

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

AZERBAIJAN

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Copyright Notice	3
Introduction.....	3
WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Azerbaijan.....	4
Link for general background information	4
Recent country history	4
The religious landscape	4
The political landscape	5
The socio-economic landscape	6
Concluding remarks.....	7
External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Azerbaijan	7
WWL 2019: Church History and Facts.....	9
How many Christians?	9
How did Christians get there?.....	9
What church networks exist today?	9
Religious context	10
Notes on the current situation.....	11
External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts	11
WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile	12
Introduction.....	12
What type of persecution dominates?	12
Who is driving persecution?.....	12
What it results in	12
Violence	12
Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period	13
External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile	13
WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics	14

Introduction..... 14

Position on World Watch List (WWL)..... 14

Persecution engines 14

Drivers of persecution 15

Context 16

Christian communities and how they are affected 16

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence 17

5 Year trends 19

Gender specific persecution..... 20

Persecution of other religious minorities 21

Future outlook..... 21

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics 22

Additional Reports and Articles 23

 WWR in-depth reports 23

 Open Doors article(s) from the region 23

 World Watch Monitor news articles 23

 Recent country developments 23

Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List Azerbaijan	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	57	50
WWL 2018	57	45
WWL 2017	-	-
WWL 2016	57	34
WWL 2015	50	46

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Azerbaijan

Link for general background information

See BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17043424>

Recent country history

Azerbaijan declared its 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 has never been resolved. From time to time there are outbreaks of military activities. As a result, there is a huge distrust in Azerbaijan against everything Armenian.

Meanwhile, 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 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 Heydar, Ilham Aliyev, to succeed his father who was admitted to a Turkish hospital in July 2003 because of 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 sworn in as president at the end of the month. He was reelected 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 while opposition boycotted the elections.

The religious landscape

The majority religion in Azerbaijan is Islam. According to the World Christian Database 95.3% of the population is Muslim – 85% of the Muslims are Shia Muslims and 15% Sunni Muslims. 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. Also, the population would seem to be merely following Islamic traditions rather than adhering to strict Muslim teachings. In a 2006–2008 [Gallup](#) poll, only 21% of respondents from Azerbaijan stated that religion is an important part of their daily lives. This makes Azerbaijan the least religious Muslim-majority country in the world.

Christians are a small minority – only 3.2% of the population. Most of them are living in the break-away republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. 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. Unfortunately there are but few exceptions to this. It plays into the hands of the government because it makes the Church weaker.

Another problem for the Church in Azerbaijan is the constant pressure exerted by the state. The constitution stipulates the separation of state and religion and equality of all religions. It also protects the right of individuals to express their religious beliefs and practice religious rituals, provided these do not violate public order or public morality. The law prohibits the government from interfering in religious activities, but 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;” and hinder secular education. (Source: [US State Department, International Religious Freedom Report for 2017](#)) 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 in practice 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. For this 50 signatures of members are needed. 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, has virtually ground to a halt, leaving many re-registration applications unanswered. Only 34 mosques were registered in in 2017 and only 13 in 2018. No non-Muslims were registered in 2107 and only three (Seventh-day Adventist in Gyanja, New Apostolic Church in Baku, and Vineyard Church in Baku) in 2018. Some religious communities have found that compulsory re-registration means de-registration. For example, the Baptist Union had 10 registered congregations in 1992; after a series of compulsory re-registrations with ever decreasing numbers of congregations being accepted, only one congregation (in Baku) was finally re-registered in 2015. All the other congregations which lodged applications - which they have done repeatedly - have received rejections. (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018](#))

The political 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.

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 that opposition politicians and journalists are jailed. Azerbaijan is currently ruled by President Ilham Aliyev, who came to power in October 2003, succeeding his ailing father Heydar Aliyev.

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 people 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). Of course everybody will confirm that Azerbaijan is the Land of Tolerance and that their situation is rosy. Unfortunately it is impossible for delegates 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, most recently by the World Evangelical Alliance after an [official visit](#) in April 2017.

The government has also taken up the task of keeping its image intact when critical reports about Azerbaijan are launched. In 2013 The Azerbaijani embassy in Germany approached the German Open Doors Development office to ask how it was possible that their country had ended up on the Open Doors World Watch List, a list indicating the level of Christian persecution in various countries. They repeated these moves after the publication of WWL 2016. Denials of reality are a routine tactic of the government and its apologists.

The government of Azerbaijan is the most oppressive factor that Christians in the country are having to deal with. Apart from many restrictions imposed by the legislation, the state is also actively monitoring all religious activities by all religious groups in the country.

The socio-economic landscape

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 accounted 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](#).

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. (Source: [CIA World Factbook](#), updated November 2018)

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 conflict with Armenia over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh has not been settled and only a fragile ceasefire is in place. The enclave is populated mostly by Armenians. The two countries have held occasional talks to find a solution for this longest-running conflict in the former Soviet Union. During 2011 fighting flared up again. Altogether about one million people have been displaced and more than 35,000 killed as a result of this conflict.

Corruption is endemic on all levels of administration and government. Christians have to face the corruption issue 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.

Thanks to the old Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Azerbaijan is literate (99.8%). People interested in the Christian message can obtain materials in their own language. The closeness of the Azeri language to Turkish means that many materials in Turkish could 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. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean this sort of ministry must mostly be done unofficially.

Christians in Azerbaijan are not affected differently by the economic and social factors than other people in Azerbaijan. The only exception to this is the pressure of the social environment on converts to Christianity. This involves some 10,000 Christians from a Muslim background.

Concluding remarks

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 managed to pass.

Secondly, 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, confiscations, arrests and fines. Pastors and other church leaders are from time to time invited 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 whom to trust any more.

In many respects Azerbaijan has developed the most sophisticated and intelligent system to stay in power. So far, it has been very successful in this. Currently, there are no major threats challenging the regime.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Azerbaijan

- The religious landscape: Gallup
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallup_\(company\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallup_(company))
- The religious landscape: US State Department, International Religious Freedom Report for 2017
<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dclid=280882>
- The religious landscape: Forum 18, Religious Freedom Survey, November 2018
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429

- The religious landscape: Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
- The political landscape: appointed
<https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-aliyev-names-wife-aliyeva-vice-president/28322210.html>
- The political landscape: Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
- The political landscape: official visit
https://intranet.globalpoint.info/wwu/_layouts/15/listform.aspx?PageType=4&ListId=%7BD75626AE-AC86-45AD-A7C1-599138589CB8%7D&ID=833&ContentTypeID=0x0100FA839E0E730E6E48AD9B1D5591D0FB8C
- The socio-economic landscape: in poverty
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081
- The socio-economic landscape: CIA World Factbook
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/aj.html>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
9,924,000	321,000	3.2

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

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.

What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Azerbaijan	Christians	%
Orthodox	294,000	91.6
Catholic	720	0.2
Protestant	13,700	4.3
Independent	11,800	3.7
Unaffiliated	800	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-2	0.0
Total	321,018	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	4,200	1.3
Renewalist movement	16,400	5.1

Please note: 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: Believers 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.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

There are no involuntarily isolated **communities of expatriate Christians** in Azerbaijan.

The historical Christian communities still make up by far the largest proportion of Christians in Azerbaijan: Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic Christians are about 2.4% of the total population. Other denominations in this group are Georgian Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran. In all, these churches account for about 2.5% of the Azeri population (more than 90% of Azerbaijan's Christians).

Converts to Christianity have increased in number since Azerbaijan's independence in 1991. In 1997, estimates amounted to 6,000 Azeri Christians from a Muslim background. In 2014, one source stated that there were about 10,000 Azeri Christians. The dependency on the Russian church has disappeared and the Azeri Christian community has grown into a strong, indigenous church which frequently faces opposition from the national and local authorities and from Azeri society. Azeri Christians are considered traitors, betraying not only Islam but also their country.

The non-traditional Christian communities (Baptists, Pentecostals etc.) are continuing to function in Azerbaijan despite the fact that fewer and fewer churches manage to obtain official registration. It is estimated that there are some 30,000 believers of this category in total but it is difficult to separate this group of Christians from the previous category – since most converts to Christianity have joined non-traditional Christian churches. Several times pastors of these churches have been filmed and broadcast on television with anti-Christian commentary, creating much pressure on the church and causing people to leave. Baptists, Pentecostals and Adventists are all struggling against decline through emigration.

Religious context

Religious Context: Azerbaijan	Numbers	%
Christians	321,000	3.2
Muslim	9,461,000	95.3
Hindu	300	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	6,000	0.1
Bahai	1,900	0.0
Atheist	8,800	0.1
Agnostic	123,000	1.2
Other	1,700	0.0

Please note: OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to the 2018 estimates published by World Christian Database, 95.3% of the population are Muslim and 3.2% Christian. Azerbaijan is unique among the former Soviet republics in having a large majority of Shiites (85% of the country's Muslims) and a small minority of Sunni Muslims.

Most Christians are of ethnic minorities - mainly Russian and Armenian (as stated above there are some 10,000 Azeri Christians). Large-scale Russian emigration explains the negative overall growth rate of Christianity in Azerbaijan. Christianity in Azerbaijan is perceived with some hostility. This is due to the past: Russian imperialism, Armenian enmity and Western neo-colonialism are all regarded as a blemish to the nation.

According to the [2009 census](#) the ethnic composition of the population is: 91.60% Azerbaijanis, 2.02% Lezgians, 1.35% Armenians (almost all Armenians live in the break-away region of Nagorno-Karabakh), 1.34% Russians, 1.26% Talysh, 0.56% Avars, 0.43% Turks, 0.29% Tatars, 0.28% Tats, 0.24% Ukrainians, 0.14% Tsakhurs, 0.11% Georgians, 0.10% Jews, 0.07% Kurds, other 0.21%.

Notes on the current situation

- While the constitution of Azerbaijan provides for religious freedom, Azerbaijan's 2009 law on religion is used to limit religious freedom and to justify fines, police raids, detentions, and imprisonment. All religious activity is monitored. It is believed that all churches have been infiltrated.
- Another major challenge is to create and maintain unity between the different Christian denominations.
- The [Religious Freedom Survey November 2018](#), published by Forum 18 on 7 November 2018, lists a whole series of violations of freedom of religion or belief that can be found in Azerbaijan.

External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

- Religious context: 2009 census
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azerbaijan>
- Notes on the current situation: Religious Freedom Survey November 2018
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 57 points, Azerbaijan ranked 50th in WWL 2019.

What type of persecution dominates?

Dictatorial paranoia: 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.

Islamic oppression: 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 return to their former faith.

Who is driving persecution?

Most of the persecution of Christians in Azerbaijan comes from government officials at various levels – ranging from the country’s central government that imposes restrictive legislation to local authorities and police who raid religious meetings, detain believers and confiscate religious materials. Another source of persecution comes from the Muslim environment (family, friends, community and local imams) which opposes evangelism among Muslims.

What it results in

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.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

World Watch List Azerbaijan	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	17	5	0	0
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	40	26	2	1

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related

reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- On 28 January 2018, Police in Gyanja's Nizami District raided the Sunday meeting for worship of 'Star in the East' Pentecostal Church, held in the home of a church member. About 100 people - 40 of them children - were present at the meeting when the police arrived. Police officers filmed everyone present and took their personal details, including the children's. Following the raid, schools attended by the children received calls from the police. (Source: [Forum 18](#), 6 February 2018)
- In November 2017, the head of the State Committee Legal Department wrote to the Baptist church in Aliabad warning it not to meet for worship without state registration. The church, which has been seeking official registration – in vain – since 1994, was officially closed down after a police raid in November 2016. (Source: [Forum 18](#), 6 February 2018)

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: Forum 18
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2350
- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: Forum 18
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2350

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 57 points, Azerbaijan ranked 50th in WWL 2019. The score is the same as in WWL 2018 and there have been no significant changes regarding religious freedom and the persecution of Christians. The government has continued its dictatorial control over the country.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Azerbaijan	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Weak
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Very weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

Please note: 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 (long version).

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 a huge amount of fear – no one knows who they can trust any longer. As a result, few dare to talk to foreigners and very little information about persecution is known outside the country. 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):

Pressure on Christians coming from Islamic circles is particularly aimed at Christian converts from a Muslim background. 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 repent and return to their former faith. Some converts will be locked up for long periods and be beaten. Local Mullahs will 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

Drivers of Persecution: Azerbaijan	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM	-	WEAK	VERY WEAK	-	-	STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	Very weak	-	-	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Very weak	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	Very weak	Very weak	-	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	Very weak	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 (long version).

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- *Government officials* at all levels are the strongest persecutors of Christians in Azerbaijan. They have infiltrated all churches. They invite pastors and other church leaders to 'come to the police station for a cup of tea.' They monitor all religious activities, raid meetings and block religious materials.
- *Normal citizens* (especially at the local level) will monitor religious activities and report to the authorities.
- Few *political parties* are allowed in Azerbaijan. Opposition is constantly suppressed. The governing party under President Aliyev is a powerful element in suppressing religious freedom in the country.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- *Muslim family members* will exert high pressure on converts to Christianity. They regard conversion as betrayal. This may lead to house arrests and beatings.

- *Normal citizens* at the community level will exert additional pressure on converts to return to Islam.
- *Muslim leaders* will oppose the conversion of Azerbaijanis to Christianity. Also, 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.

Context

Azerbaijan borders with Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and Iran. The country is officially a secular state. The majority of its population is Muslim. Azerbaijan is unique among the former Soviet republics in having a large majority of Shiites (85% of the country's Muslims) and a small minority of Sunni Muslims. The government has a negative attitude towards any form of religious fanaticism. This also applies to the attitude towards Christians. Radical Islam is perceived as being a destabilizing factor.

The government of Azerbaijan pays a lot of attention in presenting a positive image of the country. At international meetings representatives of Azerbaijan display propaganda about "The Land of Tolerance". Critical organizations are approached to correct their reporting. Foreign institutions are invited to come to Azerbaijan to see for themselves how good everything is. Of course these people can only meet carefully selected Azeris who will tell them that all is well and there is no persecution. At the same time, international human rights and press organizations continue to report that any form of independent and critical behavior continues to be treated ruthlessly in Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has a very effective tactic to control religion: Every 6-7 years all religious groups must apply for new registration. It can hardly be called coincidence that each time fewer churches manage to obtain registration.

Christian communities and how they are affected

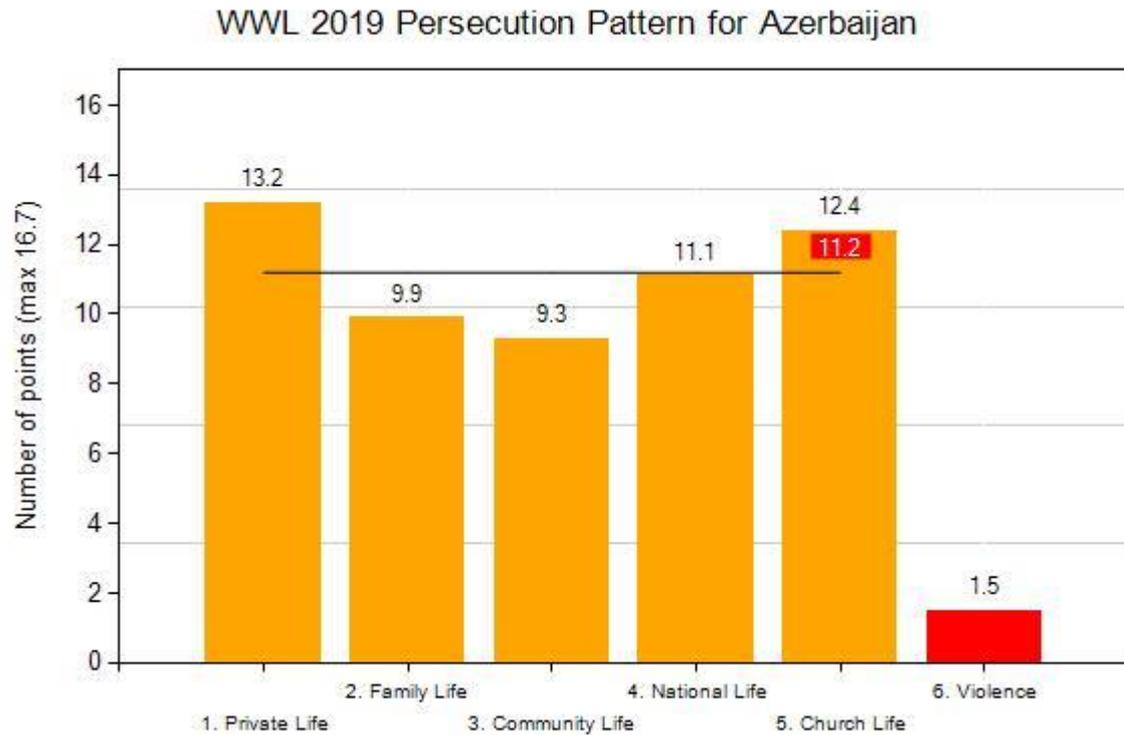
Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians in Azerbaijan are not involuntarily isolated from other Christian communities and so have not been considered as a separate category in the WWL analysis.

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 limited restrictions from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. And for them the latter are by far the more powerful.

Non-traditional Christian communities: These groups are high on the government's agenda. They have been infiltrated by spies, 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.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Azerbaijan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.2), having increased from 11.0 in WWL 2018. The increase occurred mainly in the *Private* and *Family spheres of life*, an indication that pressure from the Muslim community has risen. The indicators for the influence of the state (*National* and *Church spheres of life*, and to a lesser extent also *Community life*) has remained stable.
- The sphere of life with the highest level of pressure is *Private life*. This reflects the seriousness of the pressure on converts from the Muslim environment.
- The score for violence is low, decreasing from 2.4 in WWL 2018 to 1.5 in WWL 2019. Few people dare to speak out and hence very few violent incidents are reported from Azerbaijan.

Private sphere:

Conversions draw opposition from family, friends and community. Converts from Islam have to be careful when carrying out Christian rituals like prayer or worship since they are under constant surveillance from their environment. Since the state more or less prohibits the use of religious materials in the country, possession of these will lead to problems if discovered. It is risky for converts to reveal that they are Christians since this will draw unwanted attention from either the state or the family and community. Speaking about the faith with family members or a wider circle of people is a risk factor, particularly for converts again, but Protestant Christians need to be careful as well lest their words be regarded as evangelism. The family or community may put a convert under house arrest to increase pressure on him/her to return to Islam. In some cases physical violence is also applied.

Family sphere:

Local authorities may obstruct registering the birth, weddings and deaths of converts because they have strong links to the local Muslim community. Baptisms are always connected to evangelism and conversion. This is a prime target for both the state and the social environment. The state hinders fostering by Christian families. There is no religious education in Azerbaijan. All education is strictly secular. Parents can only share their faith with their children at home, but no materials are legally available. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan is secular, lessons on Islam are part of the curriculum and all pupils have to attend. Christian children have been slandered by the community, which also does its best to keep Muslim children from interacting with Christian children. When it becomes known that someone has converted to Christianity, the family may lock the believers up (house arrest). When a person converts to Christianity, family, friends and community will put pressure on the spouse to divorce.

Community sphere:

Converts are threatened by family, friends and community (including the local imam), and the state constantly threatens unregistered believers. Converts from Islam are monitored by their community and may be forced to take part in Islamic ceremonies and celebrations. Pressure on converts from their community to recant their new faith is usually very strong. Especially in rural areas several tactics will be applied, for instance beatings, house arrest, forced marriages and ostracism. At the local level children of converts may face disadvantages in their education. Protestants are severely hindered in the operation of their businesses. Imposing fines is a common occurrence with regard to Protestant churches. This is the preferred method of persecution the authorities use to crackdown on these churches, prior to escalating to more severe forms of punishment (raids, imprisonments, closure of churches). From time to time people have been called to the police station for questioning.

National sphere:

The constitution provides for religious freedom; however, other laws and policies restricted religious freedom in practice, particularly for members of some religious minorities. Religion is not recorded in official documents like passports and ID cards. Though Christians can generally travel abroad without too many obstacles, representatives to international conferences are carefully selected – they need to present the country as the "Land of Tolerance". Christians do not get fair treatment when dealing with authorities at all levels. If it is known that a person is a Christian, he or she will have great difficulty in finding a job, let alone with the government. A Christian's views in public are likely to be perceived as being "foreign" and potentially destabilizing by both the government and the surrounding Islamic society. Authorities who persecute Christians do so with utter impunity. As the Azerbaijani judiciary is not independent from the government, Christians will not get a fair trial.

Church sphere:

Azerbaijan has found a fool-proof method of getting rid of churches: Simply start a new round of obligatory re-registration. Fewer and fewer churches pass the test. The state monitors all religious activity, and especially targets unregistered groups. While registered churches can meet inside their buildings, special permission is needed for organizing events outside these buildings. Youth-work is very much restricted and all Christian materials must be cleared by the Committee for Religious Affairs in advance. In practice this means that all importing, printing, and distribution is blocked. Training facilities for Christians do not exist. All media are state-controlled and are therefore not accessible to Christians. Christians can do some social work – e.g. in prisons (where there is usually a chapel). By law, foreigners are not allowed to preach in the country.

Violence:

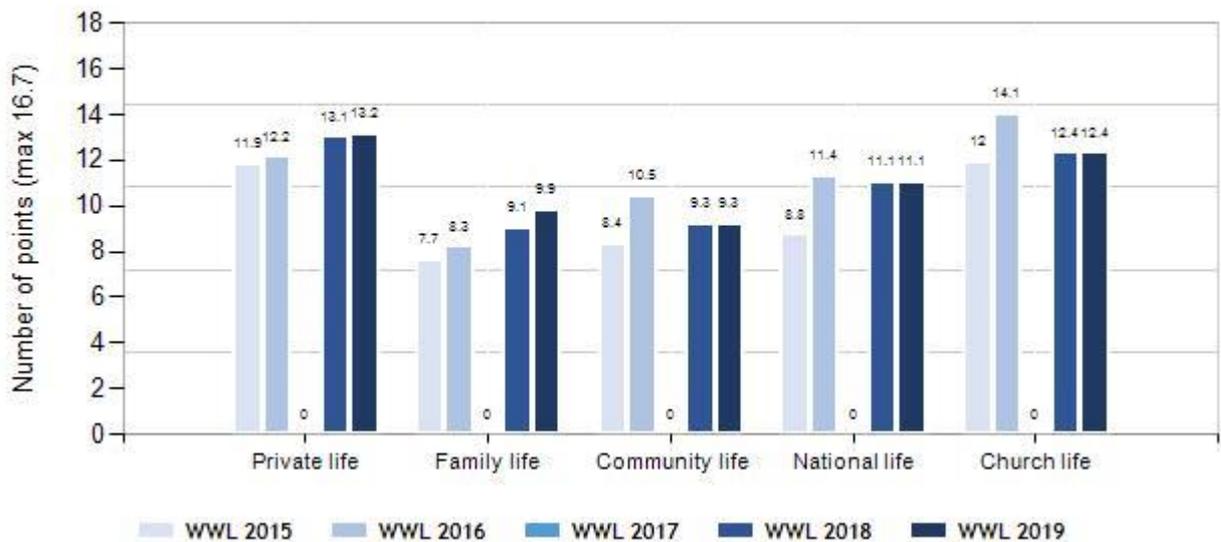
In the WWL 2019 reporting period, a few members of unregistered churches were detained and interrogated without trial for gathering for worship as a non-registered church. At least 17 Christians were physically harassed by police during church raids, or by family in the case of converts from Islam.

For a survey of the most important incidents see Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

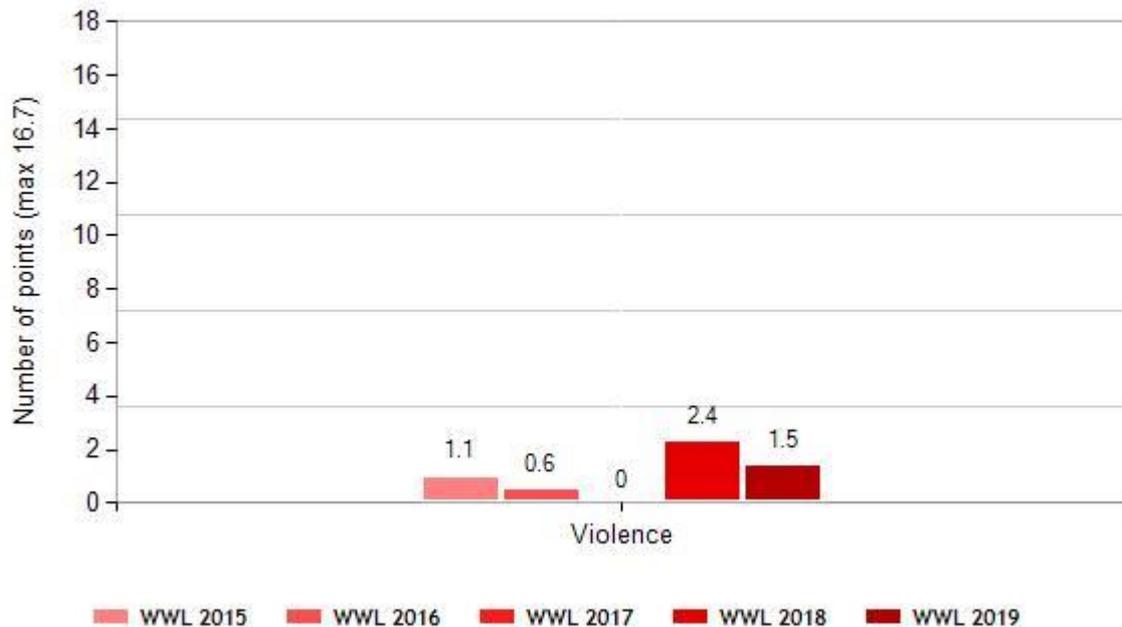
The following three charts show the pressure, average pressure and violence against Christians in the last 5 reporting periods (except for WWL 2017 when Azerbaijan was not included in the Top 50 countries). Chart 1 shows that, since WWL 2015, the levels of pressure in all *spheres of life* have risen and would appear to be levelling off at very high levels particularly in *Private, Church and National life*. Chart 2 shows that the average pressure echoes this rise and levelling off. Chart 3 shows that the scores for violence have varied but remained very low and low over the past years (with a slight peak in WWL 2018).

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Azerbaijan (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Azerbaijan	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	11.2
2018	11.0
2017	0.0
2016	11.3
2015	9.8

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Azerbaijan (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Female:

Christian women and girls from a Muslim background are at a bigger risk than non-converts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, house arrest, discrimination and rejection by family and Muslim community. For non-converts, there is no difference in persecution for men or women.

In Azerbaijan the daily life of indigenous people is based on Islamic culture which puts women in inferior position compared to men. Women are expected to show total submission to their parents and if married - to their husbands. Azerbaijan is also a Caucasus country where family traditions and rules are strict and disobedience to senior family members is not acceptable. This makes female converts more vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order.

Male:

Male converts from Islam are at a bigger risk than non-converts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, discrimination and rejection by family and Muslim community. Men are usually the heads of their families and the main bread winners. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution (possibly losing his job) his whole family will suffer. If he is a church leader (who are usually men), the fact that he is suffering persecution will affect his church and can result in an increase of fear among church members.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Azerbaijan restricts freedom of religion and belief, which is interlinked with freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Officials behave as if the rule of law, including published laws, places no limitations on their actions - for example in mishandling people. Trials for alleged offences often flagrantly lacked due process, including trials taking place without those accused being aware that the trials were happening. Officials do not allow legally or politically binding international human rights standards (to which Azerbaijan is a party) to limit their actions. Azerbaijan has constructed a complex labyrinth of "legal" restrictions on all rights of freedom, prepared for the most part in secret with no public consultation and rushed through parliament. The aim appears to be to impose state control on all activities in society and to make all exercise of human rights dependent on state permission. Every significant change to the Religion Law, the Criminal Code, and the Administrative Code has imposed tighter restrictions on freedom of religion and belief and other freedoms. (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018](#)). There is no focus on any specific religious group - all (Sunni) Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Bahais etc. suffer under a high level of state surveillance and oppression.

Examples:

- In February 2018, a Muslim was fined for selling books and pamphlets at a mosque in the northern Zaqatala District, none of which had undergone the compulsory state censorship. (Source: [Forum 18 Religious Freedom Survey](#), November 2018).
- In April 2018, police raided a mosque in a home in Baku's Qaradag District and confiscated a large quantity of religious literature which was claimed to "incite discord". Officials then ordered the mosque to close. (Source: [Forum 18 Religious Freedom Survey](#), November 2018)
- In August 2018, an 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness was sentenced by a lower court to a one-year suspended prison sentence for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. (Source: [Forum 18](#))
- In September 2018, three Muslims were arrested after a house-raid and fined for holding a religious meeting in a private home in Agsu. (Source: [Forum 18](#)).

Future outlook

The political outlook: 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 outlook for Christians - 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 requested to come to police stations for 'a cup of tea'. 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:* 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.

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

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, November 2018
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 Religious Freedom Survey
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 Religious Freedom Survey
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2408
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18
http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2420

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).