

World  
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## Azerbaijan: Full Country Dossier

March 2023



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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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 2023 reporting period was 1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

# WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Azerbaijan

## Brief country details

Azerbaijan: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
10,300,000	247,000	2.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Map of country



**Note on Nagorno-Karabakh:** According to [Freedom House's country profile](#): "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."

Azerbaijan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	59	58
WWL 2022	60	56
WWL 2021	56	61
WWL 2020	57	53
WWL 2019	57	50

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

## Brief description of the persecution situation

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

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- Azerbaijan continues to prevent Armenian pilgrims from visiting the Dadivank Monastery of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, where Christians seeking to visit have been banned since May 2021. Five clergymen remain at the monastery with Russian peacekeepers staying nearby. (Source: [International Christian Concern - ICC, 26 January 2022](#))
- The US Department of State has documented the destruction of Armenian religious sites by Azerbaijan and attempts to "Albanize" the Nagorno-Karabakh region. (Source: IRFR 2021)
- On 8 November 2021, Azerbaijani troops opened fire on a group of Armenian utility workers repairing water pipes near the city of Shushi, which was captured during the 2020 Turkish-Azeri war against Nagorno-Karabakh. One civilian was killed, three were wounded. The shooting occurred near the Lachin-Stepanakert Road, the only transit option connecting Karabakh's Armenian Christian community with the outside world. (Source: [ICC, 9 November 2021](#))

## 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: International Christian Concern - ICC, 26 January 2022 - <https://www.persecution.org/2022/01/26/azerbaijan-prevents-armenians-visiting-dadivank-monastery/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: ICC, 9 November 2021 - <https://www.persecution.org/2021/11/09/one-armenian-christian-killed-three-wounded-azeri-gunfire/>

# WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Azerbaijan

## Links for general background information

Name of index/report	Quote reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp. 81-83)	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf">https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf</a>	27 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17043424">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17043424</a>	27 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/AZE">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/AZE</a>	27 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/azerbaijan/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/azerbaijan/</a>	27 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/azerbaijan">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/azerbaijan</a>	27 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (pp. 44/46)	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/Images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/Images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf</a>	27 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	5 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries	Democracy Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/nations-transit/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/nations-transit/2022</a>	27 June 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2022</a>	27 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-net/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-net/2022</a>	14 March 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/azerbaijan">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/azerbaijan</a>	27 June 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#az">https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#az</a>	27 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/azerbaijan">https://rsf.org/en/azerbaijan</a>	27 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/aze">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/aze</a>	27 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/AZE">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/AZE</a>	27 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/</a>	27 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL	USCIRF 2022	<a href="https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/2022%20Azerbaijan.pdf">https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/2022%20Azerbaijan.pdf</a>	27 June 2022
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/azerbaijan/overview">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/azerbaijan/overview</a>	27 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=COUNTRYPROFILE&amp;b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=AZE">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=COUNTRYPROFILE&amp;b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=AZE</a>	27 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp. 6-7)	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef28464d01f195827b7e020a3e8-0500022021/related/mpo-eca.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef28464d01f195827b7e020a3e8-0500022021/related/mpo-eca.pdf</a>	27 June 2022

## 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). Since then there have been various incidents along the frontline. One of the most recent examples is the skirmish that occurred on 18-19 June 2022. (Source: [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE-RL, 20 June 2022](#))

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 controls come on top of strict controls that the regime already imposes on all exercise of freedom of religion and belief by anyone, anywhere in Azerbaijan. Any meeting by a group of people without state permission is illegal, as are meetings held in venues without state approval. Religious teaching is similarly restricted. All religious literature must undergo pre-publication censorship by the State Committee. Those who violate these state controls face punishment. (Source: Forum 18, 17 June 2021)

According to US State Department IRFR 2021:

- "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."
- "On June 16 [2021], President Ilham Aliyev signed into law 14 amendments to the religious freedom law. Among other provisions, the new amendments forbid forcing children to practice religion, prohibit the promotion of religious extremism, disallow religious leaders from engaging in religious activities when employed by the state, provide government-approved religious centers the sole right to grant religious titles, and require religious communities to suspend their activities in the absence of a government-approved religious leader. The government justified the amendments by the need for security. Civil society organizations said the changes provided the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), the government body that regulates religious affairs, with more control over religious groups."

According to the Annual Recommendations from USCIRF 2022:

- “In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan generally trended negatively, with a few notable positive developments. In the beginning of the year, the Azerbaijani government unexpectedly announced plans to amend the country's restrictive 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs (religion law); these amendments passed swiftly and entered into force mid-year. Several entities, including USCIRF and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, had previously called for the government to revise the law to guarantee the protection of freedom of religion or belief and to remove provisions that constituted violations of this right. The amendments not only failed to address existing problems but also introduced new restrictions on religious communities. Prominent among those additions were requirements that the government approve the appointment of essentially all religious leaders; religious communities cease religious activity in the absence of an appointed cleric; certain categories of religious activities only take place in approved spaces; and worship and religious ceremonies only be carried out by Azerbaijani citizens, unless given express permission otherwise. Moreover, despite public urging, the Azerbaijani government declined to seek feedback on the amendments from the general public or international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).”
- “Ongoing issues stemming from the religion law and other policies that impact the exercise of freedom of religion or belief also saw no improvement. During 2021, the government did not register any non-Muslim religious communities that had pending applications under the religion law. According to the official State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), the government registered at least 16 Muslim communities. Although sources stated that the Azerbaijani government was considering adopting a civilian alternative to mandatory military service for conscientious objectors, nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 reported that an official from the Presidential Administration refuted that claim. Azerbaijan's human rights commissioner additionally hinted that the government may repeal a ban prohibiting women and girls from wearing headscarves in passport photos.”

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	247,000	2.4
Muslim	9,917,000	96.3
Hindu	300	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	8,900	0.1
Bahai	2,100	0.0
Atheist	5,600	0.1
Agnostic	117,000	1.1
Other	1,800	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

According to the World Christian Database (accessed April 2022), 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 Muslims according to IRFR 2021) 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). This makes Azerbaijan the least religious Muslim-majority country in the world.

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

In addition to the restrictions contained in published laws, many faith communities have found that there are also unwritten restrictions. Without indications of approval from senior regime figures, groups are unlikely to be allowed to exercise freedom of religion and belief. This prevents communities from legally existing and carrying out activities such as opening places of

worship, recovering property confiscated in Soviet times, holding public events and publishing religious literature. (Source: [Forum 18, Religious Freedom Survey, November 2018](#))

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

The registration process, which started after a set of laws regulating religious affairs was introduced in 2009, seemed to have ground to a halt for many years, leaving many re-registration applications unanswered. Some religious communities have found that compulsory re-registration means de-registration. For example, the Baptist Union had 10 registered congregations in 1992; after a series of compulsory re-registrations with ever decreasing numbers, 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 State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations wrote that it had "no objection" to meetings once a week for two hours (Source: [Forum 18, 27 March 2020](#)). On the whole, however, State Committee officials continue to deny state registration to religious communities 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 the World Bank country profile:

- **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 2021) describes corruption in the country as "rampant", and has uncovered large-scale bribery of foreign politicians and others to deny the regime's serious human rights violations.

According to the CIA Factbook:

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

In July 2015, Russia stepped up its pressure on Azerbaijan by extending the area under Russian control in South Ossetia in Georgia southwards. Now, more than 1.5 kilometers of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the main export line, is under Russian control. Another factor having a major impact on Azerbaijan is the drop in the price of oil since 2014. The collapse of oil prices and oil demand along with the economic shutdown imposed to fight the COVID-19 pandemic 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 (Marja, May 19) 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 economy.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Azerbaijani 91.6%, Lezghin 2%, Russian 1.3%, Armenian 1.3%, Talysh 1.3%, other 2.4% (2009 est.). Note: The separatist Nagorno-Karabakh region is populated almost entirely by ethnic Armenians
- **Main languages:** Azerbaijani (Azeri) (official) 92.5%, Russian 1.4%, Armenian 1.4%, other 4.7% (2009 est.). Note: Russian is widely spoken.
- **Urban population:** 57.2% of total population (2022)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.8% (male: 99.9%, female: 99.7%) (2019)

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI country data profile):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.756 (0.73 for females, 0.77 for males), ranking 88
- **Total population:** 10.0 million (2019)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 73.0 years (75.5 for females, 70.5 for males) (2019)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 12.9 years (13.0 for females, 12.8 for males) (2019)

- **Gender Inequality Index:** 0.323 (2019)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 63.4, Male: 69.7 (2019)

Azerbaijan ranked 128th in the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index of 180 countries (CPI 2021). Corruption is endemic at all levels of administration and government and Christians have to face its effect on a daily basis – if they want to get anything done they must be prepared to pay bribes. Unregistered groups suffer most since they know that their activities are illegal and that they need to bribe officials to look the other way. Facing growing public discontent concerning corruption, the mismanagement of the economy and the handling of the COVID-19 crisis, president has responded by cracking down on the opposition. (Source: [RFE-RL, 30 July 2020](#))

Azerbaijan has been constructing new housing in areas of Nagorno-Karabakh which were recaptured in the six-week 2020 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 are 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](#))

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 2022):

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

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile cellular subscriptions:** 102.0 per 100 people (2020)

According to [Budde Comm Research](#) (Publication date: March 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 2022 report, Azerbaijan is listed as '*not free*' with a score of 38 points, a slight improvement compared to the previous year:

- "Internet freedom remains restricted in Azerbaijan. During the coverage period, the environment improved because more people accessed the internet, according to some measurement sources, and the government did not block social media platforms, as it did during the 2020 military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the government continued to manipulate the online information landscape, blocking numerous independent and opposition websites. The recently enacted media law places further restrictions on online media outlets and creates hurdles for those who try to establish a new outlet. The prosecutor’s office and the courts employed trumped up charges, usually relating to drugs or 'hooliganism', to prosecute activists who criticize government policies or figures online."

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 law on the media 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 religious extremist group abroad and planned a series of terrorist attacks on Azerbaijan's territory (Source: [RFE-RL, 1 February 2017](#)).

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

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

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

### The Nagorno-Karabakh enclave

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

The Karabakh conflict erupted three times in 2020. On 24 February 2020 one Azerbaijani soldier was killed by Armenian fire in the Gazakh district. A spokesman for the Armenian Defense Ministry said that one Armenian serviceman was slightly wounded in the fighting. (Source:

[RFE-RL, 24 February 2020](#)) Much more serious was the fighting that occurred on 12 July 2020. It is interesting that the fighting occurred far from Nagorno-Karabakh and was directly between the two nations (Armenia and Azerbaijan), which rarely occurs (Source: [RFE-RL, 12 July 2020](#)).

At the end of [September 2020](#) a full-fledged armed conflict was fought (Asia News, 27 September 2020). This time the Azerbaijani army managed to beat the Armenian forces. Since this last serious conflict in 2020, tensions have remained high and minor outbreaks of violence have occurred from time to time. 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 have now come under increased scrutiny.

## Trends analysis

### 1) Azerbaijan continues to have very restrictive legislation

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

### 2) All forms of opposition are under constant surveillance

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

### 3) There are no major political threats challenging the regime

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

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: 25 September 2020 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Clashes-in-the-Caucasus.-The-Armenian-Catholicos-interrupts-official-visit-to-Italy-and-the-Vatican--51145.html>
- Recent history: 12 November 2020 - <https://jamestown.org/program/karabakh-armistice-azerbaijani-national-triumph-russian-geopolitical-victory-part-one/>
- Recent history: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE-RL, 20 June 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31906110.html>
- Political and legal landscape: appointed - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-aliyev-names-wife-aliyeva-vice-president/28322210.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)
- Political and legal landscape: official visit - <https://worldia.org/en/news/religious-dialogue-in-azerbaijan/>
- Political and legal landscape: Jamestown Foundation, 27 January 2020 - <https://jamestown.org/program/a-year-in-review-azerbaijan-pursues-internal-reforms-and-external-multilateralism/>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE-RL, 9 February 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-vote-millimajlis-aliyev-parliament/30424655.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Religion Law and Administrative Code changes - [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2666](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2666)
- Religious landscape description: 2006–2008 Gallup poll - <https://web.archive.org/web/20141006084434/http://www.today.az/news/society/50636.html>
- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, Religious Freedom Survey, November 2018 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](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](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2557)
- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, March 2020 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2557](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2557)
- Economic landscape: in poverty - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)
- Economic landscape: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 16 June 2020 - <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13626-azerbaijans-economy-takes-a-double-blow.html>
- Economic landscape: Jamestown Foundation, 14 July 2022 - <https://jamestown.org/program/the-economic-implications-of-the-ukraine-war-on-azerbaijan/>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE-RL, 30 July 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-s-despotic-ruler-throws-tantrum-in-unprecedented-crackdown-on-pro-democracy-rivals/30757480.html>
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- Technological landscape: Budde Comm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Azerbaijan-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: RFE-RL, 9 September 2014 - <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-squeezes-civil-society-media/26574692.html>
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- Security situation: RFE-RL, 1 February 2017 - <http://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-four-terrorists-killed-shootout/28271554.html>
- Security situation: RFE-RL, 5 November 2018 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijani-authorities-say-two-extremists-killed-in-tense-city-of-ganca/29583259.html>
- Security situation: Caucasian Knot, 3 July 2019 - <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/47682/>

- Security situation: Nagorno-Karabakh enclave - <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>
- Security situation: Caucasian Knot, 8 July 2020 - <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/51423/>
- Security situation: RFE-RL, 24 February 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-trade-accusations-over-deadly-border-fighting/30451616.html>
- Security situation: RFE-RL, 12 July 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-armenia-trade-accusations-over-deadly-border-fighting/30722243.html>
- Security situation: September 2020 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Clashes-in-the-Caucasus.-The-Armenian-Catholicos-interrupts-official-visit-to-Italy-and-the-Vatican--51145.html>

## WWL 2023: Church information / Azerbaijan

### Christian origins

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

In the 16th century, the first shah of the Safavid established Shia Islam as the state religion. In 1806, what is now Azerbaijan became occupied by the Russian Empire during the Russo-Persian War (1804-1813). With the Russians came a new wave of Christians, since the regime brought in ethnic Russians, who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1918 Azerbaijan declared independence but they were conquered by the Soviets in 1920. Since Azerbaijan became an independent state again in 1991, many Russians have left the country, which has especially weakened the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian Protestants, however, have played a formative role in the initial stages of the new Azeri church.

### Church spectrum today

According to World Christian Database data (accessed April 2022), the largest Christian denominations in Azerbaijan are:

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

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

Azerbaijan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	220,000	89.1
Catholic	710	0.3
Protestant	20,000	8.1
Independent	5,400	2.2
Unaffiliated	910	0.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>247,020</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	9,600	3.9
Renewalist movement	14,800	6.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

**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.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021), Christians live mainly in Baku and other urban areas.

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

## Christian communities and how they are affected

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

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

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

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

## WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Azerbaijan

### Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

### Position on the World Watch List

Azerbaijan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	59	58
WWL 2022	60	56
WWL 2021	56	61
WWL 2020	57	53
WWL 2019	57	50

*Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods*

The WWL 2023 score (59 points) is one point lower than in WWL 2022: Average pressure rose from 11.3 points in WWL 2022 to 11.7, but the violence score dropped sharply from 3.3 points in WWL 2022 to 0.6 points. 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	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Very weak

Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

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

### Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

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

### Islamic oppression (Medium), blended with Clan oppression (Medium)

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

## Drivers of persecution

Azerbaijan: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM	-	-	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	-	VERY WEAK	STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	Medium	Very weak	-	Very weak	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Very weak	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-

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

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

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Strong):** At all levels, government officials are the strongest persecutors of Christians in Azerbaijan. They have infiltrated all churches and police interrogate pastors and other church leaders regularly. They monitor all religious activities, raid meetings and block the distribution of religious materials.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Especially at the local level, members of the community will monitor religious activities and report to the authorities.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Few parties are allowed in Azerbaijan and opposition is constantly suppressed. The governing party under President Aliyev is a powerful element in suppressing religious and other forms of freedom in the country.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression, blended with Clan oppression

- **Muslim family members (Strong):** A convert's Muslim family will exert high pressure since they regard conversion to Christianity as betrayal. This may lead to house arrest and beatings.
- **Government officials (Medium):** At the community level there is a link between government officials and Muslim pressure. Often, active Muslims and local officials know each other. This is why the pressure on converts is stronger at the community level than at

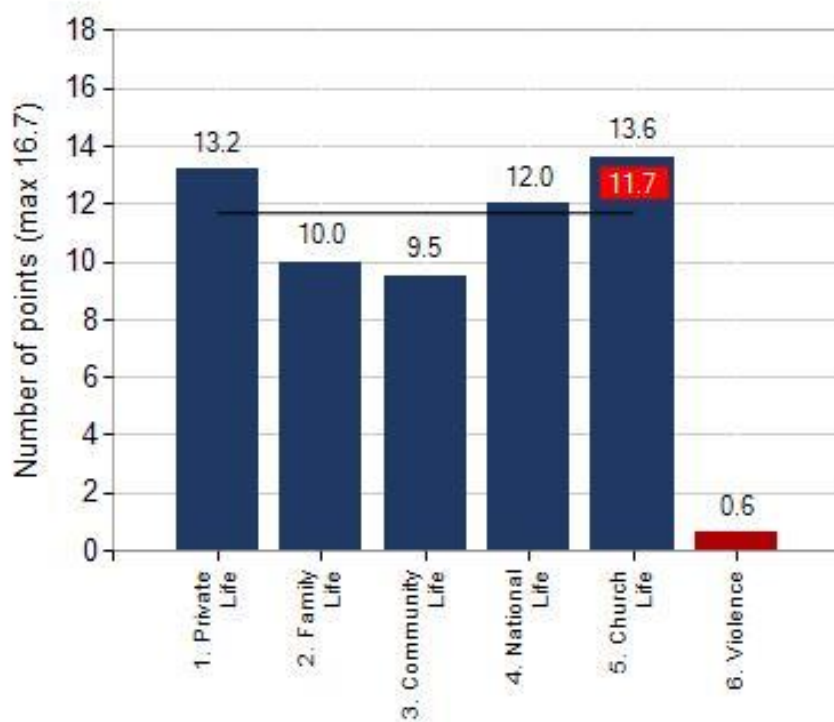


the state level, where officials claim that they are secular.

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Muslim leaders are also oppressed by the government and have limited freedom. Nevertheless, that does not stop them using their influence to oppose any conversion of Azerbaijanis to Christianity.
- **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

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Azerbaijan



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Azerbaijan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.7 points), an increase from 11.3 points in WWL 2022. The increase was caused by higher scores for pressure in the *Private, Family* and especially *Church spheres of life*.
- The two spheres of life with the highest level of pressure were again *Private sphere of life* and *Church sphere of life*. Pressure on Christians comes from two main sources: *Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression)* in the *Private sphere of life* and *Dictatorial paranoia* in the *Church sphere of life*.
- The score for violence went down from 3.3 points in WWL 2022 to 0.6 points in WWL 2023. 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 2023 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, 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 reviewed by the state and given permission for distribution - otherwise it is illegal and banned. The ROC does not seem to experience 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 if they try to meet up with fellow Christians. 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. Islamic 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 interacting 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 much more serious: 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)**

Surveillance is one of the strongest forms of persecution in the country as the state closely monitors non-Orthodox Christians. There have been numerous incidents over the years where 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 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.25 points)**

Fines are a common experience for practically all churches, with the exception of Russian Orthodox congregations. This is the preferred method of pressure applied by the authorities before escalating to more severe forms of punishment (raids, imprisonments, closure of churches).

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

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

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

Due to its secular principles, the state will not tolerate the formation of any such Christian organization. Also, the majority of the population is Muslim, so allowing Christian organizations would create societal unrest. Muslims would quickly regard the formation of a Christian organization as an attempt to convert people to Christianity and would 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 and will block any such attempts. 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 for non-traditional Christian groups. 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 legally use religious materials. Muslim citizens will also keep an eye on this and report to the authorities when necessary.

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

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

**Block 5.14: 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 state permission has been given. Distribution can 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 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:*

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

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*

- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

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

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

**3. For further discussion** (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor’s article dated 13 November 2013 available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

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

<b>Azerbaijan: Violence Block question</b>		<b>WWL 2023</b>	<b>WWL 2022</b>
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	2
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	3
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)?	41	52 *
6.9	How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.10	How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	0

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** According to in-country sources, at least 41 converts were abused and beaten by their families and villagers.

No other reports about violent incidents were received from Azerbaijan.

## 5 Year trends

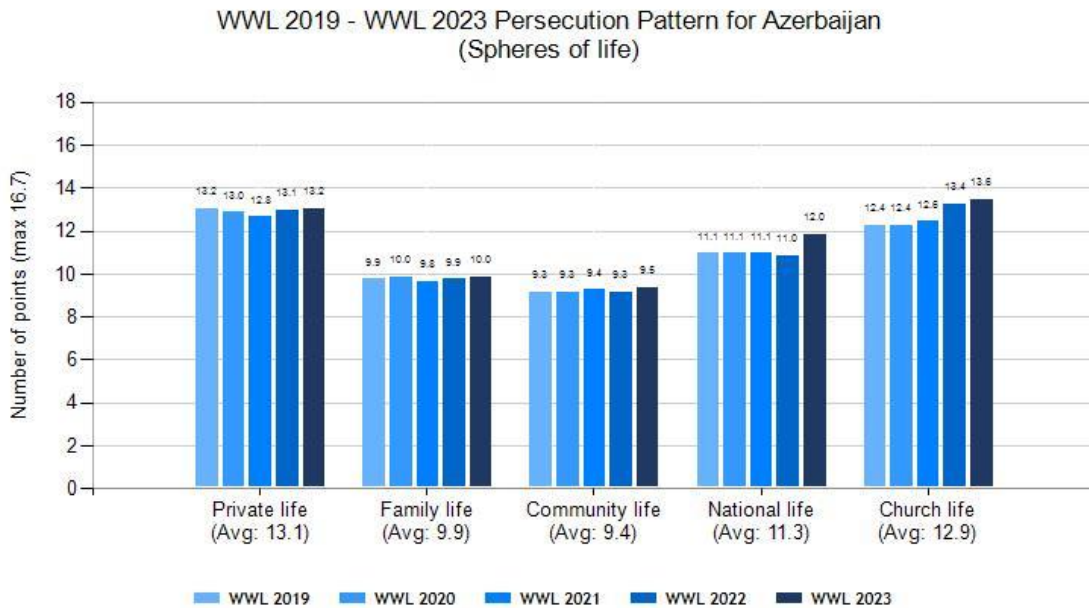
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Azerbaijan: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	11.7
2022	11.3
2021	11.1
2020	11.2
2019	11.2

The table above shows that the level of average pressure has been very high over the five reporting periods and has been stable within the range 11.0 - 11.3 points. In WWL 2023 the score for average pressure went up to 11.7, as the scores in all five spheres of life went up.

## 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

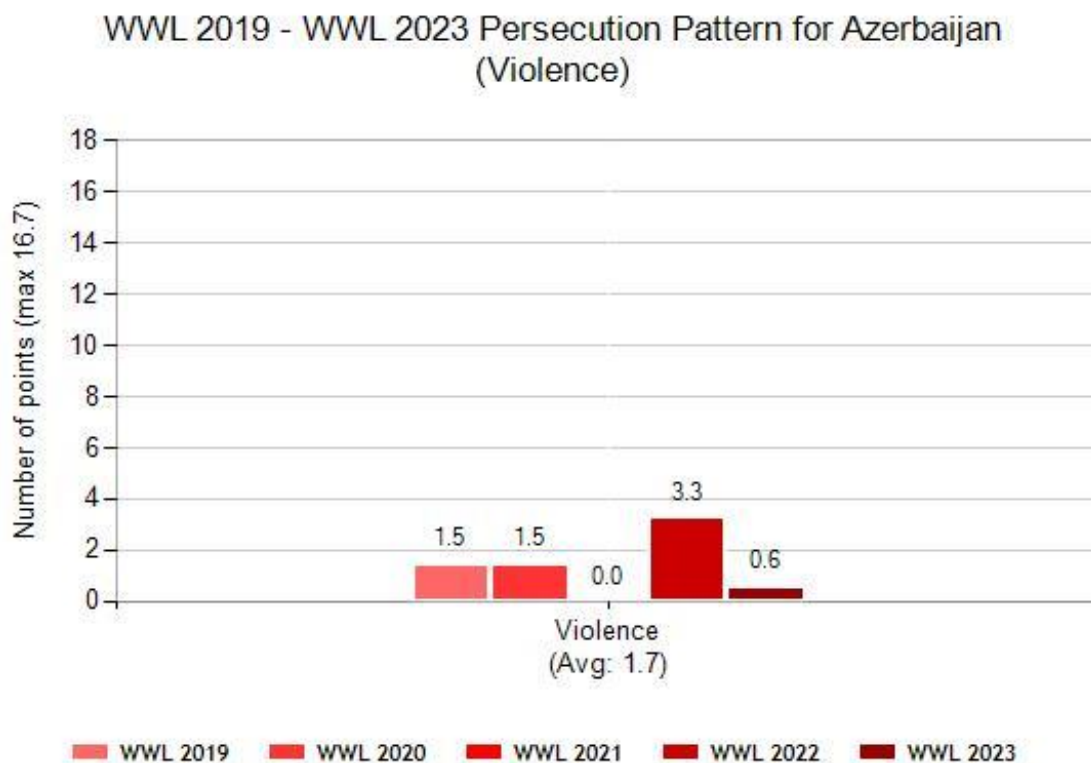


Stability is not only visible in the level of average pressure in Azerbaijan: The table above shows that there has been a lot of stability in each of the five spheres of life as well. Pressure has remained highest in two spheres of life in particular: *Private* and *Church spheres of life*. This reflects 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 2023 the score of *Private sphere of life* went up to 13.2 points.
- Pressure in the *Family sphere of life* has been fairly stable since WWL 2019 at a high level. Most affected are converts. The score of WWL 2023 reached the same highest level as in WWL 2020 at 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 2023 (12.0 points) went up and was the highest in the past five years.
- Pressure in *National sphere of life* has also been constant, but at a very high level over the past five years, showing that the government has not reduced its pressure on Christians to any great degree. The score of *National sphere of life* in WWL 2023 (9.5 points) went slightly up and was the highest in the past five years.
- Pressure in *Church sphere of life* increased again in WWL 2023 after an initial stable period of years at a very high level. This is the result of the June 2021 changes in legislation. The score for *Church sphere of life* is the highest 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.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

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

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

are not free to choose their own religion and will face persecution upon conversion to Christianity.

Christian converts (typically from a Muslim background) are therefore most vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who dare to challenge the existing order. They are at a greater risk than non-converts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, house arrest, discrimination and rejection by family and Muslim community. Female converts in conservative regions also run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men, with the aim of forcing them to return to Islam. This happens infrequently, typically in remote rural areas and in cases where premarital arrangements had already been made before the conversion.

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

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via 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. If he is a church leader (contextually, usually men), the fact that he is suffering persecution will affect his church and can result in an increase of fear among church members. As a country expert explained: “The state regards pastors and church leaders as primary targets to control Christian activities. They are used as examples for the other Christians of what may be expected. When churches are raided, it is mostly the church leaders who are detained, interrogated, fined, and sometimes harassed. Muslims will hold church leaders primarily responsible for the conversion of their people; active convert leaders will even be attacked more fiercely.”

Christian men are also forced to partake in [mandatory](#) military service (World Population Review, accessed 9 February 2023). 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. Leaving the country on the grounds of faith is also extremely challenging for Christians in Azerbaijan, especially pastors and church leaders. “The state regulates and/or outright stops foreigners 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 2022:

- “In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan generally trended negatively, with a few notable positive developments. In the beginning of the year, the Azerbaijani government unexpectedly announced plans to amend the country's restrictive 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs (religion law); these amendments passed swiftly and entered into force mid-year. Several entities, including USCIRF and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, had previously called for the government to revise the law to guarantee the protection of freedom of religion or belief and to remove provisions that constituted violations of this right. The amendments not only failed to address existing problems but also introduced new restrictions on religious communities. Prominent among those additions were requirements that the government approve the appointment of essentially all religious leaders; religious communities cease religious activity in the absence of an appointed cleric; certain categories of religious activities only take place in approved spaces; and worship and religious ceremonies only be carried out by Azerbaijani citizens, unless given express permission otherwise. Moreover, despite public urging, the Azerbaijani government declined to seek feedback on the amendments from the general public or international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).”

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- “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 having received funding from Iran. Civil society activists and human rights advocates said they considered the incarceration of MUM members to be politically motivated. The government granted early release on September 13 [2021] to MUM activist Elvin Murvatoglu, arrested in 2020 on charges that were widely characterized as trumped up, prior to expiration of his 2.5-year prison sentence.”
- “Amendments signed into law in June [2021] include a new requirement for the SCWRA to approve the appointment of all non-Islamic religious leaders. The new amendments forbid individuals from forcing children to practice religion; prohibit the promotion of religious

extremism; disallow religious leaders from engaging in religious activities when employed by the state; provide government-approved religious centers the sole right to grant religious titles; require religious centers to coordinate with the government when opening religious education institutions; restrict religious ceremonies (with exceptions) to places of worship; require believers to inform the government about travel to foreign countries to visit religious sites; grant the government authority to approve the appointment of religious figures in non-Islamic religious communities; require religious communities to suspend activity when they lose a religious leader until a new one is appointed; and allow military service members to worship in their spare time, with the exception of during combat operations. The law also contains a new requirement for the reattestation every five years of Muslim clerics who are appointed by the CMB [Caucasian Muslim Board]; reattestation is conducted with the involvement of State Committee officials. Smaller communities without a 'religious center' are not allowed to grant religious titles or ranks to the clergy; apply for permission to have foreign citizens as religious leaders; establish religious educational establishments; organize visits by their adherents to shrines and religious locations abroad, or exercise other rights that are attributed only to 'religious centers'. Mass religious worship, rites, and ceremonies (with some exceptions) may as a rule be held only in places of worship and shrines. SCWRA permission is required under the June 2021 amendments to hold religious 'mass events' anywhere other than at state-approved places of worship or shrines.”

- “The government again did not implement a civilian alternative to mandatory military service for conscientious objectors, despite being required to do so by the constitution. On October 7 [2021], the ECHR [European Court of Human Rights] adopted a judgement in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses Emil Mehdiyev and Vahid Abilov, who were convicted in 2018 and received one-year probation sentences for criminal evasion of military service. The ECHR accepted the government's admission that it had violated the human rights of both men and ordered that they be paid compensation and costs in the amount of 3,500 euros (\$4,000) for each defendant. The ECHR's October decision brought to seven the number of conscientious objectors from the country whose human rights had been violated by the government according to the court, and to whom the government had to pay compensation.”

**Additional note:** If amendments to the Religion Law (awaiting their second reading in parliament) are approved, this will give the State Committee the leading role in re-appointing all imams every five years. Commentator on religious issues Kanan Rovshanoglu notes that the Caucasian Muslim Board "will completely lose control over mosques", just as it has already lost control over Islamic higher education. He argues that Islamic communities themselves should choose their own imams. (Source: [Forum 18, 10 February 2022](#))

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### **Dictatorial paranoia**

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

### **Islamic oppression/Clan oppression (blended)**

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

Due to the very high level of stability of the 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 Male description: mandatory - <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-mandatory-military-service>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 10 February 2022 - [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2717](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2717)

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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