020. It is interesting that the fighting occurred far from Nagorno-Karabakh and was directly between the two nations (Armenia and Azerbaijan), which rarely occurs (Source: [RFE-RL, 12 July 2020](#)). At the end of [September 2020](#) a full-fledged armed conflict was fought (Asia News, 27 September 2020). This time the Azerbaijani army managed to beat the Armenian forces. In Azerbaijan this led to an increase in the government surveillance of Christians (particularly those with Armenian connections) and of organizations with connections to Western countries. Especially Protestant churches have now come under increased scrutiny.

Trends analysis

1) Azerbaijan continues to have very restrictive legislation

Azerbaijan is a country that can best be described as an intelligent dictatorship under President Ilham Aliyev. To stay in power, the government uses a wide range of tactics. First of all, the country has very restrictive legislation. Since 1992 the government has amended the Law on Religious Freedom 14 times. One of the very negative effects of this is that at least six times since 1991 all churches in Azerbaijan have been obliged to re-register under increasingly harsher conditions. It should come as no surprise that at each round of re-registration fewer and fewer congregations manage to satisfy the requirements.

2) All forms of opposition are under constant surveillance

The security and secret services have a wide mandate and are numerically strong. All opposition, be it political, social, religious, or through the media, are under constant surveillance. Arrests and beatings occur on a very regular basis. Churches that have no registration face the constant threat of raids, confiscation, arrests and fines. Pastors and other church leaders are invited from time to time to go to the police station or the secret police for 'discussions', just to keep the pressure up. The authorities have also managed to create an atmosphere of distrust among Christians. It is believed that all churches have been infiltrated by informers who report to the authorities. As a result, no one knows who can be trusted any more.

3) There are no major political threats challenging the regime

In many respects Azerbaijan has developed the most sophisticated and intelligent system for staying in power. So far, it has been very successful and there are currently no major threats challenging the regime. In April 2018 President Aliyev secured a fourth term while opposition boycotted the elections. Due to the high level of state control and the weakness of the opposition, there is hardly any chance that there will be a change of government in the near future. The success in the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh that started in September 2020 has increased President Aliyev's popularity.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: 25 September 2020 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Clashes-in-the-Caucasus.-The-Armenian-Catholicos-interrupts-official-visit-to-Italy-and-the-Vatican--51145.html>
- Recent history: 12 November 2020 - <https://jamestown.org/program/karabakh-armistice-azerbaijani-national-triumph-russian-geopolitical-victory-part-one/>
- Recent history: RFE-RL, 17 August 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-border-skirmish-azerbaijan-/31415413.html>
- Political and legal landscape: appointed - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-aliyev-names-wife-aliyeva-vice-president/28322210.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
- Political and legal landscape: official visit - <https://worldea.org/en/news/religious-dialogue-in-azerbaijan/>
- Political and legal landscape: Jamestown Foundation, 27 January 2020 - <https://jamestown.org/program/a-year-in-review-azerbaijan-pursues-internal-reforms-and-external-multilateralism/>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE-RL, 9 February 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-vote-millimajlis-aliyev-parliament/30424655.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Religion Law and Administrative Code changes - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2666
- Religious landscape description: 2006–2008 Gallup poll - <https://web.archive.org/web/20141006084434/http://www.today.az/news/society/50636.html>
- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, Religious Freedom Survey, November 2018 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, 27 March 2020 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2557
- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, March 2020 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2557
- Economic landscape: in poverty - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429

- Economic landscape: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 16 June 2020 - <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13626-azerbaijans-economy-takes-a-double-blow.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP's full 2020 report - <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE-RL, 30 July 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-s-despotic-ruler-throws-tantrum-in-unprecedented-crackdown-on-pro-democracy-rivals/30757480.html>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Azerbaijan-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: RFE-RL, 9 September 2014 - <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-squeezes-civil-society-media/26574692.html>
- Technological landscape: Reuters, 29 July 2016 - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-azerbaijan-turkey-gulen-idUSKCN1091YD>
- Technological landscape: RFE-RL, 12 May 2017 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-rferl-service-website-court-orders-blocked/28482679.html>
- Security situation: Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office - <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/azerbaijan>
- Security situation: RFE/RL, 1 February 2017 - <http://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-four-terrorists-killed-shootout/28271554.html>
- Security situation: RFE-RL, 5 November 2018 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijani-authorities-say-two-extremists-killed-in-tense-city-of-ganca/29583259.html>
- Security situation: Caucasian Knot, 3 July 2019 - <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/47682/>
- Security situation: Nagorno-Karabakh enclave - <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>
- Security situation: Caucasian Knot, 8 July 2020 - <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/51423/>
- Security situation: RFE-RL, 24 February 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-trade-accusations-over-deadly-border-fighting/30451616.html>
- Security situation: RFE-RL, 12 July 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-armenia-trade-accusations-over-deadly-border-fighting/30722243.html>
- Security situation: September 2020 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Clashes-in-the-Caucasus.-The-Armenian-Catholicos-interrupts-official-visit-to-Italy-and-the-Vatican--51145.html>

WWL 2022: Church information / Azerbaijan

Christian origins

Christianity arrived in the Kingdom of Caucasian Albania in the 1st century AD. The origins and formation of the Albanian Church are closely associated with the history of eastern Christianity (Nestorianism). Christianity officially became the state religion at the beginning of the 4th century. Invading Arab armies turned Caucasian Albania into a vassal state after the Christian resistance, led by King Javanshir, was suppressed in 667. From this moment onwards, Islam seeped into the country. At the beginning of the 11th century, the territory was seized by waves of Turkic Oghuz tribes from Central Asia. The first of these Turkic dynasties established was the Seljuqs, who entered the area now known as Azerbaijan by 1067. A clear division began to develop with Islam being the religion of the Azeris and Christianity the religion of the minority Armenians.

In the 16th century, the first shah of the Safavid established Shia Islam as the state religion. In 1806, what is now Azerbaijan became occupied by the Russian Empire during the Russo-Persian War (1804-1813). With the Russians came a new wave of Christians, since the regime brought in ethnic Russians, who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1918 Azerbaijan

declared independence but they were conquered by the Soviets in 1920. Since Azerbaijan became an independent state again in 1991, many Russians have left the country, which has especially weakened the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian Protestants, however, have played a formative role in the initial stages of the new Azeri church.

Church spectrum today

Azerbaijan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	220,000	89.1
Catholic	680	0.3
Protestant	19,800	8.0
Independent	5,200	2.1
Unaffiliated	880	0.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	246,560	99.8
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	9,300	3.8
Renewalist movement	14,400	5.8

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

According to World Christian Database data (accessed April 2021), the biggest denominations in Azerbaijan are:

- The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)
- The Armenian Apostolic Church (exclusively in the Nagorno-Karabakh region)

Christians are a small minority, mostly belonging to Orthodox churches made up of ethnic minorities - mainly Russian and Armenian. There are also approximately 10,000 Azeri Christian converts. Large-scale Russian emigration explains the negative overall growth rate of Christianity in Azerbaijan. Christianity in Azerbaijan is perceived with some hostility (see above: *Religious landscape*).

WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / Azerbaijan

Reporting period

1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

Azerbaijan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	60	56
WWL 2021	56	61
WWL 2020	57	53
WWL 2019	57	50
WWL 2018	57	45

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

The WWL 2022 score is four points higher than in WWL 2021 – mainly due to the war crime violence committed during the Karabakh war that began on 25 September 2020. The levels of pressure are highest in the *Church* and *Private spheres of life* and also rose. The two main Persecution engines in Azerbaijan are *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Islamic oppression* (blended with *Clan oppression*) are active in all spheres of life, but the latter dominates in the *Private* and *Family spheres of life*, while the former dominates in the *National* and *Church spheres of life*. Both engines 'meet' each other in the *Community sphere of life*. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure on converts in particular, while the government imposes many restrictions on church activities.

Persecution engines

Azerbaijan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Very weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. State agents are reported to have infiltrated all religious congregations. Pastors and other church leaders are regularly invited for conversations with the police. This has created an atmosphere of fear and no one knows who they can trust any longer. As a result, few dare to talk to foreigners and information about persecution is scarce. Restrictive legislation that requires registration has been imposed. From time to time all registered groups are required to apply for re-registration, a process in which ever fewer congregations manage to pass the hurdle. The level of oppression in Azerbaijan is so high that Azerbaijani Christians find it easier to evangelize in Iran than in their own country.

Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression) (Medium)

Christian converts from a Muslim background are particularly affected. If indigenous people convert to Christianity, they will experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to recant and return to their former faith. Some converts will be locked up for long periods and be beaten. Local imams preach against them and they may eventually be expelled from their communities. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their new faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Azerbaijan: Drivers of Persecution									
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM	-	-	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	-	VERY WEAK	STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	Medium	Very weak	-	Very weak	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Very weak	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	-	Medium	Very weak	-	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	-	Strong	Weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Strong):** At all levels, government officials are the strongest persecutors of Christians in Azerbaijan. They have infiltrated all churches and police interrogate pastors and other church leaders regularly. They monitor all religious activities, raid meetings and block the distribution of religious materials.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Especially at the local level, members of the community will monitor religious activities and report to the authorities.

- **Political parties (Medium):** Few parties are allowed in Azerbaijan and opposition is constantly suppressed. The governing party under President Aliyev is a powerful element in suppressing religious and other forms of freedom in the country.

Drivers of Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression)

- **Muslim family members (Strong):** A convert's Muslim family will exert high pressure since they regard conversion to Christianity as betrayal. This may lead to house arrest and beatings.
- **Government officials (Medium):** At the community level there is a link between government officials and Muslim pressure. Often, active Muslims and local officials know each other. This is why the pressure on converts is stronger at the community level than at the state level, where officials claim that they are secular.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Muslim leaders are also oppressed by the government and have limited freedom. Nevertheless, that does not stop them using their influence to oppose any conversion of Azerbaijanis to Christianity.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Islam is the traditional religion for ethnic Azerbaijanis. Normal citizens at the community level will exert high pressure on converts to return to Islam.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020), Christians live mainly in Baku and other urban areas.

There are no hotspots for the persecution of Christians in Azerbaijan, but pressure from the Muslim environment on converts is more intense outside the major cities. After the Karabakh conflict in the 1990s, many Christians in Azerbaijan (who were ethnic Armenians) left the country or went to the break-away republic. The new fighting that erupted at the end of September 2020 over Karabakh had severe consequences for Christians in the region as shelling destroyed houses, official buildings and even a few churches. Hundreds of people were killed.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians in Azerbaijan are not involuntarily isolated from other Christian communities and so have not been considered as a separate category for WWL analysis and scoring.

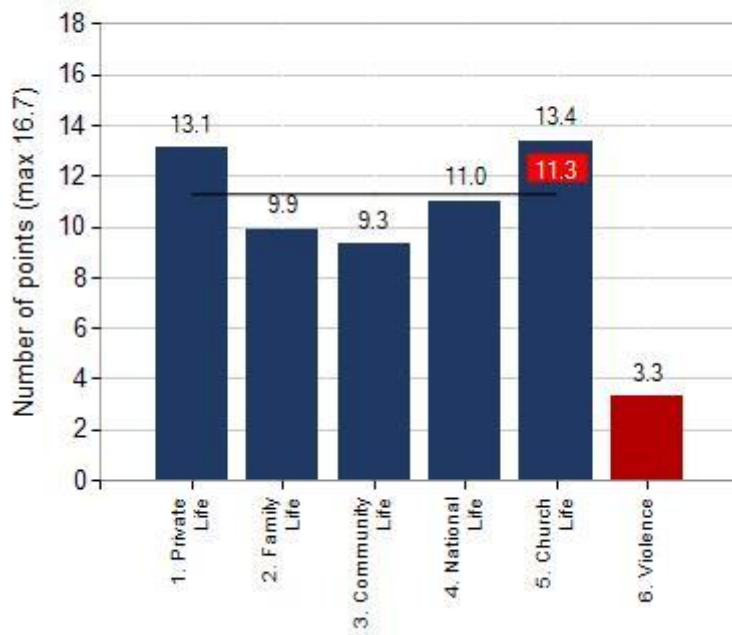
Historical Christian communities: These groups are not involved in evangelism among Azeris and can function without too much government interference. They will also be used to corroborate the propaganda of the regime that Azerbaijan is the "Land of Tolerance".

Converts to Christianity: Christian converts with a Muslim background bear the brunt of the persecution in Azerbaijan. Apart from restrictions from the state, they are under strong pressure from family, friends and community, which affects them more directly.

Non-traditional Christian communities: These groups are high on the government’s agenda. They have been infiltrated by informers, and all their activities are constantly being monitored. Pastors and church leaders are required to report to the police regularly. Due to the repeated cycles of obligatory re-registration every 6-7 years, ever fewer congregations in this category exist.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern for Azerbaijan



The WWL 2022 Persecution pattern for Azerbaijan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.3 points), an increase from 11.1 points in WWL 2021. The increase was caused by higher scores for pressure in the *Private, Family* and especially *Church spheres of life*.
- The two spheres of life with the highest level of pressure were again *Private life* and *Church life*. Pressure on Christians comes from two main sources: *Islamic oppression* (blended with *Clan oppression*) in the *Private sphere of life* and *Dictatorial paranoia* in the *Church sphere of life*.
- The score for violence jumped to 3.3 points from zero in WWL 2021. This was caused by incidents occurring during the September 2020 Karabakh war. Due to the oppressive levels of surveillance, few people dare speak publicly about this deliberate targeting.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2022 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.50 points)

For converts, the persecution comes from their family or local community when, for instance, Christian materials are discovered. Christian materials are considered as hard evidence for conversion. The government has a strict requirement that all religious literature (both imported and anything produced in the country) must be checked by the state and given permission for distribution - otherwise it is illegal and banned. The ROC does not seem to have problems at this point.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.50 points)

Converts run the risk of drawing unwanted attention from their social environment. Protestants are always at risk of government harassment and disruption when meeting with other Christians, as it is considered an illegal activity not sanctioned by the government.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.25 points)

There are few opportunities for Christians to reveal their faith and activities in written form, except on Facebook and other similar social media platforms. Christians from registered churches in Azerbaijan - including indigenous Christians - openly share their faith, although the access to their pages would be restricted to a group of friends. However, Christians from non-registered churches do not use Facebook for such purposes. Converts have an additional problem in this respect as openly showing their new faith will draw negative reactions from their families, friends and the community.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 points)

Converts will avoid sharing their new faith with members of their local Islamic community to prevent negative reactions. Non-traditional Protestants can also quickly be accused of carrying out evangelism when they speak about their faith.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.50 points)

Baptisms are usually regarded as the final farewell to the Islamic faith of the fathers - the final sign of conversion. Family, friends and community will oppose this. Baptisms are regarded by the state with hostility as they are automatically connected to evangelism and conversion - two activities opposed by the state.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.25 points)

Christian children are often insulted for their faith and Muslim children are usually kept from communication with them. Children of converts are seen as outsiders and may experience harassment from other children.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.00 points)

Officially, Azerbaijan is a secular country. It will not impose a specific religious teaching. The only place for parents to provide Christian teaching is in church and at home. This can mostly take place without problem, except for Christians who are members of non-registered churches. For converts from Islam the situation is very different. The extended family will often try to take the children of converts away and raise them according to Islamic principles. This is also a problem when one of the parents is not a Christian.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.00 points)

Despite the fact that Azerbaijan is secular, lessons in Islamic Studies are part of the standard school curriculum and all pupils have to attend. The Muslim environment (family, friends, community) will pressurize children of converts in particular into receiving Islamic teaching - sometimes even against the wishes of their parents.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.25 points)

Threats are very common. Converts are threatened by family, friends and community (including the local imam), and the state constantly threatens members of unregistered churches.

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.25 points)

This is one of the strongest forms of persecution in the country as the state closely monitors non-Orthodox Christians. There have been numerous incidents in the past where it is known that people from the local community reported Christians to the authorities. Converts are, of course, also monitored by the family and surrounding community.

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.25 points)

This is a common occurrence with regard to practically all churches, with the exception of the Russian Orthodox Church. This is the preferred method of persecution the authorities use to crack down on these churches, prior to escalating to more severe forms of punishment (such as raids, closure of churches and imprisonment).

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community. From time to time Christians and church leaders have been called to the police station for questioning.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

Due to its secular principles, the state will not tolerate the formation of any such Christian organization. Also, the majority of the population is Muslim, so any formation of Christian organizations would be likely to create societal unrest. Muslims consider the purpose of Christian organizations to be an attempt to convert people to Christianity and so would block this with all means available.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.75 points)

Azerbaijan is a secular state. The government perceives faith-based opinions expressed in public by Christians as potentially destabilizing. It will block this. From the Muslim perspective, Christianity is primarily seen as being linked to their arch-enemy Armenia. Apart from this, Muslims consider Christian preaching and evangelism in public undesirable and will obstruct this with all means.

Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (3.50 points)

Human rights activists have continued to criticize the government for not offering any form of alternative service for conscientious objectors refusing compulsory military service.

Block 4.16: International monitoring has been hindered when Christians had to stand trial. (3.50 points)

Azerbaijan is doing its best to create a positive image abroad; it is working hard to impress OSCE, EU and other international organizations. When a negative report about their country is publish-

ed, the Azeri regime will do its best to attack this. They will claim that international monitoring is possible, but at the same time ensure that much passes unnoticed.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.9: Christians have experienced interference when choosing their own religious leaders. (3.75 Points)

In 2021 President Ilham Aliyev signed into law Religion Law and Administrative Code changes introducing new restrictions on freedom of religion and belief. These include requiring the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations to approve the appointment of all non-Islamic religious leaders, which includes Christian church leaders.

Block 5.12: Churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in printing Christian materials or owning printing presses. (3.75 points)

Registration is required to produce and distribute religious material; but state permission to actually do this is hardly ever granted.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (3.75 points)

Registration is required to import and distribute religious material; but state permission to actually do this is hardly ever granted.

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.50 points)

When the instigators of persecution are state agents at any level (which affects practically all Christians except the ROC), it is dangerous to speak out against them. These people have official backing and can more or less act with impunity. Also, since the judiciary in Azerbaijan is not independent, any complaints will result in detention or a fine.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Azerbaijan: Violence Block question		WWL 2022	WWL 2021
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	2	0
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	3	0
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.4	How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5	How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6	How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7	How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0

6.8	How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	52	0
6.9	How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.10	How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	0

In the WWL 2022 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** There were reports that two elderly Armenian Christians were killed during the September 2020 Karabakh war (see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period*).
- **Churches damaged:** There were reports that at least three churches were damaged the September 2020 Karabakh war.
- **Christians attacked:** According to in-country sources, at least 52 converts were abused and beaten by their families and villagers.

5 Year trends

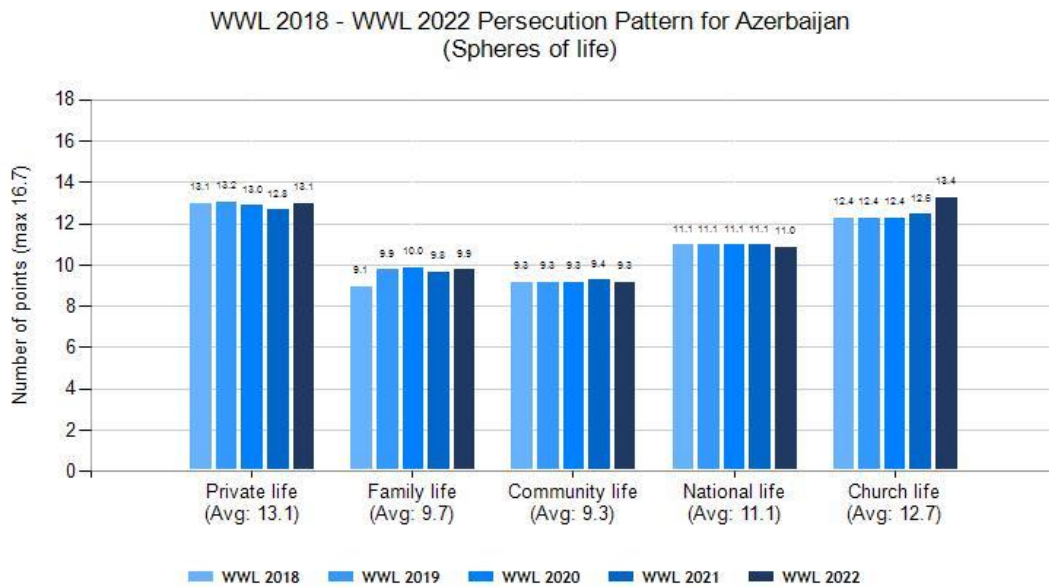
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Azerbaijan: WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2022	11.3
2021	11.1
2020	11.2
2019	11.2
2018	11.0

The table above shows that the level of average pressure has been very high over the five reporting periods and has been stable within the range 11.0 - 11.3 points.

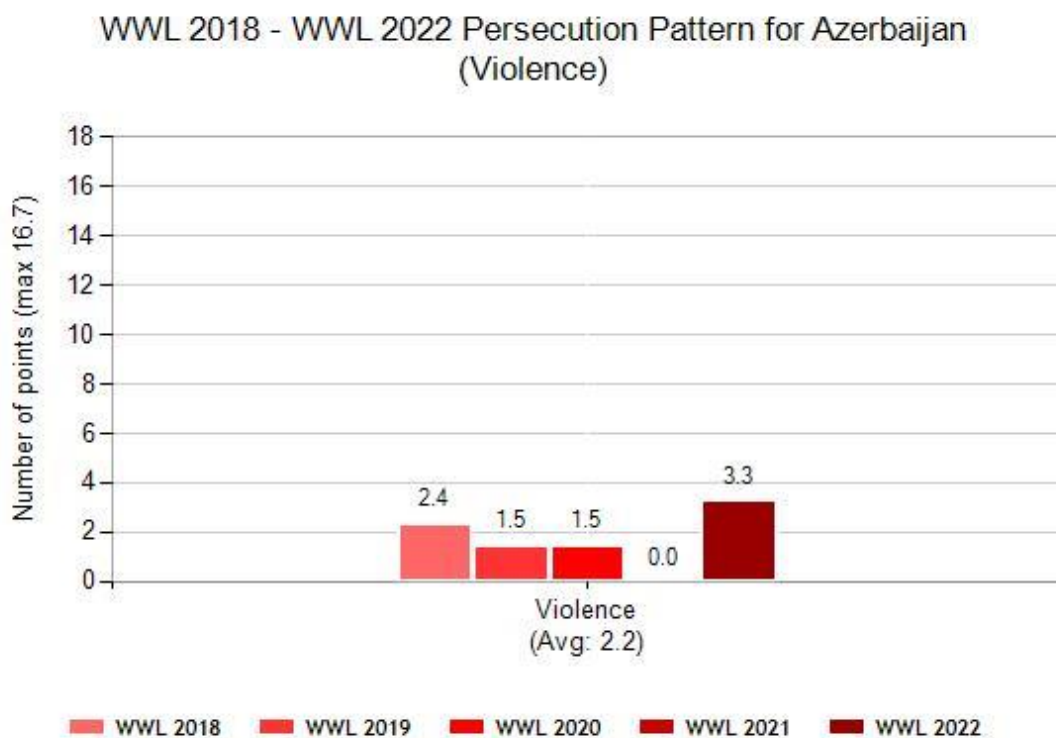
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



Stability is not only visible in the level of average pressure in Azerbaijan: The table above shows that there has been a lot of stability in each of the five spheres of life as well. Pressure has remained highest in two spheres of life in particular: *Private* and *Church life*. This reflects the influence of the two main Persecution engines.

- Pressure in *Private life* over the past five years has always been very high - it has never been lower than 12.8 points. In the first four reporting periods since WWL 2018, *Private life* has been the highest scoring sphere of life in Azerbaijan, indicating high pressure especially on converts. (In WWL 2022 this 'privilege' went to the *Church sphere of life*.)
- Pressure in the *Family sphere of life* has been fairly stable since WWL 2019 at a high level. Most affected are converts.
- Pressure in *Community life* has been very stable at a high level. Most affected are converts.
- Pressure in *National life* has also been constant, but at a very high level over the past five years, showing that the government has not reduced its pressure on Christians to any great degree.
- Pressure in *Church life* increased markedly in WWL 2022 after an initial stable period of years at a very high level. This is the result of the June 2021 changes in legislation.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The level of violence in Azerbaijan has been low or very low over the past WWL reporting periods, reaching the dramatically low score of 0 points in WWL 2021. It needs to be borne in mind that Azerbaijani Christians have been under great pressure not to report on persecution. In WWL 2022 the score for violence jumped to a country record high of 3.3 points. This was mainly due to the effects of the Karabakh war that started on 25 September 2020.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Azerbaijan is a typical Caucasian country where family traditions and rules are very strict, and disobedience to senior family members is unacceptable. Patriarchal norms and discriminatory gender stereotypes remain prevalent and women are expected to remain within the home and prioritize domestic and familial duties ([UN News, 1 January 2022](#)). Within this context, women

are not free to choose their own religion and will face persecution upon conversion to Christianity. Christian converts (typically from a Muslim background) are therefore most vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who dare to challenge the existing order. They are at a greater risk than non-converts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, house arrest, discrimination and rejection by family and the Muslim community. Female converts in conservative regions also run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men, with the aim of forcing them to return to Islam. This happens infrequently, typically in remote rural areas and in cases where premarital arrangements had already been made before the conversion.

The tight structure of society means that women are also targeted for persecution as a means of inflicting psychological harm on their husbands or other family members. The persecution of women can cause fear, anxiety and anger.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

In Azerbaijan, male converts from Islam are at a greater risk than non-converts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, discrimination and rejection by family and the Muslim community. Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community and some have been called to the police station for questioning.

Christian men – both converts and non-converts – are targeted for their role as head of the family and primary financial provider. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution (possibly losing his job) his whole family will suffer. If he is a church leader (contextually, usually men), the fact that he is suffering persecution will affect his church and can result in an increase of fear among church members. As a country expert explained: “The state regards pastors and church leaders as primary targets to control Christian activities. They are used as examples for the other Christians of what may be expected. When churches are raided, it is mostly the church leaders who are detained, interrogated, fined and sometimes harassed. Muslims will hold church leaders primarily responsible for the conversion of their people; active convert leaders will even be attacked more fiercely.”

Persecution of other religious minorities

The government does not target any specific religious group - all Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Bahais etc. experience a high level of state surveillance and oppression.

According to USCIRF 2021:

- "As in 2019, there were no known incidents of law enforcement raids on religious communities, although some interlocutors reported nevertheless limiting some of their activities for fear of possible repercussions. The government continued to imprison individuals related to their religious activism. Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that maintain lists of political prisoners in the country estimate that between 43 and 51 current prisoners are religious activists. In 2020, authorities released at least three religious prisoners, including Shi'a Muslim imam Sardar Babayev, who had served his full sentence, and two others released in consideration of the COVID-19 threat. Members of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) announced that the government subjected them to increased pressure during the year through summonses, detentions, and arrests on questionable or politically motivated grounds."

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020):

- In 2019: "In nine cases concluded in September, the ECHR accepted the government's admission that it had violated the rights of multiple individuals to freedom of religion or belief. One case involved seven Muslims who were detained when they met at a home in Baku in 2015 to discuss the works of Nursi. In another case, authorities detained four Jehovah's Witnesses when they met at a member's home in Ganja in 2010. The government paid 4,400 euros (\$5,400) in compensation to the Muslims and 4,000 euros (\$4,900) to the Jehovah's Witnesses following the decisions. In these cases, as well as in earlier cases where the government admitted culpability, the victims said they were concerned by both the low level of compensation the government offered and what they saw as its failure to change the laws to ensure similar violations did not occur again. Forum 18 said there were 34 cases alleging violations of freedom of religion or belief involving 61 individuals and five religious communities that were pending before the ECHR at year's end."

Further examples:

- The UN Human Rights Committee adopted two decisions in favor of four Jehovah's Witnesses, requiring not only that Azerbaijan repay their fines and court fees but review "its domestic legislation, regulations and/or practices" to ensure similar violations cannot recur. Dozens of European Court of Human Rights judgments in freedom of religion or belief cases similarly require changes to law and practice to implement the decisions. The regime has given no public indication of any changes to law and practice to prevent further violations. (Source: [Forum 18, 26 March 2021](#))
- The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg issued judgments in May and June finding that Azerbaijan had violated human rights in a further eight freedom of religion or belief cases and ordering that the victims be paid compensation and costs. The regime

contested all the cases. Seven of the cases resulted from a police raid on a meeting for worship of Muslims reading the works of the late theologian Said Nursi and subsequent fines in June 2015. In the eighth case, the ECtHR found that Azerbaijan violated the rights of two women from the southern town of Masalli who had established the NGO Religion and Women's Rights in 2011, but which was denied registration (and thus the legal right to exist) by the Justice Ministry. (Source: [Forum 18, 16 June 2021](#))

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia

The current government exerts a very high level of control over the country. Government officials at all levels are the strongest persecutors of Christians in Azerbaijan and have infiltrated all churches. Pastors and other church leaders are regularly questioned by the police. All religious activities are monitored, meetings are raided and religious materials blocked from being distributed. The chances that this situation will change in the near future are very slim indeed.

Islamic oppression/Clan oppression (blended)

Islam is not the state religion in Azerbaijan, but it is the traditional religion of the large majority of the population, with most Azerbaijani being Shiites. Muslim pressure on Christians is evident in the far-reaching influence of family, friends and community on converts. The chances that this will change in the near future are also as good as non-existent.

Due to the very high level of stability of the two most influential Persecution engines in Azerbaijan, the Church in this country will have to brace itself for living under a continued and considerable level of surveillance and pressure.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: UN News, 1 January 2022 - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1108872>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 26 March 2021 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2647
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 16 June 2021 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2665

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Azerbaijan>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Azerbaijan>