

World
Watch
Research

Azerbaijan: Full Country Dossier

February 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| World Watch List 2024..... | 3 |
| Copyright note..... | 4 |
| Sources and definitions..... | 4 |
| WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Azerbaijan | 5 |
| Brief country details | 5 |
| Map of country..... | 5 |
| Dominant persecution engines and drivers | 6 |
| Brief description of the persecution situation | 6 |
| Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period | 6 |
| Specific examples of positive developments | 6 |
| External Links - Situation in brief | 7 |
| WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Azerbaijan | 7 |
| Links for general background information..... | 7 |
| Recent history | 7 |
| Political and legal landscape | 8 |
| Religious landscape | 11 |
| Economic landscape..... | 13 |
| Social and cultural landscape..... | 14 |
| Technological landscape | 15 |
| Security situation | 17 |
| Trends analysis..... | 18 |
| External Links - Keys to understanding | 19 |
| WWL 2024: Church information / Azerbaijan..... | 21 |
| Christian origins..... | 21 |
| Church spectrum today..... | 21 |
| Areas where Christians face most difficulties | 22 |
| Christian communities and how they are affected | 22 |
| WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Azerbaijan | 23 |
| Reporting period | 23 |
| Position on the World Watch List | 23 |
| Persecution engines | 23 |
| Drivers of persecution..... | 25 |

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| The Persecution pattern..... | 26 |
| Pressure in the 5 spheres of life..... | 27 |
| Violence..... | 30 |
| 5 Year trends | 32 |
| Gender-specific religious persecution / Female | 34 |
| Gender-specific religious persecution / Male | 35 |
| Persecution of other religious minorities..... | 36 |
| Future outlook..... | 38 |
| External Links - Persecution Dynamics..... | 38 |
| Further useful reports..... | 39 |

Introduction

World Watch List 2024

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 | Total Score WWL 2020 |
|------|--------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | North Korea | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 12.8 | 96 | 98 | 96 | 94 | 94 |
| 2 | Somalia | 16.5 | 16.7 | 16.6 | 16.6 | 16.6 | 10.6 | 93 | 92 | 91 | 92 | 92 |
| 3 | Libya | 15.9 | 16.0 | 15.9 | 16.1 | 16.4 | 10.2 | 91 | 88 | 91 | 92 | 90 |
| 4 | Eritrea | 14.6 | 14.9 | 15.5 | 15.9 | 15.7 | 12.8 | 89 | 89 | 88 | 88 | 87 |
| 5 | Yemen | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 5.9 | 89 | 89 | 88 | 87 | 85 |
| 6 | Nigeria | 13.5 | 13.9 | 14.5 | 14.9 | 14.4 | 16.7 | 88 | 88 | 87 | 85 | 80 |
| 7 | Pakistan | 13.2 | 13.9 | 15.0 | 15.1 | 13.1 | 16.7 | 87 | 86 | 87 | 88 | 88 |
| 8 | Sudan | 14.1 | 14.2 | 14.9 | 14.9 | 15.5 | 13.3 | 87 | 83 | 79 | 79 | 85 |
| 9 | Iran | 15.0 | 14.6 | 13.5 | 15.8 | 16.5 | 10.9 | 86 | 86 | 85 | 86 | 85 |
| 10 | Afghanistan | 15.7 | 15.9 | 15.2 | 16.3 | 16.6 | 4.6 | 84 | 84 | 98 | 94 | 93 |
| 11 | India | 12.2 | 12.6 | 13.3 | 14.8 | 13.2 | 16.5 | 83 | 82 | 82 | 83 | 83 |
| 12 | Syria | 13.4 | 14.3 | 13.9 | 14.3 | 14.2 | 11.1 | 81 | 80 | 78 | 81 | 82 |
| 13 | Saudi Arabia | 15.2 | 15.3 | 14.8 | 15.7 | 16.6 | 3.3 | 81 | 80 | 81 | 78 | 79 |
| 14 | Mali | 11.1 | 10.1 | 14.7 | 12.8 | 15.1 | 15.6 | 79 | 76 | 70 | 67 | 66 |
| 15 | Algeria | 14.4 | 14.1 | 11.5 | 14.0 | 15.6 | 9.8 | 79 | 73 | 71 | 70 | 73 |
| 16 | Iraq | 14.2 | 14.4 | 14.0 | 14.8 | 13.9 | 7.8 | 79 | 76 | 78 | 82 | 76 |
| 17 | Myanmar | 12.2 | 10.6 | 13.4 | 13.7 | 13.0 | 16.1 | 79 | 80 | 79 | 74 | 73 |
| 18 | Maldives | 15.6 | 15.5 | 13.6 | 16.0 | 16.4 | 0.9 | 78 | 77 | 77 | 77 | 78 |
| 19 | China | 13.0 | 10.0 | 12.8 | 14.6 | 16.0 | 11.1 | 78 | 77 | 76 | 74 | 70 |
| 20 | Burkina Faso | 11.7 | 9.7 | 13.2 | 11.5 | 13.8 | 15.6 | 75 | 71 | 68 | 67 | 66 |
| 21 | Laos | 11.6 | 10.6 | 13.2 | 14.3 | 14.0 | 11.3 | 75 | 68 | 69 | 71 | 72 |
| 22 | Cuba | 13.2 | 8.7 | 13.8 | 13.3 | 15.1 | 8.7 | 73 | 70 | 66 | 62 | 52 |
| 23 | Mauritania | 14.6 | 14.2 | 13.8 | 14.2 | 14.2 | 1.3 | 72 | 72 | 70 | 71 | 68 |
| 24 | Morocco | 13.2 | 13.8 | 11.7 | 12.8 | 14.4 | 5.4 | 71 | 69 | 69 | 67 | 66 |
| 25 | Uzbekistan | 14.6 | 12.7 | 13.9 | 12.6 | 15.5 | 1.7 | 71 | 71 | 71 | 71 | 73 |
| 26 | Bangladesh | 12.4 | 10.6 | 12.5 | 10.8 | 10.4 | 14.1 | 71 | 69 | 68 | 67 | 63 |
| 27 | Niger | 9.4 | 9.6 | 14.5 | 7.7 | 13.1 | 15.9 | 70 | 70 | 68 | 62 | 60 |
| 28 | CAR | 10.3 | 8.6 | 13.9 | 9.6 | 12.2 | 15.6 | 70 | 70 | 68 | 66 | 68 |
| 29 | Turkmenistan | 14.2 | 12.3 | 13.6 | 13.9 | 15.5 | 0.6 | 70 | 70 | 69 | 70 | 70 |
| 30 | Nicaragua | 12.1 | 7.6 | 13.2 | 13.2 | 14.1 | 9.6 | 70 | 65 | 56 | 51 | 41 |
| 31 | Oman | 14.3 | 14.0 | 10.6 | 13.3 | 14.0 | 3.1 | 69 | 65 | 66 | 63 | 62 |
| 32 | Ethiopia | 9.9 | 9.7 | 12.6 | 10.4 | 12.1 | 14.4 | 69 | 66 | 66 | 65 | 63 |
| 33 | Tunisia | 12.3 | 13.2 | 10.2 | 12.4 | 13.8 | 6.9 | 69 | 67 | 66 | 67 | 64 |
| 34 | Colombia | 11.1 | 8.6 | 12.9 | 11.3 | 10.4 | 14.1 | 68 | 71 | 68 | 67 | 62 |
| 35 | Vietnam | 11.3 | 9.4 | 12.4 | 13.8 | 14.2 | 7.2 | 68 | 70 | 71 | 72 | 72 |
| 36 | Bhutan | 13.1 | 12.1 | 12.4 | 14.1 | 14.3 | 2.2 | 68 | 66 | 67 | 64 | 61 |
| 37 | Mexico | 11.5 | 8.5 | 12.5 | 11.1 | 10.6 | 14.1 | 68 | 67 | 65 | 64 | 60 |
| 38 | Egypt | 12.5 | 13.7 | 11.4 | 11.9 | 10.9 | 7.8 | 68 | 68 | 71 | 75 | 76 |
| 39 | Mozambique | 9.3 | 8.5 | 13.9 | 8.4 | 12.5 | 15.0 | 68 | 68 | 65 | 63 | 43 |
| 40 | Qatar | 14.2 | 14.2 | 10.5 | 13.2 | 14.4 | 0.6 | 67 | 68 | 74 | 67 | 66 |
| 41 | DRC | 8.0 | 7.9 | 12.6 | 9.7 | 13.0 | 15.9 | 67 | 67 | 66 | 64 | 56 |
| 42 | Indonesia | 10.9 | 12.3 | 11.5 | 10.2 | 9.7 | 11.5 | 66 | 68 | 68 | 63 | 60 |
| 43 | Cameroon | 8.8 | 7.6 | 12.6 | 8.0 | 13.1 | 15.9 | 66 | 65 | 65 | 64 | 60 |
| 44 | Brunei | 15.0 | 14.7 | 10.0 | 10.8 | 14.1 | 1.3 | 66 | 65 | 64 | 64 | 63 |
| 45 | Comoros | 12.7 | 14.0 | 11.2 | 12.4 | 14.2 | 1.1 | 66 | 66 | 63 | 62 | 57 |
| 46 | Tajikistan | 13.8 | 12.6 | 12.3 | 12.9 | 13.4 | 0.6 | 66 | 66 | 65 | 66 | 65 |
| 47 | Kazakhstan | 13.3 | 11.8 | 12.1 | 12.8 | 14.3 | 1.1 | 65 | 65 | 64 | 64 | 64 |
| 48 | Jordan | 12.9 | 14.2 | 10.5 | 12.4 | 12.8 | 2.2 | 65 | 65 | 66 | 64 | 64 |
| 49 | Malaysia | 13.0 | 14.1 | 11.5 | 12.2 | 11.1 | 2.4 | 64 | 66 | 63 | 63 | 62 |
| 50 | Turkey | 13.0 | 11.5 | 11.6 | 13.2 | 11.4 | 3.1 | 64 | 66 | 65 | 69 | 63 |

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 | Total Score WWL 2020 |
|------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 51 | Kenya | 10.3 | 9.2 | 11.4 | 8.0 | 11.5 | 12.4 | 63 | 64 | 63 | 62 | 61 |
| 52 | Tanzania | 9.3 | 10.8 | 10.3 | 8.6 | 8.7 | 14.4 | 62 | 63 | 61 | 58 | 55 |
| 53 | Nepal | 12.1 | 10.4 | 9.5 | 13.2 | 12.3 | 4.4 | 62 | 61 | 64 | 66 | 64 |
| 54 | Kuwait | 13.1 | 13.6 | 9.4 | 12.0 | 12.2 | 0.9 | 61 | 64 | 64 | 63 | 62 |
| 55 | Djibouti | 12.3 | 12.6 | 12.7 | 10.1 | 12.3 | 1.1 | 61 | 60 | 59 | 56 | 56 |
| 56 | Chad | 11.6 | 8.2 | 10.2 | 10.2 | 10.3 | 10.6 | 61 | 58 | 55 | 53 | 56 |
| 57 | UAE | 13.3 | 13.4 | 9.5 | 11.3 | 12.8 | 0.7 | 61 | 62 | 62 | 62 | 60 |
| 58 | Sri Lanka | 12.9 | 9.2 | 10.8 | 11.5 | 9.7 | 5.9 | 60 | 57 | 63 | 62 | 65 |
| 59 | Azerbaijan | 13.2 | 9.9 | 9.6 | 11.9 | 13.6 | 1.7 | 60 | 59 | 60 | 56 | 57 |
| 60 | Palestinian Territories | 13.1 | 13.3 | 9.7 | 10.7 | 12.1 | 0.9 | 60 | 60 | 59 | 58 | 60 |
| 61 | Kyrgyzstan | 13.2 | 10.3 | 11.3 | 10.5 | 12.2 | 1.3 | 59 | 59 | 58 | 58 | 57 |
| 62 | Russian Federation | 12.7 | 7.7 | 10.6 | 12.8 | 12.9 | 1.7 | 58 | 57 | 56 | 57 | 60 |
| 63 | Rwanda | 9.4 | 7.7 | 9.0 | 10.4 | 11.7 | 9.4 | 58 | 57 | 50 | 42 | 42 |
| 64 | Burundi | 7.6 | 7.8 | 9.4 | 9.8 | 9.7 | 12.8 | 57 | 55 | 52 | 48 | 48 |
| 65 | Bahrain | 12.0 | 13.2 | 8.6 | 11.3 | 8.5 | 1.1 | 55 | 55 | 57 | 56 | 55 |
| 66 | Honduras | 7.9 | 4.7 | 12.2 | 7.3 | 9.9 | 12.6 | 55 | 53 | 48 | 46 | 39 |
| 67 | Venezuela | 6.0 | 4.4 | 11.1 | 10.0 | 10.8 | 10.7 | 53 | 56 | 51 | 39 | 42 |
| 68 | Togo | 9.2 | 6.7 | 9.3 | 7.1 | 11.0 | 8.9 | 52 | 49 | 44 | 43 | 41 |
| 69 | Guinea | 10.3 | 7.5 | 8.3 | 8.3 | 10.5 | 7.2 | 52 | 48 | 43 | 47 | 45 |
| 70 | Uganda | 8.1 | 5.0 | 7.4 | 6.7 | 8.8 | 15.9 | 52 | 51 | 48 | 47 | 48 |
| 71 | Angola | 6.8 | 6.7 | 8.1 | 11.5 | 11.4 | 7.2 | 52 | 52 | 51 | 46 | 43 |
| 72 | Lebanon | 11.0 | 10.2 | 7.0 | 6.1 | 6.6 | 7.2 | 48 | 40 | 35 | 34 | 35 |
| 73 | Gambia | 8.3 | 8.2 | 8.9 | 8.8 | 8.9 | 3.7 | 47 | 44 | 44 | 43 | 43 |
| 74 | South Sudan | 5.7 | 4.4 | 7.0 | 6.3 | 7.6 | 15.6 | 46 | 46 | 43 | 43 | 44 |
| 75 | Belarus | 9.6 | 3.8 | 5.8 | 9.7 | 13.3 | 3.3 | 46 | 43 | 33 | 30 | 28 |
| 76 | Ivory Coast | 12.0 | 6.5 | 8.7 | 5.9 | 8.0 | 3.3 | 44 | 44 | 42 | 42 | 42 |
| 77 | Ukraine | 5.5 | 4.8 | 8.0 | 11.6 | 11.6 | 2.8 | 44 | 37 | 37 | 34 | 33 |
| 78 | Israel | 9.8 | 8.6 | 5.8 | 6.3 | 6.9 | 6.7 | 44 | 38 | 41 | 40 | 38 |

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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 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- 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 can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Azerbaijan

Brief country details

| Azerbaijan: Population (UN estimate for 2023) | Christians | Chr% |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------|------|
| 10,370,000 | 248,000 | 2.4 |

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Concerning Nagorno-Karabakh: According to: [Freedom House's country profile](#) (accessed 23 February 2024): "The Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, which also calls itself the Republic of Artsakh, has enjoyed *de facto* independence from Azerbaijan since a 1994 cease-fire agreement that ended roughly two years of open warfare, though its independence is not recognized by any UN member states. The territory's population is mostly ethnic Armenians, and given its geographic and diplomatic isolation, it has been dependent on close political and economic ties with Armenia. However, a third of Nagorno-Karabakh and some adjacent land came under Azerbaijani control in 2020 under a cease-fire agreement that ended a weeks-long conflict that year." As reported by HRW 2024 Azerbaijan country chapter: On 19 September 2023, "Azerbaijan launched a military operation to regain full control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Nagorno-Karabakh forces surrendered after one day of fighting. More than 100,000 ethnic Armenians—nearly the entire Armenian population of the area—fled to Armenia."

| Azerbaijan: World Watch List | Points | WWL Rank |
|------------------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2024 | 60 | 59 |
| WWL 2023 | 59 | 58 |
| WWL 2022 | 60 | 56 |
| WWL 2021 | 56 | 61 |
| WWL 2020 | 57 | 53 |

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

October 2022: As stated in an article by Providence on 13 December 2022: "The Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) and the Monument Watch reported in October 2022 that the [Armenian] Surb Sargis Church, located in the center of the Azeri-occupied Hadrut region's Mokhrenes village, was destroyed by Azerbaijan."

Specific examples of positive developments

None.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Map of country: Freedom House's country profile - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/nagorno-karabakh>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: October 2022 - <https://providencemag.com/2022/12/azerbaijan-desecrates-armenian-cultural-and-religious-heritage/>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Azerbaijan

Links for general background information

| Name | Quote Reference | Link | Last accessed on |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Amnesty International 2022/23 Azerbaijan country report – covering 156 countries | AI Azerbaijan 2022 | https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/azerbaijan/report-azerbaijan/ | 1 September 2023 |
| BBC News Azerbaijan profile - updated 10 April 2023 | BBC Azerbaijan profile | https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17043424 | 1 September 2023 |
| Bertelsmann Transformation Index Azerbaijan country report 2022 – covering 137 countries | BTI Azerbaijan Report 2022 | https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/AZE | 1 September 2023 |
| CIA World Factbook Azerbaijan - updated 29 August 2023 | World Factbook Azerbaijan | https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/azerbaijan/ | 1 September 2023 |
| Crisis24 Azerbaijan report (Garda World) | Crisis24 Azerbaijan report | https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/azerbaijan | 1 September 2023 |
| Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries | EIU 2022 Eastern Europe pp.50-54 | https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf | 1 September 2023 |
| FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries | FSI 2023 Azerbaijan | https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/ | 1 September 2023 |
| Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries | Democracy Index 2023 Azerbaijan | https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/nations-transit/2023 | 1 September 2023 |
| Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries | Global Freedom Index 2023 Azerbaijan | https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2023 | 1 September 2023 |
| Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries | Freedom on the Net 2022 Azerbaijan | https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-net/2022 | 1 September 2023 |
| Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries | GIWPS 2021 Azerbaijan profile | https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/azerbaijan/ | 1 September 2023 |
| Girls not Brides Azerbaijan report | Girls not Brides Azerbaijan | https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/azerbaijan/ | 1 September 2023 |
| Human Rights Watch World Report 2024 - Azerbaijan country chapter | HRW 2024 Azerbaijan country chapter | https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/azerbaijan | 23 February 2024 |
| Internet World Stats 2023 | IWS 2023 Azerbaijan | https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#az | 1 September 2023 |
| RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries | World Press Freedom 2023 Azerbaijan | https://rsf.org/en/azerbaijan | 1 September 2023 |
| Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries | CPI 2022 Azerbaijan | https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/aze | 1 September 2023 |
| UNDP's Human Development Report Azerbaijan – data updates as of 8 September 2022 | UNDP HDR 2022 Azerbaijan | https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/AZE | 1 September 2023 |
| US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Azerbaijan | IRFR 2022 Azerbaijan | https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/ | 1 September 2023 |
| USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL | USCIRF 2023 Azerbaijan SWL | https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Azerbaijan.pdf | 1 September 2023 |
| World Bank Azerbaijan country overview (no date of update) | World Bank Azerbaijan overview | https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/azerbaijan/overview | 1 September 2023 |
| World Bank Azerbaijan data - 2021 | World Bank Azerbaijan data | https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileid=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=AZE | 1 September 2023 |
| World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 Azerbaijan | Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 Azerbaijan | https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef28464d01f195827b7e020a3e8-0500022021/related/mpo-aze.pdf | 1 September 2023 |

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 action since this time. As a result, there is great 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). However, repeated outbreaks of violence continued along the border in 2022 (Source: [RFE/RL, 21 November 2022](#)) and 2023 (Source: [RFE/RL, 6 April 2023](#), [RFE/RL, 11 May 2023](#)). Then, on 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a full-scale military operation into the Karabakh region and managed to take Karabakh and the surrounding areas that had been under Armenian control in just two days. Azerbaijan's 24-hour offensive ended three decades of rule by ethnic Armenians in the region, which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. Although the Azerbaijani government stated it would not take reprisals on the ethnic Armenians, practically all Armenians (about 120,000) had no confidence in this and left Karabakh. President Aliyev raised the Azerbaijani flag in Karabakh's capital Stepanakert (Xankendi to Azeris) on 15 October 2023 (Source: [RFE/RL, 15 October 2023](#)). Tensions with Armenia remain high.

2024 Presidential elections

On 7 February 2024, incumbent president Ilham Aliyev, who has held office since 2003, won a fifth consecutive term with 92.12% of the vote, defeating his closest runner-up Zahid Oruj, who obtained just 2% of the vote (Source: [AP News, 9 February 2024](#)).

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 Mehribana 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](#)).

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 regulations come on top of strict controls that the regime already imposes on all religious organizations and their adherents. 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)

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Azerbaijan):

- “The constitution stipulates the separation of religion and state and the equality of all religions before the law. 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. In March, amendments to the religious freedom law came into effect that transferred responsibility for appointing and reappointing religious personnel in all mosques from the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board (CMB) to the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SCWRA). The government also has authority to approve the appointment of religious figures in non-Islamic religious communities.”
- “During the year [2021], the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) found the government violated individual freedom of religion or belief in two judgments involving seven individuals, including one case involving arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for prayer in a private home.”
- “Local experts on religious affairs, religious leaders, and civil society representatives said the general public continued to show tolerance of, and in some cases financially supported, minority religious groups they viewed as “traditional” (i.e., those considered historically present in the country), including Jews, Russian Orthodox, and Catholics. According to the same sources, some individuals viewed religious groups that had less of a historical presence in the country with suspicion and mistrust.”

According to USCIRF 2023 Azerbaijan (Special Watch List country):

- “In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan trended negatively. The government continued to exert significant control over all religious practice, primarily through enforcement of the country's law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs (religion law). The religion law requires religious communities to register to legally engage in religious activity, requires state review and approval of religious literature and related materials, and places numerous other limitations on freedom of religion or belief. In March, President Ilham Aliyev signed into law amendments to the religion law that reassigned the power to appoint imams from the nominally independent Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) to the official State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), further entrenching state control over the practice of Islam. In May, the SCWRA fired Shi'a imam Mirseymur Aliyev after he reportedly held Ramadan prayers on a different day than mandated by the state. That same month, the CMB announced the imposition of an age restriction that barred citizens over the age of 65 from performing the Hajj. Authorities also raided, seized religious literature from, and fined about 20 Muslims across the country who met for worship in private homes or held religious events with children.”
- “While religious minorities have generally noted positive strides for religious freedom in Baku, others have shared that local authorities outside of the capital have surveilled Christ-

ians. During the year, the government failed yet again to register any non-Muslim religious communities, leaving some communities of Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses without registration and therefore unable to operate legally. Meanwhile, the SCWRA disclosed registering approximately 22 Muslim communities. Officials continued to reject requests for a civilian alternative to mandatory military service despite the allowance of such an option in the constitution. In a reversal of recent practice, Azerbaijan resumed detaining Jehovah's Witnesses who sought to conscientiously object. In July, conscription authorities detained Royal Karimov and held him for more than three months. In September, a local court sentenced Seymur Mammadov to nine months in prison for his refusal to serve in the military before converting that punishment in December to a one-year suspended sentence.”

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 Berlin approached the Open Doors office in Germany to ask how it was possible that their country had been included in the Top 50 countries of the Open Doors World Watch List, an index indicating high, very high and extreme levels of Christian persecution in countries around the world. 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 | 248,000 | 2.4 |
| Muslim | 9,991,000 | 96.3 |
| Hindu | 300 | 0.0 |
| Buddhist | 0 | 0.0 |
| Ethno-religionist | 0 | 0.0 |
| Jewish | 8,900 | 0.1 |
| Bahai | 2,200 | 0.0 |
| Atheist | 5,400 | 0.1 |
| Agnostic | 113,000 | 1.1 |
| Other | 1,900 | 0.0 |
| <i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i> | | |

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

According to the World Christian Database (accessed March 2023), 96.3% 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 (65% of the country's Muslim population according to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Azerbaijan) and a minority of Sunni Muslims (35%). 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). If this is a true reflection of reality, it 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 the mistrust between Christians 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) religious activities. 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 give its stamp of approval to any religious literature and materials before they can be legally produced, imported or distributed.

The registration process, which started after a set of laws regulating religious affairs was introduced in 2009, seemingly 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, only one congregation (in Baku) was finally re-registered in 2015. All the other congregations which lodged repeated applications 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, officially began open worship in January 2020. The SCWRA 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 not having 50 adult members, the required number for lodging an application. Religious communities have long complained about

the State Committee's arbitrary and opaque decision-making processes (Source: [Forum 18, March 2020](#)).

Economic landscape

According to World Bank Azerbaijan data:

- **GDP** (current US\$) (billions): 54.62 (in 2021)
- **GDP growth** (annual %): 5.6 (in 2021)

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 2022 Azerbaijan) describes corruption in the country as "rampant", and has uncovered large-scale bribery of foreign politicians and others to encourage them to deny the regime's serious human rights violations.

As noted by the World Factbook Azerbaijan:

- "Oil-based economy; macroeconomic instabilities due to demand shocks; recent state bailout of largest lender; potential economic gains from Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; negatively impacted by COVID-19; investing in human capital to diversify and retain younger generation."

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 put even more strain on Azerbaijan's economy. The upheaval on the global oil market exposed fragilities in Azerbaijan's banking system and four of its banks were put under temporary administration of the central bank and others had their capital requirements relaxed. The government introduced economic and social packages to mitigate the consequences of the crisis; however, growth forecasts remain pessimistic. (Source: [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 16 June 2020](#))

The invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on 24 February 2022 had a notable impact on Azerbaijan's economy. On the positive side, Azerbaijan's revenues from gas exports increased 3.7-fold and reached \$4.18 billion in the first four months of 2022. Revenues from oil exports increased 50.3 percent in the same period. As a result, the positive balance of payments increased 4.8-fold and reached \$1.57 billion in the first quarter of 2022 compared to the same period in 2021. But Azerbaijan is also confronted with several economic difficulties. War-related restrictions and declining production not only affected the level of imports from Ukraine and Russia but also made imported goods, especially food products, more expensive. Due to war-

related stagnation in the Russian economy, remittances have also been decreasing. In the first quarter of 2022, the total level of remittances from Russia decreased by about 17% compared to the same period in 2021 and totaled about \$99.7 million. The remittances from Ukraine, on the other hand, decreased by about 27%. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 14 July 2022](#))

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 economic situation.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Azerbaijan:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Azerbaijani 91.6%, Lezghin 2%, Russian 1.3%, Armenian 1.3% [Note: Until September 2023, the Nagorno-Karabakh region was populated almost entirely by ethnic Armenians.], Talysh 1.3%, other 2.4% (2009 est.). Azerbaijan has over 80 ethnic groups.
- **Main languages:** Azerbaijani (Azeri) (official) 92.5%, Russian 1.4%, Armenian 1.4%, other 4.7% (2009 est.). Russian is widely spoken throughout the country.
- **Urban population:** 57.6% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.8% (male: 99.9%, female: 99.7%) (2019)

According to the UNDP Human Development Report Azerbaijan:

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.745 (0.73 for females, 0.75 for males), ranking 91 (2021)
- **Total population:** 10.3 million (2021)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 69.4 years (73.3 for females, 65.6 for males) (2021)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 13.5 years (13.6 for females, 13.4 for males) (2021)
- **Gender Inequality Index:** 0.294 (2021)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 60.4, Male: 67.3 (2021)

Azerbaijan ranked 157th in the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index of 180 countries (CPI 2022 Azerbaijan). 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, the president has responded by cracking down on the opposition. (Source: [RFE/RL, 30 July 2020](#))

Azerbaijan has been constructing new housing in areas of Nagorno-Karabakh which were recaptured in the 2020 six-week war. The president is planning to make the Azerbaijani families return home, who fled the initial fighting in the early 1990s. However, despite the official promises of return, many potential returnees have been skeptical, airing concerns that not enough infrastructure (including schools and hospitals) have been built. Particularly worrying is that there is unlikely to be sufficient employment available. (Source: [RFE/RL, 30 October 2021](#)) However, this may change drastically in light of Azerbaijan's complete control of the region following the successful military operation in September 2023.

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 2023 Azerbaijan):

- **Internet usage:** 85.0% penetration - survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 51.1% penetration - survey date: July 2022

According to World Bank Azerbaijan data:

- **Mobile cellular subscriptions:** 104.9 per 100 people (2021)

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (Publication date: June 2023):

- “In spite of the telecom sector being one of the major contributors to Azerbaijan’s non-oil GDP, overall development, growth, and investment in the sector has been held back by years of political and civil unrest coupled with endemic corruption.”
- “Mobile penetration rates reached 100% as far back as 2011, but have largely stagnated since then. The MNOs are slowly extending the reach of their LTE networks around the country, and this increased coverage (along with access to faster data-based services) is expected to produce a moderate resurgence for both mobile and mobile broadband over the next few years as customers migrate from 3G to 4G. 5G services are still some way off, as the demand for high-speed data and fast broadband can easily be met by existing capacity on LTE networks.”
- “Fixed-line teledensity continues to drop down each year as customers consolidate their telecommunications services around the mobile platform. Yet the rate of decline is comparatively slow to other countries, since Azerbaijan has a relatively high proportion of (87%) of fixed-line broadband customers still on DSL. Fibre (12% of fixed broadband connections) is gradually being rolled out in urban areas, and this makes up the bulk of the (limited) growth being seen in the overall fixed broadband market. DSL’s predominance, however, will serve to keep Azerbaijan’s average access speeds in the sub-10Mbps range for the foreseeable future.”

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's Freedom on the Net 2023 report:

- Azerbaijan is listed as 'not free' with a score of 37 points.
- "Internet freedom continues to be restricted in Azerbaijan. During the coverage period, the state temporarily blocked access to TikTok amid renewed tensions with Armenia. The government continued to manipulate the online information landscape, blocking numerous independent and opposition websites and forcing activists to remove content. The government also launched a media registry, required by the new media law adopted in 2022, and rejected the applications of several independent news outlets to join the registry. Prosecution of activists for their online criticism of the government continued during the coverage period. Additionally, activists faced online harassment, doxing, and blackmail." "Power in Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime remains heavily concentrated in the hands of Ilham Aliyev, who has served as president since 2003, and his extended family. Corruption is rampant, and the formal political opposition has been weakened by years of persecution. The authorities have carried out an extensive crackdown on civil liberties in recent years, leaving little room for independent expression or activism. Azerbaijan won control of a third of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh along with some adjacent land during a weeks-long conflict with Armenia in 2020, at the cost of over 2,900 soldiers."

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.

Journalists have been hounded and harassed to the point where many have fled the country. Online independent or opposition media have been blocked. Nearly all news media reaching the public are controlled by the government. Media experts and others have been warning about Azerbaijan's dire media landscape for years and now it looks like things could get even worse. Despite protests from many of the remaining independent reporters in the country and criticism from the West, including the Council of Europe, President Aliyev approved a new media-law on 8 February 2022. The legislation, passed by the country's largely rubber-stamp parliament in late December 2021, places fresh restrictions on the owners of media operating in Azerbaijan as well as journalists, who will be required not only to register with the authorities but to abide by other new rules, including one on the "objective" interpretation of facts and events. (Source: [RFE/RL, 20 February 2022](#))

Security situation

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 Islamic extremist group abroad and planned a series of 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 had previously only occurred on rare occasions (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. However, tensions remained high and there were minor outbreaks of violence. This has 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 now came under increased scrutiny. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian accused

Azerbaijan of "ethnic cleansing" with its continued blockade of the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region. In a speech to parliament in Yerevan on 16 June 2023, Pashinian said Baku's installation of an illegal checkpoint in the Lachin Corridor and its ongoing blockade of the only road linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh were "actions that once again substantiate our fear that Azerbaijan is conducting a policy of ethnic cleansing" (Source: [RFE/RL, 16 June 2023](#)). Azerbaijan launched a military attack on Karabakh on 19 September 2023 and managed to overcome all Armenian resistance in just two days. After the Azerbaijani victory, practically all 120,000 ethnic Armenians left Karabakh. Tensions with Armenia remain high. (Source: [RFE/RL, 15 October 2023](#)).

Tensions with Iran

Relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have never been easy and have gone through several phases over the past 30 years. The strong Azerbaijani pressure in the south after the 44-day war in 2020 is causing increasingly tense reactions among the Iranians. Iran supports Armenia, which, however, has been the losing party in the conflict. In the continuing tensions between Yerevan and Baku, Tehran nevertheless continues to play the Armenian card. The Azeris are looking beyond Karabakh, dreaming of expanding into a larger 'Southern Azerbaijan' to be created in the area most populated by Iranian Azeris, who are also deeply entrenched in the local economy and politics. Iran, on the other hand, seeks to regain a dominant role in the South Caucasus as well, and it is hoped that the confrontation will not degenerate into a devastating conflict, given the current instability in the entire region. (Source: [AsiaNews, 28 November 2022](#))

The fact that Azerbaijan opened an embassy in Iran's archenemy Israel served to increase tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 30 November 2022](#)) In April 2023, Azerbaijan expelled four Iranian diplomats. (Source: [RFE/RL, 6 April 2023](#))

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 resounding success in September 2023 in the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh increased President Aliyev's popularity and following presidential elections on 7 February 2024, he is now heading into another seven-year term in office having won over 92% of the vote.

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>
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- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, Religious Freedom Survey, November 2018 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
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- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, 27 March 2020 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2557
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- 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>
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WWL 2024: 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, played a formative role in the initial stages of the new Azeri church.

Church spectrum today

| Azerbaijan: Church networks | Christians | % |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| Orthodox | 220,000 | 88.7 |
| Catholic | 740 | 0.3 |
| Protestant | 20,300 | 8.2 |
| Independent | 5,600 | 2.3 |
| Unaffiliated | 940 | 0.4 |
| Doubly-affiliated Christians | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total | 247,580 | 99.8 |
| <i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i> | | |
| Evangelical movement | 9,900 | 4.0 |
| Renewalist movement | 15,200 | 6.1 |

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

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 March 2023), the largest Christian denominations in Azerbaijan are:

- The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)
- The Armenian Apostolic Church (exclusively in the Nagorno-Karabakh region). However, after the Azerbaijani two-day war in September 2023 practically all Armenians have left Karabakh.

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*).

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Azerbaijan): "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. After the September 2023 military operation, Azerbaijan took control over Karabakh and practically all ethnic Armenians (120,000) left the region.

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.

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Azerbaijan

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

| Azerbaijan: World Watch List | Points | WWL Rank |
|------------------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2024 | 60 | 59 |
| WWL 2023 | 59 | 58 |
| WWL 2022 | 60 | 56 |
| WWL 2021 | 56 | 61 |
| WWL 2020 | 57 | 53 |

The WWL 2024 score (60 points) is one point higher than in WWL 2023: Average pressure remained the same as in WWL 2023 (11.7 points) while the violence score went up from 0.6 points in WWL 2023 to 1.7 points in WWL 2024. The levels of pressure are highest in the *Church and Private spheres 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 | Very weak |
| Clan oppression | CO | Medium |
| Christian denominational protectionism | CDP | Very weak |

| Azerbaijan: Persecution engines | Abbreviation | Level of influence |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Communist and post-Communist oppression | CPCO | Not at all |
| Secular intolerance | SI | Not at all |
| 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 (Medium), blended with Clan oppression (Medium)

According to society's standard attitude, an Azerbaijani has to be a Muslim. Christians are normally from other ethnic groups (Russians and Armenians). 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 (Islam). Some converts will be locked up for long periods and 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 | - | VERY WEAK | MEDIUM | VERY WEAK | - | - | STRONG | - |
| Government officials | Medium | - | Very weak | Medium | Very weak | - | - | Strong | - |
| Ethnic group leaders | Medium | - | Very weak | Medium | - | - | - | - | - |
| Non-Christian religious leaders | Medium | - | Weak | Medium | - | - | - | - | - |
| Religious leaders of other churches | - | - | - | - | Very weak | - | - | - | - |
| Violent religious groups | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Ideological pressure groups | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs | Medium | - | Weak | Medium | Very weak | - | - | Medium | - |
| One's own (extended) family | Strong | - | - | Strong | Weak | - | - | - | - |
| Political parties | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | Strong | - |
| 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.

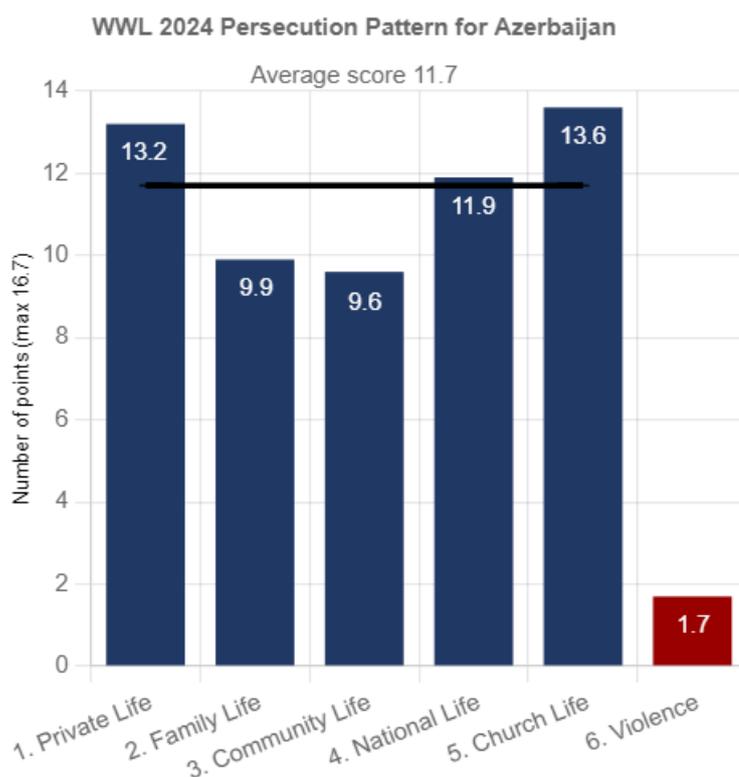
Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **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.
- **Ordinary citizens (Medium):** Islam is the traditional religion for ethnic Azerbaijanis. Ordinary citizens at the community level will exert high pressure on converts to return to Islam.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Azerbaijan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.7 points), the same score as in WWL 2023.
- The two spheres of life with the highest levels of pressure were again the *Church* and *Private spheres*. Pressure on Christians comes from two main sources: *Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression and Ethno-religious hostility)* in the *Private sphere of life* and *Dictatorial paranoia* in the *Church sphere of life*.

- The score for violence went up from 0.6 points in WWL 2023 to 1.7 in WWL 2024. Due to the oppressive levels of surveillance, most Christians self-censor to avoid getting into trouble.

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 2024 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 regularly regarded as the final farewell to the 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. (3.50 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 3.2: 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.). (3.50 points)

This is one of the strongest forms of persecution in the country as the state closely monitors non-Orthodox Christians. Over the years there have been numerous incidents in which people from the local community reported Christians to the authorities. Converts are of course also monitored by the family and surrounding community.

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 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses. (3.25 points)

Protestants and converts are severely hindered in this way. This form of persecution is driven by both the government and the local community, which shuns Azeri Christians. There is extensive evidence that converts in particular face severe economic consequences as one part of the general hostility targeting them. In addition, as Protestant churches are mainly unregistered, they are unable to secure loans, have a bank account, or rent property.

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. The imposition of fines is the preferred method of persecution the authorities use to crack down on these churches, prior to escalating to more severe forms of punishment (raids, imprisonments, closure of churches).

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 allowing Christian organizations would create societal unrest. Muslims will quickly regard Christian organizations as an attempt to convert people to Christianity and will block this with all means.

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 published, 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 5.1: Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.75 points)

All religious activities are monitored by the strictly secular authorities. Raids are reported regularly, particularly evangelical groups (and Jehovah's Witnesses). Activities of unregistered groups can also be hindered and/or obstructed. Physical violence is used on a very limited scale.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching materials and/or published materials were monitored. (3.75 points)

All materials must be cleared by the committee for religious affairs first. And only registered groups can have religious materials. Muslims will also keep an eye on this and report to the authorities when necessary.

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

Registration is required to produce, import, export, or distribute religious material; but state permission to actually do this is hardly ever granted.

Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles and other Christian materials has been hindered. (3.75 points)

All religious materials are closely watched by the state. Nothing may be used unless special permission has been given. Distribution of certain materials can only be done on a small scale inside a few registered churches.

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 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.*

| Azerbaijan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire | WWL 2024 | WWL 2023 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)? | 0 | 0 |
| 6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (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)? | 0 | 41 |
| 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 |

| Azerbaijan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire | WWL 2024 | WWL 2023 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| 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 2024 reporting period:

- **Churches and public Christian properties damaged:** One Armenian church and two Christian cemeteries were deliberately damaged (see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights*).

5 Year trends

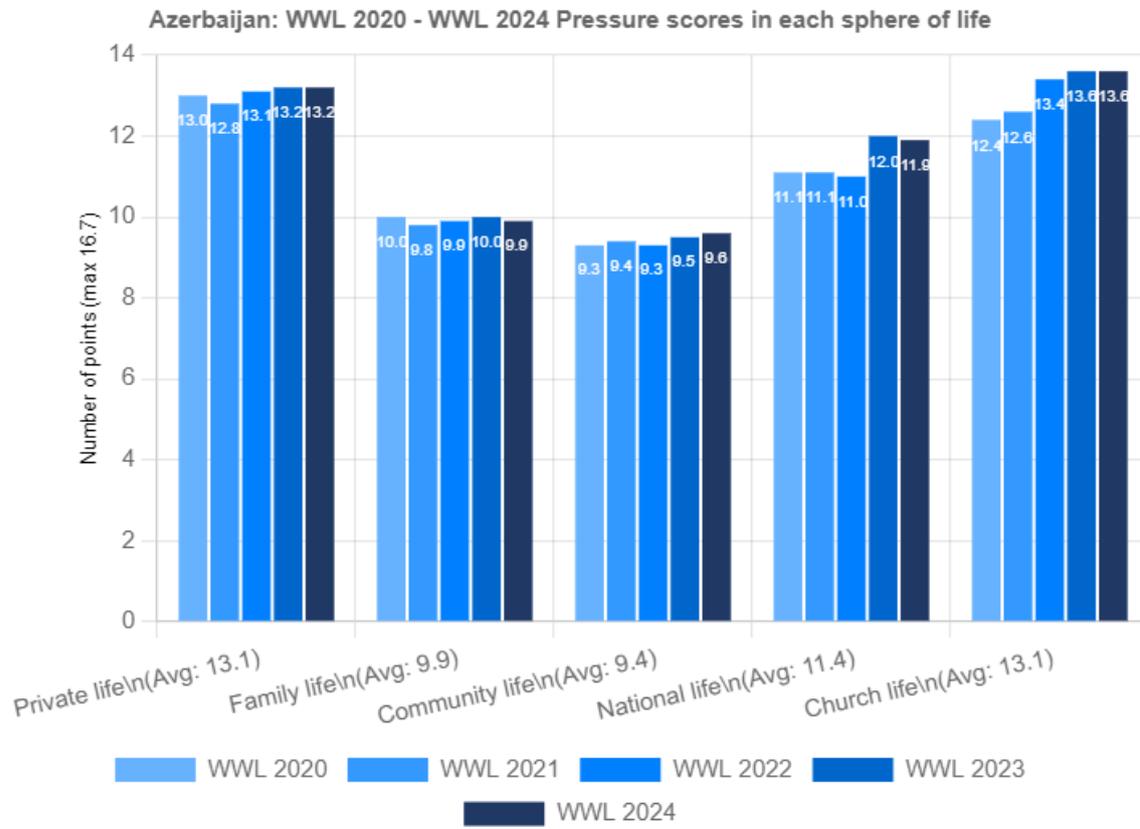
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

| Azerbaijan: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024 | Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| 2024 | 11.7 |
| 2023 | 11.7 |
| 2022 | 11.3 |
| 2021 | 11.1 |
| 2020 | 11.2 |

The table above shows that the level of average pressure has been very high over the five reporting periods. In the period WWL 2020-2022 the score was stable within the range 11.2 - 11.3 points. There was then a rise in pressure and the score has stabilized in the WWL 2023-2024 period at 11.7 points.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

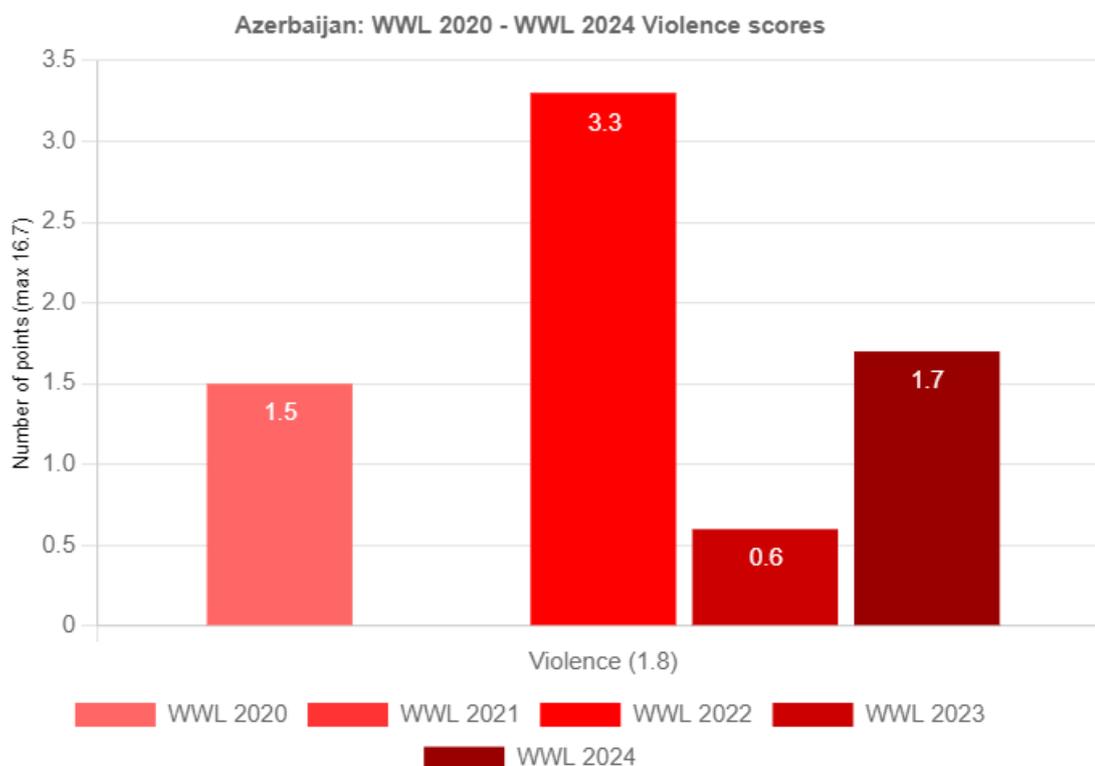


The table above shows that there has been some stability in the five spheres of life. Pressure has remained highest in two spheres of life in particular: the *Private* and *Church spheres* of life. This reflects the influence of the two main Persecution engines.

- **Pressure in *Private sphere of 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 sphere of life* has been the highest scoring sphere of life in Azerbaijan, indicating high pressure especially on converts. (Since WWL 2022 this 'privilege' went to the Church sphere of life.) In WWL 2024 the score for the *Private sphere* went up to 13.2 points (the same level as in WWL 2023).
- **Pressure in the *Family sphere of life*** has been fairly stable since WWL 2020 at a high level. Most affected are converts. The score of WWL 2024 (9.9 points) was slightly lower than the score of WWL 2020 (10.0 points).
- **Pressure in *Community sphere of life*** has been very stable at a high level. Most affected are converts. The score of *Community sphere of life* in WWL 2024 (9.6 points) went up very slightly from 9.5 in WWL 2023.
- **Pressure in *National sphere of life*** has also been rather 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. The score of *National sphere of life* in WWL 2024 (11.9 points) went very slightly down from 12.0 in WWL 2023.

- **Pressure in Church sphere of life** had the same score in WWL 2024 as in WWL 2023 (13.6 points). The score for *Church sphere of life* is the highest of the five spheres of life in Azerbaijan and indicates the level of state oppression on Christians.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The level of violence in Azerbaijan has been very 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. The score for WWL 2023 went down again to 0.6 points. In WWL 2024 it went up again to 1.7 points.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

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

In Azerbaijan, 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. Women who have exposed human rights violations or been critical of the authorities are silenced through smear campaigns and blackmailing ([Amnesty International Public Statement, 2021](#)). Christian converts in particular are at a greater risk of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, house arrest, discrimination and rejection by family and 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.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

| Group | Male Pressure Points |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Economic | Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines |
| Political and Legal | Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement |
| Security | 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 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. “There is extensive evidence,” a country expert adds, “that converts in particular face severe economic consequences as one part of the larger persecution against them.”

Christian men – both converts and non-converts – are targeted for their role as heads of their families and primary financial providers. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution (possibly losing his job) his whole family will suffer.

Church leaders – usually men – are notable targets of persecution, which will often 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.”

Christian men are also forced to partake in [mandatory](#) military service (World Population Review, accessed 27 February 2024). With no option for an alternative form of service for conscientious objectors, many men are forced to serve in the army despite their strongly held religiously-based objections to taking an oath or taking up weapons. Travelling from the country for reasons relating to Christian faith is also extremely challenging, especially for church leaders. “The state regulates and/or stops foreigners outright from meeting with local groups as well as locals from travelling abroad for religious educational reasons,” a country expert disclosed.

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 2023 Azerbaijan (Special Watch List):

- “In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan trended negatively. The government continued to exert significant control over all religious practice, primarily through enforcement of the country's law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs (religion law). The religion law requires religious communities to register to legally engage in religious activity, requires state review and approval of religious literature and related materials, and places numerous other limitations on freedom of religion or belief. In March, President Ilham Aliyev signed into law amendments to the religion law that reassigned the power to appoint imams from the nominally independent Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) to the official State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), further entrenching state control over the practice of Islam. In May, the SCWRA fired Shi'a imam Mirseymur Aliyev after he reportedly held Ramadan prayers on a different day than mandated by the state. That same month, the CMB announced the imposition of an age restriction that barred citizens over the age of 65 from performing the Hajj. Authorities also raided, seized religious literature from, and fined about 20 Muslims across the country who met for worship in private homes or held religious events with children.”
- “While religious minorities have generally noted positive strides for religious freedom in Baku, others have shared that local authorities outside of the capital have surveilled Christians. During the year, the government failed yet again to register any non-Muslim religious communities, leaving some communities of Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses without registration and therefore unable to operate legally. Meanwhile, the SCWRA disclosed registering approximately 22 Muslim communities. Officials continued to reject requests for a civilian alternative to mandatory military service despite the allowance of such an option in the constitution. In a reversal of recent practice, Azerbaijan resumed detaining Jehovah's Witnesses who sought to conscientiously object.”

According to US State Department (IRFR 2022 Azerbaijan):

- “During the year [2022], the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) found the government violated individual freedom of religion or belief in two judgments involving seven individuals, including one case involving arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for prayer in a private home. A human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) said that as of year's end, 22 individuals remained imprisoned for their religious beliefs or practices. On September 16, the court extended until March 2023 the pretrial detention of Iranian-trained Shia imam Sardar Babayev, who faced treason charges. Human rights activists said the government's prosecution was motivated by Babayev's religious activities.”
- “Local human rights groups and others said the government continued to physically abuse, temporarily hold incommunicado, arrest, and imprison religious activists, and that many arrests and convictions of religious figures, including on drug possession charges, were politically motivated. During the year, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) found the government violated individual freedom of religion or belief in two judgments involving seven individuals, including one case involving arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for prayer in a private home.”
- “Authorities continued to initiate legal action against individuals associated with the unregistered Muslim Unity Movement (MUM), which the government characterized as an extremist group and accused of receiving funding from Iran. MUM members continued to report authorities physically abused them while in custody. One MUM member reported authorities raped him, then held him in administrative detention (detention for a nonviolent offense) for 15 days. Some civil society activists and human rights advocates considered the incarceration of MUM members politically motivated. Officials stated the government was not considering providing alternative service for conscientious objectors, as stipulated in the constitution. Authorities continued to imprison Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing compulsory military service, despite their willingness to perform alternative service.”

Further information

- “Multiple prosecutions and fines of Muslims - who in different parts of Azerbaijan met for Islamic worship in homes without state permission - have followed raids by police and State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations officials. The Muslims were each fined the equivalent of about two months' average wages for those in formal work. For people in rural areas, those without a formal job, or pensioners, such fines are a heavy financial burden.” (Source: [Forum 18, 9 December 2022](#))
- “A Baku court fined Shola Jafarova two months' average wage for holding mourning meetings in the Muslim holy month of Muharram and organising children to sing a mourning song uploaded to social media. A Goychay court similarly fined Samira Jafarova for a social media video with 15 children performing a lamentation for Imam Hussain (the third Imam of Shia Islam). She told her appeal hearing that ‘holding a religious ceremony is her right arising from the Constitution’, but the court rejected her appeal.” (Source: [Forum 18, 13 December 2022](#))

- “After 12 weeks in jail, a Ganca court changed the nine-month jail term for Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Seymur Mammadov to a one-year suspended sentence. Another, Royal Karimov, was released after three months' forced detention in a military unit. Both had declared readiness to perform an alternative civilian service. The Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office failed to respond on what action it would take (if any) to ensure that Azerbaijan introduces a civilian alternative service for those unable to serve in the army on grounds of conscience.” (Source: [Forum 18, 16 December 2022](#))
- “At least seven Shia Muslims faced court cases for taking their children to a celebration in a shopping center of the anniversary of the birth of Fatima, the daughter of the Islamic prophet Mohammad. Four were fined two months' average wage. One of those fined, Mail Karimov, was arrested at the court and is among hundreds of Shia Muslims in jail under investigation on drugs charges which human rights defenders say are fabricated. The criminal trial of Shia Imam Sardar Babayev continues in Baku.” (Source: [Forum 18, 21 April 2023](#))

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. The victory of Azerbaijan in Karabakh in September 2023 has resulted in a huge departure of Armenian Christians from the country; hostility towards the remaining Christians can be expected to continue.

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 Persecution engines in Azerbaijan, Christians in this country will have to brace themselves 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>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: (Amnesty International Public Statement, 2021). - <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/azerbaijan-gender-based-reprisals-against-women-must-stop.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: mandatory - <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-mandatory-military-service>

- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 9 December 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2794
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 13 December 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2795
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 16 December 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2796
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 21 April 2023 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2826

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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