

World Watch Research

Azerbaijan: Background Information

September 2024



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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September 2024

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



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

Azerbaijan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
10,463,000	253,000	2.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Azerbaijan declared independence from the former Soviet Union on 30 August 1991, with Ayaz Mütəllibov, 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 Elçibey becoming the country's first democratically elected, non-Communist president.

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

President Elchibey was formally deposed by a national referendum in August 1993, when the National Council conferred presidential powers upon its new speaker, Heydar Aliyev, former First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party (1969–81) and later a member of the Soviet Union's Politburo, the KGB, and USSR Deputy Prime Minister (until 1987). Aliyev was elected to a 5-year term as president in October 1993 with only token opposition. Aliyev won re-election to another 5-year term in 1998, in an election marred by serious irregularities.

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

On [25 September 2020](#) a new war erupted between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region (Asia News, 27 September 2020). This time, the Azerbaijani army managed to defeat the Armenians. A peace agreement was announced on [12 November 2020](#), which meant that Nagorno-Karabakh returned under the authority of Azerbaijan, while 2,000 Russian soldiers would protect the Armenian population (Jamestown Foundation, 12 November 2020). However, repeated outbreaks of violence continued along the border in 2022 (Source: [RFE/RL, 21 November 2022](#)) and 2023 (Source: [RFE/RL, 6 April 2023](#), [RFE/RL, 11 May 2023](#)). Then, on 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a full-scale military operation into the Karabakh region and managed to take Karabakh and the surrounding areas that had been under Armenian control in just two days. Azerbaijan's 24-hour offensive ended three decades of rule by ethnic Armenians in the region, which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. Although the Azerbaijani government stated it would not take reprisals on the ethnic Armenians, practically all Armenians (about 120,000) had no confidence in this and left Karabakh. President Aliyev raised the Azerbaijani flag in Karabakh's capital Stepanakert (Xankendi to Azeris) on 15 October 2023 (Source: [RFE/RL, 15 October 2023](#)). Tensions with Armenia remain high.

2024 Presidential elections

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

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

Political and legal landscape

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

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

The government, foreign apologists and religious leaders (coerced or co-opted by the regime) use claims of what is called "tolerance", "dialogue", "multiculturalism" and similar terms to deny the reality of the serious human rights violations occurring in the country. For example, delegations of religious leaders are used for propaganda when the government seeks international trade agreements. The regime and its foreign apologists even claim that other countries should promote "the Azerbaijani model of tolerance". (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018](#))

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

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

On 16 June 2021, President Ilham Aliyev signed into law [Religion Law and Administrative Code changes](#) introducing new restrictions on freedom of religion and belief. These include requiring the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations to approve the appointment of all non-Islamic religious leaders and to take part in the re-attestation of all clerics of the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board every five years. The new regulations come on top of strict controls that the regime already imposes on all religious organizations and their adherents. Any meeting by a group of people without state permission is illegal, as are meetings held in venues without state approval. Religious

teaching is similarly restricted. All religious literature must undergo pre-publication censorship by the State Committee. Those who violate these state controls face punishment. (Source: Forum 18, 17 June 2021)

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Azerbaijan](#)):

- “The constitution stipulates the separation of religion and state and the equality of all religions before the law. It also protects the right of individuals to express their religious beliefs and to practice religious rituals, provided these do not violate public order or public morality. The law prohibits the government from interfering in religious activities; it also states the government and citizens have a responsibility to combat "religious extremism" and "radicalism." The law specifies the government may dissolve religious organizations if they cause racial, national, religious, or social animosity; proselytize in a way that "degrades human dignity;" or hinder secular education. The State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SCWRA) appoints religious personnel in all mosques. The government also has authority to approve the appointment of religious leaders in non-Islamic religious communities.”

The USCIRF classified Azerbaijan as RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST. According to [USCIRF 2024 Azerbaijan chapter](#):

- “In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan trended negatively. The government continued to enforce its 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs, which required the registration of religious groups to operate legally and engage in worship, mandated the official review and approval of religious literature and other materials, and restricted who could engage in "religious propaganda" or missionary activity, among other limitations. In keeping with the previous year, the government yet again refused to register any non-Muslim religious community despite continued efforts by Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses to obtain official registration. The government only reported registering two mosques during the year.”
- “The government continued to pose a threat to religious sites in and around the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. In May, the chairman of the official State Committee for Work on Religious Affairs Mubariz Gurbanli urged Armenian Apostolic priests to leave the Dadivank Monastery located in the Kalbajar region, falsely claiming that they had no ties to the religious site. Although a United Nations mission to the city of Khankendi in October concluded that it "saw no damage . . . to cultural or religious structures," other organizations remained concerned by the potential for damage or destruction in the region. In November 2023, Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW), a research initiative supported by Cornell University, reported damage to the historical Meghretsots Holy Mother of God Church in Shusha. That same month, CHW released satellite imagery that indicated probable damage to two Armenian cemeteries also in Shusha.”
- “The constitution characterizes Azerbaijan as a secular state and stipulates a separation between the state and religion. Nonetheless, the government continued to play an active role in the management and oversight of religious activities throughout the country and subjected virtually all religious practice to strict state control. Throughout the year, various officials misleadingly sought to promote Azerbaijan as a "model of state-religion relations.””

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	253,000	2.4
Muslim	10,069,000	96.2
Hindu	340	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	9,500	0.1
Bahai	2,100	0.0
Atheist	5,800	0.1
Agnostic	121,000	1.2
Other	1,900	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024), 96.2% of the population are Muslim and only 2.4% Christian. However, this last statistic dates from before the departure of practically all Armenians from Karabakh. The size of the Christian community in Azerbaijan has decreased tremendously since about 120,000 Armenians fled Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 (Source: [Catholic News Agency, 3 October 2023](#)).

Azerbaijan is unique among the former Soviet republics in having a large majority of Shiites (65% of the country's Muslim population according to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Azerbaijan](#))) and a minority of Sunni Muslims (35%). However, it would be wrong to call Azerbaijan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence: The government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and has put Islam under very strict control. Most of the Muslim population would seem to follow Islamic traditions purely as a form of culture. In a [2006–2008 Gallup poll](#), only 21% of respondents from Azerbaijan stated that religion is an important part of their daily

lives (TodayAZ 12 February 2009). If this is a true reflection of reality, it makes Azerbaijan the least religious Muslim-majority country in the world.

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

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

Azerbaijan uses a special government agency, the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), to supervise (and restrict) religious activities. To function as a religious group, it is necessary to register with the SCWRA. This requires the signatures of 50 official members. Furthermore, the SCWRA must give its stamp of approval to any religious literature and materials before they can be legally produced, imported or distributed.

The registration process, which started after a set of laws regulating religious affairs was introduced in 2009, seemingly ground to a halt for many years, leaving many re-registration applications unanswered. Some religious communities have found that compulsory re-registration means de-registration. For example, the Baptist Union had 10 registered congregations in 1992; after a series of compulsory re-registrations with ever decreasing numbers, only one congregation (in Baku) was finally re-registered in 2015. All the other congregations which lodged repeated applications received rejections (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018](#)). However, there was some movement in 2020: Aliabad's Baptist community, denied legal status for 25 years, officially began open worship in January 2020. The SCWRA wrote that it had "no objection" to meetings once a week for two hours (Source: [Forum 18, 27 March 2020](#)). On the whole, however, State Committee officials continue to deny state registration to religious communities not having 50 adult members, the required number for lodging an application. Religious communities have long complained about the State Committee's arbitrary and opaque decision-making processes (Source: [Forum 18, March 2020](#)).

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Azerbaijan](#)):

- “The religious freedom law and its amendments require religious organizations - termed "associations" in the country's legal code and encompassing religious groups, communities, and individual congregations of a denomination - to register with the government through the SCWRA. The SCWRA manages the registration process and may appeal to the courts to suspend a religious group's activities. A religious community's registration is tied to the physical site where the community is located, as stated in its application. A subsequent move or expansion to other locations requires re-registration. Registration allows a religious organization to hold meetings,

maintain a bank account, rent property, act as a legal entity, and receive funds from the government.”

- “To register, a religious organization must submit to the SCWRA a notarized application signed by at least 50 of its members, a charter and founding documents, the names of the organization's founders, and the organization's legal address and bank information. The law requires the application to include information on the citizenship, place of residence, date of birth, and religious education, as well as copies of identity documents, of each of the 50 members. The application must include information on the history of the community; the forms and methods of its activities and traditions; its doctrine's approach towards family, marriage, and education; and restrictions the community imposes on the rights and responsibilities of its members.”
- “Local experts on religious affairs, religious leaders, and civil society representatives said the general public continued to show tolerance of, and in some cases financially supported, minority religious groups they viewed as "traditional" (i.e., those considered historically present in the country), including Jews, Russian Orthodox, and Catholics. According to the same sources, some individuals viewed religious groups that had less of a historical presence in the country with suspicion and mistrust.”

Economic landscape

According to [World Bank Azerbaijan data](#) (accessed 29 August 2024) - all data is for 2023:

- **GDP (current US\$) (billions):** 72.36
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 1.1
- **Inflation, consumer prices (annual %):** 8.8
- **Unemployment, total (% of total labor force / modeled ILO estimate):** 5.6
- **Personal remittances, received (% of GDP):** 3.9

Azerbaijan is one of the richest countries in the former Soviet Union with 5.9% of the population living below the poverty line (2021 figure). Mining and hydrocarbon industries account for well over 95% of the Azerbaijani economy. There is an urgent need for diversification, but few significant steps in this direction have been taken. Despite massive oil wealth, [poverty](#) remains a serious problem (Borgen Project, 2 February 2024).

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

The invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on 24 February 2022 had a notable impact on Azerbaijan's economy. On the positive side, Azerbaijan's revenues from gas exports increased 3.7-fold and reached

\$4.18 billion in the first four months of 2022. Revenues from oil exports increased 50.3 percent in the same period. As a result, the positive balance of payments increased 4.8-fold and reached \$1.57 billion in the first quarter of 2022 compared to the same period in 2021. But Azerbaijan is also confronted with several economic difficulties. War-related restrictions and declining production not only affected the level of imports from Ukraine and Russia but also made imported goods, especially food products, more expensive. Due to war-related stagnation in the Russian economy, remittances have also been decreasing. In the first quarter of 2022, the total level of remittances from Russia decreased by about 17% compared to the same period in 2021 and totaled about \$99.7 million. The remittances from Ukraine, on the other hand, decreased by about 27%. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 14 July 2022](#))

Corruption

Transparency International's ([Corruption Perceptions Index 2023 Azerbaijan](#)) score for the country was 23/100 (rank 154/180). Transparency International stated in a [news item](#) on 30 January 2024:

- "Ranking at the bottom in the region, Azerbaijan (23), Tajikistan (20) and Turkmenistan (18) continue to struggle with severe corruption issues. Authoritarian control over state institutions by ruling elites has firmly taken root, with corruption being used to [sustain power](#) and evade accountability [HRW, 25 July 2023]. The low scores of these countries reflect systemic governance deficits and a lack of independent oversight, where corruption erodes various levels of society and state, while undermining civic and political rights."

The rampant corruption includes large-scale bribery of foreign politicians and others to encourage them to deny the regime's serious human rights violations. 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 and the mismanagement of the economy, the president has responded by cracking down on the opposition.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Azerbaijan](#) (accessed 29 August 2024):

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

According to [UNDP's Human Development Report Azerbaijan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.760 (0.743 for females, 0.773 for males), ranking 89 (2022)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 73.5 years (76.2 for females, 70.55 for males) (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 12.7 years (12.7 for females, 12.4 for males) (2022)
- **Gender Inequality Index:** 0.329 (2022)

- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 61.9, Male: 69.6 (2022)

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

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

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

Technological landscape

According to DataReportal Digital 2024: Azerbaijan (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 88.0% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 58.4% of the total population. As of January 2024, 46.7% of social media users were female, while 53.3% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 113.2% of the total population

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (Publication date: August 2024):

- “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 ways off, as the demand for high-speed data and fast broadband can easily be met by existing capacity on LTE networks.”
- “Fixed-line teledensity continues to drop down each year as customers consolidate their telecommunications services around the mobile platform. Yet the rate of decline is comparatively slow to other countries, since Azerbaijan has a relatively high proportion of (87%) of fixed-line broadband customers still on DSL. Fibre (12% of fixed broadband connections) is gradually being rolled out in urban areas, and this makes up the bulk of the (limited) growth being seen in the

overall fixed broadband market. DSL's predominance, however, will serve to keep Azerbaijan's average access speeds in the sub-10Mbps range for the foreseeable future."

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

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023](#) report, Azerbaijan is listed as 'not free' with a score of 37 points.

- "Internet freedom continues to be restricted in Azerbaijan. During the coverage period, the state temporarily blocked access to TikTok amid renewed tensions with Armenia. The government continued to manipulate the online information landscape, blocking numerous independent and opposition websites and forcing activists to remove content. The government also launched a media registry, required by the new media law adopted in 2022, and rejected the applications of several independent news outlets to join the registry. Prosecution of activists for their online criticism of the government continued during the coverage period. Additionally, activists faced online harassment, doxing, and blackmail."
- "Power in Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime remains heavily concentrated in the hands of Ilham Aliyev, who has served as president since 2003, and his extended family. Corruption is rampant, and the formal political opposition has been weakened by years of persecution. The authorities have carried out an extensive crackdown on civil liberties in recent years, leaving little room for independent expression or activism. Azerbaijan won control of a third of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh along with some adjacent land during a weeks-long conflict with Armenia in 2020, at the cost of over 2,900 soldiers."

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

Journalists have been hounded and harassed to the point where many have fled the country. Online independent or opposition media have been blocked. Nearly all news media reaching the public are controlled by the government. Media experts and others have been warning about Azerbaijan's dire media landscape for years and now it looks like things could get even worse. Despite protests from many of the remaining independent reporters in the country and criticism from the West, including

the Council of Europe, President Aliyev approved a new media-law on 8 February 2022. The legislation, passed by the country's largely rubber-stamp parliament in late December 2021, places fresh restrictions on the owners of media operating in Azerbaijan as well as journalists, who will be required not only to register with the authorities but to abide by other new rules, including one on the "objective" interpretation of facts and events. (Source: [RFE/RL, 20 February 2022](#))

Security situation

Radical Islam

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

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

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

Christians in Azerbaijan have not been targeted by radical Islamic activity.

The Nagorno-Karabakh enclave

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

The Karabakh conflict erupted three times in 2020. On 24 February 2020 one Azerbaijani soldier was killed by Armenian fire in the Gazakh district. A spokesman for the Armenian Defense Ministry said that one Armenian serviceman was slightly wounded in the fighting (Source: [RFE/RL, 24 February 2020](#)). Much more serious was the fighting that occurred on 12 July 2020. It is interesting that the fighting occurred far from Nagorno-Karabakh and was directly between the two nations (Armenia and Azerbaijan), which had previously only occurred on rare occasions (Source: [RFE/RL, 12 July 2020](#)).

At the end of [September 2020](#) a full-fledged armed conflict was fought (Asia News, 27 September 2020). This time the Azerbaijani army managed to beat the Armenian forces. However, tensions remained high and there were minor outbreaks of violence. This has led to an increase in the government surveillance of Christians (particularly those with Armenian connections) and of

organizations with connections to Western countries. Especially Protestant churches now came under increased scrutiny. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian accused Azerbaijan of "ethnic cleansing" with its continued blockade of the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region. In a speech to parliament in Yerevan on 16 June 2023, Pashinian said Baku's installation of an illegal checkpoint in the Lachin Corridor and its ongoing blockade of the only road linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh were "actions that once again substantiate our fear that Azerbaijan is conducting a policy of ethnic cleansing" (Source: [RFE/RL, 16 June 2023](#)). Azerbaijan launched a military attack on Karabakh on 19 September 2023 and managed to overcome all Armenian resistance in just two days. After the Azerbaijani victory, practically all 120,000 ethnic Armenians left Karabakh. Tensions with Armenia remain high (Source: [RFE/RL, 15 October 2023](#)). and from time-to-time Armenia and Azerbaijan continued to exchange gunfire (Source: [RFE/RL, 6 April 2024](#)).

Caucasus Heritage Watch released images that reveal the recent demolition of St. John the Baptist Church, a 19th century structure in Nagorno-Karabakh's Susa area, and the razing of a village known in Armenian as Karintak. The church and village, both with significant Armenian heritage, were under Azerbaijani control after Baku captured Susa from ethnic Armenian forces in November 2020. The Armenian-built church in Susa, dating back to the 19th century, was taken over by Azerbaijan. It was wrapped in scaffolding for most of the time it was under Azerbaijani control, suggesting ongoing construction or restoration. But satellite images from Caucasus Heritage Watch show that the church was demolished during the winter of 2023-24 (Sources: [RFE/RL, 24 April 2024](#), [Christian Post, 28 April 2024](#)).

Amid ongoing tensions after the fall of Artsakh in September 2023, the Armenian government agreed to cede territory to Azerbaijan along the border in an attempt to normalize relations (Source: [International Christian Concern, 1 May 2024](#)). This led to large-scale demonstrations in Armenia because many Armenians oppose this move (Source: [RFE/RL, 28 April 2024](#)).

Tensions with Iran

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

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

Christian origins

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

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

Church spectrum today

Azerbaijan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	222,000	87.7
Catholic	1,800	0.7
Protestant	22,600	8.9
Independent	5,700	2.3
Unaffiliated	850	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	252,950	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	9,200	3.6
Pentecostal-Charismatic	14,200	5.6

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

According to World Christian Database data (accessed May 2024), the largest Christian denominations in Azerbaijan are:

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

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

Further useful reports

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

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

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

External Links

- Map of country: Freedom House's country profile - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/nagorno-karabakh>
- Recent history: 25 September 2020 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Clashes-in-the-Caucasus.-The-Armenian-Catholicos-interrupts-official-visit-to-Italy-and-the-Vatican--51145.html>
- Recent history: 12 November 2020 - <https://jamestown.org/program/karabakh-armistice-azerbaijani-national-triumph-russian-geopolitical-victory-part-one/>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 21 November 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-ceasefire-violation-border-nagorno-karabakh/32140039.html>
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- Recent history: RFE/RL, 15 October 2023 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-aliyev-flag-karabakh/32638296.html>
- Recent history: AP News, 9 February 2024 - <https://apnews.com/article/azerbaijan-election-ilham-aliyev-087121df383cef2282ba961729933f0c>
- 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
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- Political and legal landscape: IRFR 2023 Azerbaijan - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/>
- Political and legal landscape: USCIRF 2024 Azerbaijan chapter - <https://www.uscirf.gov/annual-reports?country=31>
- Religious landscape description: Catholic News Agency, 3 October 2023 - <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/255561/nearly-all-ethnic-armenians-have-fled-nagorno-karabakh>
- Religious landscape description: IRFR 2023 Azerbaijan - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/>
- 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
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- Religious landscape description: Forum 18, 27 March 2020 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2557
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- Religious landscape description: IRFR 2023 Azerbaijan - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/>
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