

Notice: Undefined index: et_header_layout in /home/hrwfe90/domains/hrwf.eu/public_html/wp-content/plugins/pdf-print/pdf-print.php on line 1214

Notice: Trying to access array offset on value of type null in /home/hrwfe90/domains/hrwf.eu/public_html/wp-content/plugins/pdf-print/pdf-print.php on line 1214

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USCIRF Delegation travels to Azerbaijan to assess religious freedom conditions

HRWF calls upon the Azerbaijani government to release Shia Imam Sardar Babayev.

USCIRF (09.03.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2IBv7ig> – United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Vice Chairs Gayle Manchin and Nadine Maenza traveled to Baku and Quba, Azerbaijan from February 24 to February 28 to meet with Azerbaijani government officials, religious communities, civil society representatives, and human rights defenders to assess religious freedom conditions and discuss the impact of

Azerbaijan's religion law on the ability of individuals and communities to exercise their freedom of religion.



USCIRF Vice Chairs and Staff with Azerbaijan's State Committee on Religious Associations Chairman Mubariz Gurbanli and U.S. Embassy Personnel in Baku

USCIRF Vice Chair Gayle Manchin said, "We are encouraged to see that Azerbaijan's State Committee on Religious Associations has taken some promising first steps to allow the country's many religious communities to more freely and fully practice their religion and beliefs. The last year's precipitous decline in police raids and other forms of harassment of unregistered religious communities – up until recently a hallmark of religious freedom violations in Azerbaijan – signifies an important move in the right direction that we hope the government will codify into law. We welcomed last year President Ilham Aliyev's decision to pardon a number of political and religious prisoners, and hope that

additional religious prisoners will be released for the coming Novruz holiday later this month.”

USCIRF Vice Chair Nadine Maenza added, “Azerbaijan has taken great pride in its history of multiculturalism and religious tolerance and should bolster those deserving values by ensuring that religious freedom is truly a reality for all. Current provisions of the religion law that mandate the registration of religious organizations in order to engage in worship or other religious practices, limit religious activity to a religious organization’s registered legal address, and require state approval for all religious literature should be amended to comply with international standards. Finally, as guaranteed in the constitution of Azerbaijan, the government should adopt an alternative service and permit conscientious objection for those citizens for whom military service conflicts with the tenets of their beliefs.”

USCIRF will issue its detailed findings from the visit and recommendations for U.S. policy when it releases its 2020 Annual Report on April 28. USCIRF has placed Azerbaijan on its Tier 2 list of countries for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern” since 2013.

HRWF Comment

The number of people in prison in Azerbaijan for the exercise of their religious freedom has progressively decreased over

the years as indicated by our database of FORB prisoners (<https://hrwf.eu/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-database-archive/>):

2015: 19 prisoners (6 Sunnis – 6 followers of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi – 4 Jehovah’s Witnesses – 3 Shia Muslims)

2016: 12 prisoners (5 followers of Said Nursi – 3 Sunni Muslims – 2 Shias – 2 Jehovah’s Witnesses)

2017: 2 prisoners (Shia Muslims)

2018: 2 prisoners (Shia Muslims)

2019: 1 prisoner (Shia Muslim)

However, the decreasing number of FORB prisoners is not a result of less repressive laws. There hasn’t been any substantial change in the legislation regarding FORB, but its implementation has been less aggressive in the past few years. No doubt that the role of the US and the EU behind the scenes has contributed to these developments.

One such example of this is a case that has been filed with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) concerning a Shia imam: *Babayev v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 34015/17). Police arrested Sardar Babayev in February 2017. A court sentenced him in July 2017 to three years imprisonment for leading prayers in a mosque after having received his religious education outside Azerbaijan. His lawyer initially brought his case to the ECHR to challenge his pre-trial detention, but he has since updated it to challenge Sardar Babayev’s sentence.

HRWF calls upon the Azerbaijani government to release Sardar

Babayev and to create a legal civil service option for conscientious objectors to military service.

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