

AZERBAIJAN: Current situation of Jehovah's Witnesses

HRWF (14.01.2019) – On 5-6 February 2019, the 6th EU-Azerbaijan Subcommittee (SC) on Justice, Freedom, Security and Human Rights and Democracy will take place in Baku. In 2018 and 2017, no Jehovah's Witness was in prison for the exercise of his/her religious freedom while in 2016 and 2015, two and four of them were respectively behind bars.

In September last, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses participated in the OSCE/ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw and filed a report about their situation in Azerbaijan (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/394640?download=true>). HRWF presents you an updated version of this report:

Update Regarding Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan

Over the past year, Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan have experienced less governmental interference in manifesting their religious beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses are grateful for the decrease in state-sponsored harassment.

Positive Developments

- **Rental of facilities for holding large religious assemblies.** Since 2016 the Witnesses have received assistance from the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) and have been able to rent large venues in Baku for annual religious events.
- **Compensation for arbitrary detention.** In early October

2018, Irina Zakharchenko and Valida Jabrayilova finally received compensation for their unjust conviction and 11-month imprisonment during 2015 and 2016.

- **Import of religious publications.** The SCWRA has not refused permission to import any new publications of Jehovah's Witnesses since November 2015.
- **Registration in Baku.** On 8 November 2018 Jehovah's Witnesses in Baku received State registration. 'Jehovah's Witnesses in Baku Religious Community' now appears on the SCWRA website among the list of 'Non-Islamic Religious Communities.'

Current Difficulties

Denial of Right to Conscientious Objection to Military Service

1. **Barda.** Barda District Court convicted Mr Emil Mehdiyev on **6 July 2018**, and ordered a one-year probationary arrangement.
2. **Aghdam.** On **6 September 2018**, Aghdam District Court sentenced Mr Vahid Abilov to a one-year probationary arrangement.
3. **Baku.** In **July 2018**, Mr Emin Tahmazov was informed that his case would be sent to the Prosecutor's Office.
4. **Gakh.** On **4 August 2018**, Mr Levani Otarashvili was summoned to the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription (SSMC) and asked to sign a document concerning the transfer of his case to the Prosecutor's Office.
5. **Khachmaz.** On **28 June 2018**, the SSMC Chief threatened to send Mr Fuad Hasanaliyev's case to the Prosecutor's Office.

Harassment by Officials and Interference with Religious Services

1. On **20 January 2018**, approximately ten police officers raided the home of Ms Sharafat Azizova during a social gathering of several families of Jehovah's Witnesses (not a religious meeting). The police searched the home, seized personal literature, recorded personal details and took statements from those in attendance. The men were required to give statements at the Lankaran Police Department and were released an hour later.
2. On **10 February 2018**, two officials came to the home of Ms Mzia Otarashvili in mid-afternoon. Without introducing themselves or providing credentials, the officials accused Ms Otarashvili of conducting "unauthorised" religious meetings in her home, which they alleged were in violation of Azerbaijan's laws.
3. On **9 July 2018**, at 10 a.m. Ms Saadat Mammadova was called to the Prosecutor's Office. The employee asked Ms Mammadova various questions about her religious beliefs, and warned her to be careful and not to distribute illegal religious publications; otherwise, he would take measures against her. She was allowed to leave at about 11.05 a.m.
4. On **14 July 2018**, at about 5 p.m., Police Officer Shakhmar Gahramanov and two other officials interrupted a religious meeting in the private home of Ms Sona Mammadova.
5. On **15 August 2018**, Ms Sevda Aliyeva, a resident of Baku, went to the Housing and Communal Services Committee concerning document issues. The manager of the Committee told her in a friendly way that she had received several phone calls from the State Security Service (SSS) enquiring about Ms Aliyeva's religion.
6. On **30 August 2018**, Ms Raisa Shpakovskaya was visited by Field Inspector Elmar Huseynov and another official in civilian clothing, who neither introduced himself nor showed his credentials. About 30–40 minutes later, after searching the entire flat, including the kitchen and the closet, they left.

7. On **16 September 2018**, about 70 Jehovah's Witnesses from Ganja decided to hold an outdoor meeting in Khanlar. At about 12.10 p.m., after the meeting had finished, five police officers arrived. The police telephoned representatives of the SCWRA, two of whom subsequently attended. The police officers recorded the names of all the detainees and then sent the names for verification, receiving photographs in return.

Interference with Manifestation of Belief

During 2018, there were 18 reported cases where police detained individual Witnesses while they were sharing their religious beliefs with others. Typically, police officers stop the persons concerned, take them to the police station, verbally abuse them, and threaten them with administrative charges and heavy fines. On most of these occasions, the Witnesses were detained for several hours.

1. **Lankaran**. On **19 February 2018**, a police officer called and asked Ms Gulnaz Nasirova to come to the police department the next day. On 20 February 2018, at 12.10 p.m. she went to the police department and the police officer, whose name was Adam, questioned her about her religion and religious beliefs. She wrote a statement and was released at about 2 p.m.
2. **Siyazan**. On **25 February 2018**, at 3.45 p.m. Mr Elmir Mursalov and Ms Firangiz Aghasanova were approached by two police officers and taken to the police department. Two officers in civilian clothing, who did not identify themselves, insulted, humiliated and threatened the Witnesses, demanding that they practise Islam and asserting that they 'have no rights.' An official of the SCWRA, who was present, confirmed that the publications were permitted by law, since they bore control stamps. Despite this, he retained them for examination. The

Field Inspector drew up a Report on Seizing Publications. They were released at 8.10 p.m.

3. **Sahil.** On **28 February 2018**, at about 12.30 p.m. Ms Khalida Rasulova, was taken to Police Department No. 38 and asked to write a statement, but she refused to write or sign anything. One of the officers told her that she had violated the law, and read an article in the law about a fine. At about 1.45 p.m. she was released.
4. **Baku.** On **25 March 2018**, at about 1.45 p.m. Mr Emil Mehdiyev and Mr Rizvan Babayev were taken to Police Department No. 19 against their will. In the department, Mr Mehdiyev's pockets were searched. They were allowed to leave at about 3 p.m.
5. **Baku.** On **23 April 2018**, at about 11.50 a.m. Ms Rahifa Guliyeva and Ms Targul Seyidova were taken to Police Department No. 33 against their will. The Witnesses wrote and signed statements. At about 4.05 p.m. the Witnesses were released.
6. **Yevlakh.** On **4 May 2018**, at about 11 a.m., the police took Ms Hasa Mammadova to a mosque, and questioned her about the literature and religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. Then officers took her to the police department. She was released at about 2 p.m.
7. **Baku.** On **21 May 2018**, between 12 and 12.30 p.m., Ms Yegana Salahova was visited at home by three officials, one of whom was Field Inspector Mahammad. She was asked to write in a statement that she was not one of Jehovah's Witnesses and that she did not share her beliefs with others. Ms Salahova refused. The officials left at 2 p.m.
8. **Salyan.** On **27 May 2018**, at about 2.25 p.m., Mr Elgiz Aliyev and Mr Ali Amirzada were taken to the police department against their will. The officers insulted the Witnesses' religion, and said that they must preach Islam. The men were released at about 3.10 p.m. after their personal details had been recorded.
9. **Siyazan.** On **1 July 2018**, at about 12.40 p.m., Ms Ismat

Zohrabova and Ms Maryam Aliyeva, along with Mr Eldar Aliyev who had been detained while conducting a Bible study in a park, were taken to the police department against their will. The Deputy Chief, named Goshgar, said that they were engaged in illegal activities and had no right to share their beliefs. Eventually, Goshgar returned their publications and said that this time the police would let them go, but if they returned to Siyazan they would be detained. Their personal details were recorded and at about 1.15 p.m. they were released.

10. On **11 July 2018**, at about 10.15 a.m., Ms Bahar Aliyeva and her daughter Ms Aysel Aliyeva were approached by four or five police officers, and told that they must accompany them to the police department. If they refused they would be taken there by force. The women were ordered to empty their bags and all their publications were seized. After the police had taken their statements, they were released at about 3.30 p.m.
11. On **27 July 2018**, at about 8.40 a.m., Ms Natalya Moroz and Ms Sevil Teymurova were taken to Police Department No. 22. They wrote statements and were not released until 7 p.m.
12. On **20 August 2018**, at 12.55 p.m., Ms Natella Azimova was summoned to Badamdar Police Department No. 41. A police officer, Agil, informed Ms Azimova that the husband of a woman with whom she studied the Bible had complained about her. At 4.45 p.m. she was released.
13. On **23 August 2018**, at about 1.30 p.m., police officers of the Astara Police Department detained six Jehovah's Witnesses: Mr Roman Mukhtarov, Mr Elshan Aghalarov, Mr Ruslan Taghiyev, Ms Khatira Gubadova, Ms Bahar Aliyeva, and Ms Sharafat Azizova. The police seized from Mr Aghalarov's car all the religious publications and his personal laptop. He was told to empty his bags, which contained his and his wife's personal items. When he objected, one of the officers pushed him. Their personal details were recorded and statements were taken. At

about 6.30 p.m. all were released.

14. On **28 August 2018**, at about 1.30 p.m., when Ms Sevda Aliyeva and Ms Sama Natigzada were sharing their religious beliefs in public, they were stopped by seven or eight police officers and taken to the police department. They were released at 4.30 p.m.
15. On **29 September 2018**, at about 11.45 a.m. Ms Aytaj Rahmanova and Ms Telli Samadova were approached by three police officers while sharing their beliefs. After writing statements, they were released at about 1 p.m.
16. On **16 October 2018**, at about 1.10 p.m., three of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mr Yavar Abbasov, his wife Ms Khuraman Abbasova, and Mr Mahabbat, were approached by Rufat Ismayilov, a police officer in civilian clothing. They were taken to Police Department No. 35. At 4.30 p.m. they were released.
17. On **4 November 2018**, a group of Jehovah's Witnesses shared their religious beliefs. When they were leaving the city a man, who said he was a representative of the executive authority for religious affairs, stopped them and stated that each time they come to the district they have to inform the executive authority. He threatened to take them to the police department, but after ten minutes he let them go.
18. On **11 November 2018**, at about 11.10 a.m., a police officer who introduced himself as Nazim stopped Mr Eldar Aliyev and demanded that he get his companions and leave the city. Nazim told him that "he does not want to see them preaching in Siyazan." At 11.50 a.m. Nazim left. The Witnesses subsequently proceeded to share their beliefs without hindrance.

Denial of Ganja Registration

1. Since **1 July 2010**, Jehovah's Witnesses in Ganja have filed six applications for registration. Every

application was returned on the basis of alleged errors. On **14 September 2016**, representatives of the EAJW met with Mr Gurbanli, who indicated that no progress would be made with this application until re-registration of the Baku Community was resolved.

2. **Elsewhere in Azerbaijan**, there is not the required number of Jehovah's Witnesses to apply for registration. According to the Law, a minimum of 50 founders is required. In some cities, such as Sumgayit, Barda and Mingachevir, there are several dozen Jehovah's Witnesses but the available number does not reach 50, and for this reason an application to register the local religious community cannot be filed. Although law-enforcement agents have not disrupted religious meetings in recent months, Jehovah's Witnesses outside Baku live in constant fear that their meetings for worship may be disrupted by police officers and that they will be fined for 'illegal' religious activity.
3. **National Registration.** As mentioned above, Jehovah's Witnesses live and worship in many cities and smaller towns. In some cities they number in the tens, and in others there are fewer than 10. Because these groups are unable to apply for local registration, during 2009 documents seeking national registration were filed with the SCWRA. However, the application was rejected, with the sole reason given: *"According to the first part of Article 12 of the Azerbaijan Republic Law on Freedom of Religious Beliefs, a religious community can conduct activity at the place of worship that is indicated as the legal address mentioned in the information that is presented in order to obtain state registration."*

Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan will be pleased to provide additional details on request:

LegalContact.AZ@jw.org

International Office of Public Information: OPIGov@jw.org

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SOUTH KOREA: South Korean court allows conscientious objection to military service

The Straits Times (01.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20rI66H> – South Korea's supreme court ruled on Thursday (Nov 1) that moral and religious beliefs are valid reasons to refuse the country's military service, in a case that has implications for hundreds of conscientious objectors.

Almost 65 years after the end of the Korean War, nearly every able-bodied South Korean male between the ages of 18 and 35 must still complete around two years of military service. Anyone refusing the call-up has usually ended up in prison for 18 months, and more than 19,000 conscientious objectors have been jailed since 1950, most of them Jehovah's Witnesses.

But the Supreme Court overturned the conviction of a conscientious objector on Thursday, months after a landmark constitutional court ruling that authorities had to provide an alternative to joining the military.

At the centre of Thursday's case is Jehovah's Witness Oh Seung-hun, who was called up in 2013 but refused, was found guilty, and lost an initial appeal to the high court.

"It is the majority opinion of the supreme court that conscientious objection is... a valid reason (to refuse conscription)," said chief Supreme Court justice Kim Myeong-su.

Punishing conscientious objectors "for refusing conscription on grounds of religious faith, in other words, freedom of conscience, is deemed an excessive constraint to an individual's freedom of conscience", he added.

The decision, by a majority of nine votes to four, overturned a previous Supreme Court ruling 14 years ago.

Oh, 34, said he had refused to join the military as doing so went against biblical teaching.

“The bible says that everyone who uses a sword will be killed by a sword,” Oh told AFP. “I expected to suffer for objecting to conscription but I thought the pain I would feel by not listening to my inner voice would be far worse,” he added.

Jehovah’s Witnesses welcomed the ruling, calling it a “huge step forward in ending this policy of imprisoning our fellow believers”.

“Today the Supreme Court has brought South Korea more in line with international norms,” said spokesman Paul Gillies.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, more than 900 similar cases are pending in the South Korean justice system, with another 96 people currently serving prison terms for not fulfilling their duties.

Conscripts killed

The South remains technically at war with the North, after the 1950-53 Korean War ended in a ceasefire rather than a peace treaty. But the ruling comes amid a dramatic dialling-down of tensions on the peninsula, with Pyongyang taking part in a series of summits with both the South and the US, long its sworn enemy.

Seoul's armed forces rely heavily on conscription, and military service often involves postings to front-line positions on the border with the North.

In May 2010, a North Korean submarine torpedoed the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan, killing 46 sailors including 16 who were on military service. Pyongyang denies responsibility.

In November the same year, the North shelled a South Korean border island, killing two marines – both of them young conscripts.

The social implications of the South's military service are also enormous – men must interrupt or delay either their education or their careers to comply, with Tottenham striker Son Heung-min a high-profile recent example.

He only secured an exemption – avoiding a potentially ruinous career break – by winning gold at this year's Asian Games in Indonesia.

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RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witness draftee defends right to conscientious objection

19-year-old resident of Altai territory files suit against draft commission.

Russia Religion News (07.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2xcJjb5> – On 16 July in Kamensky city court of the Altai territory, there was a session during which the lawsuit of a 19-year-old resident of the city of Kamnya against the draft commission of the military commissariat was reviewed. In his plaintiff's declaration he demanded that its refusal of performance of alternative civilian service be found to be illegal and the commission be required to give to him the pertinent opportunity.

The conscript Aleksei Shapovalov, who graduated this year from the Kamensky Agrotechnology Junior College, was summoned to the military commissariat immediately after he received his diploma. The young man was included in the spring draft, which concluded on 15 July. The medical commission's conclusion was

unambiguous: fit for military service. The young, physically strong fellow really does not have any contraindicators for army service. However he has special ideological notions on this matter. At sixteen years of age, at a pre-conscription commission, he indicated on a questionnaire that he is a Jehovah's Witness, as NIA-Altai reported.

Back in the spring, Aleksei wrote an application to the military commissar to the effect that by virtue of convictions he cannot perform military training, and he asked that he be assigned to alternative civilian service. The draft commission responded with a refusal and ordered that he be drafted into military service on general grounds.

"Ideological objection" to military service is a world-wide practice. In Russia the right to refuse conscription into armed forces on the basis of convictions is enshrined in the constitution. A citizen of the RF, in the event that his convictions or religious confession forbid performing military service, has the right to substitute for it alternative civilian service (article 59, part 3 of the Russian constitution). That is, pacifist inclinations of a person may be explained not only by religious conviction and affiliation with one confession or another. A conscript may explain his wish by personal convictions—philosophical, moral, ethical, and so forth.

"Upon consideration of the application of the conscript Aleksei Shapovalov, the military commission took into account only the fact that it was submitted later than the established deadline," the military commissar in the city of Kamen-on-Ob of the Kamensky and Krutikhinsky districts, Sergei Shabalin, said. "The federal law on alternative service (No. 113) says

that the application must be submitted no later than 1 April for citizens who are supposed to be drafted in October to December of the current year, and no later than 1 October if the citizen is subject to draft in April to June of the next year. Citizen Shapovalov fell in the spring conscription campaign and consequently he was supposed to submit the application in the autumn of the past year. Actually, he submitted it only in March 2018. In rendering the decision to refuse alternative civilian service (ACS), the commission took only this into account and the religion and other convictions of the conscript were not considered.

The refusal to substitute ACS for military service because the deadline had passed is the most frequent reason cited by draft commissions. And it is rather wide-spread judicial practice.

Lawyers for the plaintiff called attention to the legal conflict that arises: the point of the federal law about ACS, which speaks of the deadlines for submitting an application and refusal of acceptance from the draftee, contradicts article 59 of the constitution of the Russian Federation. Yet another important argument in the plaintiff's favor was the fact that there also is a contradiction in the determination of the deadlines for the draft. Federal law No. 113 declares that the work of the spring draft commission ends on 30 June. While as of the present time, all military commissariats of the country are using an order by the president of the RF extending the spring draft campaign to 15 July. The paradox consists in the fact that the federal law has greater jurisdiction than the president's order.

Addressing the court, Aleksei showed that he independently calculated the deadlines for submitting applications, having

studied the federal law on the draft. The deadline for the draft for him was 30 June of this year and the plaintiff properly (although mistakenly) supposed that he fell into the autumn draft. Therefore in his understanding the application for substitution of alternative civilian service for military service had been submitted in time.

Lawyers for the plaintiff insisted that Aleksei's ignorance of the existence of an order extending the deadline of the spring draft is a valid reason.

In the debates, the plaintiff's side also insisted on the existence of an ethical aspect—the profound moral convictions of the young man that conflicted cognitively with the necessity of performing military service are much more important than judicial casuistry.

The court granted the request of the plaintiff in part: the decision of the draft commission refusing to accept the application for performing ACS was ruled to be illegal. The plaintiff and his lawyers refused to comment on the situation, arguing that the point of this story has still not been established. In the autumn, draftee Aleksei Shapovalov will again have to defend his right to perform alternative civilian service. (tr. by PDS, posted 11 September 2018)

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ISRAEL: Ultra-Orthodox exemption from military service in Israel removed

Israel's Supreme Court decision a blow to the Netanyahu regime

By Derek Welch

World Religion News (18.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2fzDtJ5> – The Supreme Court in Israel during the second week of September canceled the arrangement set by the present Israeli Government that permitted Orthodox Jews to avoid compulsory military service altogether. The court called the arrangement unconstitutional and discriminatory. The Supreme Court said the ruling will be effective within a year.

The ruling was given out by outgoing President of the Supreme Court, Miriam Naor, who presided over a nine-member justice panel. The ruling itself was eight for, one dissenting. The majority of the justices consented with the petitioners' position, the Movement for Quality Government, that the present law continues to perpetuate the inequality between the religious and the secular youth. The former is exempt from

military enlistment while the latter is compelled by law to do so.

To arrive at their conclusion, the justices went through the data thrown up by the draft mechanism. Subsequent analysis revealed the rate of military enlistment by yeshiva or religious students were reduced when the legal framework to sidestep military duty was in force. The justices observed there was hardly any enlistment of the Haredi yeshiva students.

This Israeli Supreme Court judgment was a big blow to the already fragile governing coalition under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister. The question of pushing ultra-Orthodox young men studying in the many religious seminaries dotting the city has troubled the small but highly militarized country for many years now. Majority of the Israeli population are not happy with this arrangement, their children are compelled to enroll in the military draft when they reach 18 years of age. Their college education gets delayed by about three years.

In an indication of the stormy welcome Netanyahu will face when he returns to Israel from his foreign tour, two senior Netanyahu Cabinet members reacted with vastly different actions on the news of the ruling. Aryeh Deri, of Shas party, an ultra-Orthodox political entity, and who is also the country's Interior Minister, said that he had the agreement of the prime minister to present a strict law to bypass the rulings made by the Supreme Court. In contrast, Avigdor Lieberman, the Defense Minister, said that he has made the plan to propose a brand-new law which will impose compulsory military service on not only ultra-Orthodox Jews but also among the Arab citizens. Lieberman belongs to the right wing but secular Jewish Home Party.

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ISRAEL: Jehovah's Witnesses: military service, social hostility and state recognition

Yad Vashem has designated nineteen Jehovah's Witnesses Righteous Among the Nations, an honorific used by the State of Israel to describe non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews from extermination by the Nazis.

HRWF (16.01.2017) – There are approximately 1,600 Jehovah's Witnesses in Israel and 300 more in the areas of the Palestinian Authority. They obey the laws of the country, pay

their taxes and believe that they are upstanding citizens, but refuse to fulfill one national obligation: to perform military service.

Military service

Young Jehovah's Witnesses are permitted to submit a formal letter to the army declaring that they are members of the community who have been baptized, whereupon they receive an exemption from service – a process that is repeated every year until they reach the age 30, when they are officially discharged from military service. They thus undergo a process similar to those of Orthodox youths studying in yeshivas, though in the case of the Witnesses it is regulated by the military draft law, the last version of which was approved in 2015.

“Jehovah's Witnesses are exempt from service since they belong to a special community, and must be presented with a proper alternative due to their way of life,” according to the Israel Defense Forces Spokesman's Office. “The exemption is not part of an agreement [with the IDF per se], but is anchored in laws regarding the security services.”

On 3rd December 2016, Haaretz published an article written by Netta Ahituv and entitled “A rare glimpse into the insular world of Israeli Jehovah's Witnesses” (See full article here):

Social hostility

Motti Danziger, 43, a former Jew who became a member of the community as a teenager, says that recently an ultra-Orthodox man followed him into the apartment building where he lives with his wife, who is also a member of Jehovah's Witnesses. The next morning, all the building's occupants found in their mailboxes a letter warning that, despite Danziger's affable exterior, he is a dangerous person who will try to convert them.

Danziger also encountered harassment during his missionary activity. In the town of Nes Tziona, south of Tel Aviv, he knocked on the door of an apartment and was invited in by the woman of the house. But when her husband arrived, he locked the door and threatened Danziger and his associate. After words were exchanged, and Danziger tried to call the police, the man agreed to let them go – on condition that they leave all their written material with him.

In several large assemblies of Jehovah's Witnesses from different cities, participants were met with violent demonstrations. The latest such incident occurred this past June, when adherents who attended an assembly in Rishon Letzion endured attacks that included stone-throwing and physical assaults, apparently organized by the ultra-right Lehava organization (the name is an acronym, meaning "flame") for Prevention of Assimilation in the Holy Land.

A similar event occurred a year earlier, in Ra'anana, which also involved a legal saga. On the morning of the assembly, the municipality announced that it was canceling the event, "for fear of offense to the public's sensibilities," after discovering that a public hall had been rented by Jehovah's Witnesses. The issue reached the Supreme Court (after the municipality appealed a decision of the District Court that ordered that the gathering could take place), which ruled that the city cannot cancel a gathering on the grounds of religion, as this would infringe on freedom of religion and worship. When it became clear that the assembly would proceed as planned, the city's rabbi, Yitzhak Peretz, organized a demonstration outside the venue. About 1,000 people showed up and tried to break in. Two demonstrators were detained by the police and released shortly afterward.

Unrecognized community

The primary confrontation Jehovah's Witnesses have in Israel is with the state, says Haaretz.

Recognition would accord them various rights, such as being able to marry according to their faith, as well as social, legal and cultural legitimacy, and certain tax benefits.

In August 2000, lawyers for Jehovah's Witnesses sought recognition for them as a formal religious community in Israel via the cabinet secretary, the attorney general and the Prime Minister's Office. Fully three years later, the attorney general's office replied that the decision was up to the government, as the community itself had noted in its request. Following another letter, they were told that only a cabinet minister could place the subject on the agenda, and therefore the attorney general was referring the matter to the interior, justice and religious affairs ministers. Seven years after that, the cabinet secretary informed Jehovah's Witnesses that no progress had been made.

In 2014, another request for recognition was conveyed to the cabinet secretary. A year went by without a reply. A month after the community sent a reminder, the legal adviser to the Prime Minister's Office informed Jehovah's Witnesses that she was rejecting their request. "There are many different groups in Israel that wish to be recognized as a religious community. Accordingly, in the past 40 years, given the broad implications entailed in recognizing new religious communities, the government has not seen fit to change the existing situation," the legal adviser wrote.

The "existing situation" is that the state recognizes only the following religious communities (in addition to Jews): Muslims, Christians, Druze, Circassians, Bedouin, Samaritans, Ahmadis and Bahais. (By comparison, Britain recognizes about 30 religious communities.) Jehovah's Witnesses now believe that, all other possibilities having been tried, the only remaining alternative is the High Court of Justice. A petition to the court to that effect is now being drawn up by attorney Yael Nagar from the law firm of Eliad Shraga & Co.

Concurrently, Jehovah's Witnesses are seeking recognition as a public institution from the Tax Authority as a nonprofit organization engaged in religious activity. This process, which is being spearheaded by attorney Amit Moshe Cohen from the law firm of Doron Tikotzky Kantor Gutman Cederbom, has been ongoing for three years. During that time, representatives of the Israel Tax Authority, after visiting the Jehovah's Witnesses offices in Tel Aviv and being persuaded that the required criteria were met, transmitted the request to the Knesset's Finance Committee. In a meeting held last March, the committee's chairman, MK Moshe Gafni (United Torah Judaism), announced that he was referring the request to the attorney general because the issue is a matter of "deep public controversy."

No response was received from the Prime Minister's Office, which is responsible for the attorney general's office, by press time.

Jehovah's Witnesses hope that Haaretz article – the first to enter into the community's usually closed doors since their activity got underway in 1913, in Palestine and Israel – will help reduce social hostility.

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