

AZERBAIJAN 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates the separation of religion and state and the equality of all religions. 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. In two separate decisions in January and June, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled the government had violated the religious freedom rights of five individuals by subjecting them to excessively long pretrial detention (between five and 10 months) under the European Convention on Human Rights and ordered it to pay compensation. According to Forum 18, an international human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO), three of the five were arrested for gathering to study the works of the late Turkish Sunni theologian Said Nursi. One of the men said authorities physically abused him during his detention. In September, the ECHR accepted the government’s admission it had violated the rights of multiple Muslim individuals and Jehovah’s Witnesses to meet for worship or religious study at members’ homes. Throughout the year, courts continued reviewing appeals and sentencing individuals detained after a July 2018 attack on the then-head of the Ganja City Executive Committee and the subsequent killing of two police officers. Authorities alleged those sentenced were part of a Shia “extremist conspiracy” that sought to undermine the constitutional order. Civil society activists and human rights groups considered the vast majority of the verdicts to be politically motivated and estimated 43 individuals remained in prison at year’s end in connection with the events in Ganja. Authorities continued legal action against individuals associated with the unregistered Muslim Unity Movement (MUM), which the government characterized as an extremist group. Civil society activists and human rights advocates considered the incarceration of MUM members to be politically motivated. Local human rights groups and others stated the government continued to physically abuse, arrest, and imprison religious activists. According to these groups, the number of religious activists who were political prisoners or detainees ranged from 41 to 48 at the end of the year. Religious communities continued to express frustration that communities with fewer than 50 members were not allowed to legally register. The government stated that reducing the minimum number of members below 50 would promote

extremism. The government continued to control the importation, distribution, and sale of religious materials. In June, amendments to the criminal code entered into force that added “restriction of freedom” (i.e., probation) to preexisting penalties that included fines and imprisonment for publishing or distributing material with religious content without government approval. The government did not exercise control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region or surrounding territories throughout much of the year. During 44 days of intensive fighting from September 27 to November 10 involving Armenia, Armenia-supported separatists, and Azerbaijan, significant casualties and atrocities were reported by all sides. After Azerbaijan, with Turkish support, reestablished control over four surrounding territories controlled by separatists since 1994, a Russian-brokered ceasefire arrangement announced by Azerbaijan and Armenia on November 9 resulted in the peaceful transfer of control over three additional territories to Azerbaijan as well as the introduction of Russian peacekeepers to the region. During the conflict, Human Rights Watch reported two separate attacks on October 8 on the Holy Savior Cathedral in Shusha by Azerbaijani forces. In connection with attacks on and vandalism of religious sites following the Fall fighting, Armenian officials, religious leaders, and civil society representatives expressed concerns for the protection of Armenian cultural and religious heritage as the sites passed from Armenian to Azerbaijani control.

Civil society representatives stated citizens continued to tolerate and, in some cases, financially support “traditional” minority religious groups (i.e., those historically present in the country), including Jews, Russian Orthodox, and Catholics. Groups viewed as “nontraditional,” however, were often viewed with suspicion and mistrust.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers engaged government officials to advocate for the release of individuals NGOs stated were imprisoned for their religious beliefs. The Ambassador and embassy officers urged government officials to address longstanding issues with the registration process for smaller religious communities and to implement an alternative to military service for conscientious objectors, as stipulated in the constitution. The Ambassador advocated at the highest levels of government for the protection of religious and cultural sites in the newly returned territories. The Ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with representatives of registered and unregistered religious groups and civil society to discuss religious freedom in the country. Embassy officers also had consultations with theologians.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to 2011 data from the State Committee on Religious Associations in Azerbaijan (SCWRA) (the most recent available), 96 percent of the population is Muslim, of which approximately 65 percent is Shia and 35 percent Sunni. Groups that together constitute the remaining 4 percent of the population include the Russian Orthodox Church; Georgian Orthodox Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Molokan Church; Roman Catholic Church; other Christians, including evangelical churches, Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses; Jews; and Baha'is. Ethnic Azerbaijanis are mainly Muslims and non-Muslims are mainly Russians, Georgians, Armenians, and other national minorities. Others include the International Society of Krishna Consciousness and those professing no religion.

Christians live mainly in Baku and other urban areas. Approximately 15,000 to 20,000 Jews live in Baku, with smaller communities throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates the separation of religion and state and the equality of all religions and all individuals regardless of belief. It protects freedom of religion, including the right of individuals to profess, individually or together with others, any religion, or to profess no religion, and to express and spread religious beliefs. It also provides for the freedom to carry out religious rituals, provided they do not violate public order or public morality. The constitution states no one may be required to profess his or her religious beliefs or be persecuted for them; the law prohibits forced expressions or demonstrations of religious faith.

According to the code of administrative offenses, an administrative offense is applicable to nonviolent crimes. An administrative arrest may last up to three months.

The law requires 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 reregistration. 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.

By law, the government must rule on a registration application within 30 days, but there are no specified consequences if the government fails to act by the deadline. Authorities may deny registration of a religious organization if its actions, goals, or religious doctrine contradict the constitution or other laws. Authorities may also deny registration if an organization's charter or other establishment documents contradict the law or if the information provided is false. Religious groups may appeal registration denials to the courts.

The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) is registered by the SCWRA as a foundation and oversees the activities of registered Islamic organizations, including training and appointing clerics to lead Islamic worship, periodically monitoring sermons, and organizing pilgrimages to Mecca. Muslim communities must receive an approval letter from the CMB before submitting a registration application to the SCWRA.

The law bans activities by unregistered religious groups, which are punishable by fines or imprisonment.

While the law prohibits the government from interfering in the religious activities of any individual or group, there are exceptions for suspected extremist or other illegal activity. The law states government entities and citizens have rights and responsibilities to combat "religious extremism" and "radicalism." The law defines religious extremism as behavior motivated by religious hatred, religious radicalism (described as believing in the exceptionalism of one's religious beliefs), or religious fanaticism (described as believing no one outside of one's religious group may criticize that group). According to the law, this behavior includes forcing a person to belong to any specific religion or to participate in specific religious rituals. It also includes activities seeking to change by force the constitutional structure of the country's government, including its secular nature; setting up or participating in illegal armed groups or unions; and engaging in terrorist activities. The law penalizes actions that intend to change the constitutional order or violate the territorial integrity of the country on the grounds of religious hatred, radicalism, or fanaticism, with prison terms ranging from 15 years to life.

The law specifies circumstances under which religious organizations may be dissolved, including if they act contrary to their founding objectives; cause racial, national, religious, or social animosity; or proselytize in a way that degrades human dignity or contradicts recognized principles of humanity, such as “love for mankind, philanthropy, and kindness.” Other grounds for dissolution include hindering secular education or inducing members or other individuals to cede their property to the organization.

Rituals and ceremonies related to Islam may be performed only by citizens of the country. The law allows foreigners invited by non-Islamic registered religious groups to conduct religious services, but it prohibits citizens who received Islamic education abroad from leading religious ceremonies unless they obtain special permission from the CMB. Penalties for violating the law include up to one year’s imprisonment or fines from 1,000 *manat* (\$590) to 5,000 *manat* (\$2,900). A longstanding agreement between the government and the Holy See allows foreigners to lead Catholic rituals.

The administrative code prohibits “clergy and members of religious associations from holding special meetings for children and young people as well as the organizing or holding by religious bodies of organized labor, literary, or other clubs and groups unassociated with holding religious ceremonies.”

The law restricts the use of religious symbols and slogans to inside places of worship.

According to the law, the SCWRA reviews and approves all religious literature for legal importation, sale, and distribution. Punishments for “production, sale and distribution of religious literature (on paper and electronic devices), audio and video materials, religious items, and other informational materials of religious nature with the aim of importation, sale and distribution without appropriate authorization” are proscribed by law. Punishments for first-time offenders include a fine of between 5,000 and 7,000 *manat* (\$2,900 and \$4,100), up to two years’ restricted freedom, or up to two years’ imprisonment. Violations by a group of people “according to a prior conspiracy,” an organized group, an individual for a second time, or an official carry a fine of between 7,000 and 9,000 *manats* (\$4,100 and \$5,300), between two and four years’ restricted freedom, or imprisonment of between two and five years. In June, amendments to the criminal code entered into force that added the alternative punishment of “restriction of freedom” (probation) – two to four years in cases involving an individual first-time offender and two to five years in aggravated cases – to the preexisting punishments.

There is no religious component in the curriculum of public or private elementary or high schools; however, students may obtain after-school religious instruction at registered institutions. Students may study religion at higher educational institutions, such as the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology, and the CMB sponsors some religious training abroad. The law prohibits individuals who pursue foreign government-supported or privately funded religious education abroad without permission from the government from holding official religious positions, preaching, or leading sermons after returning to the country.

Although the constitution allows alternative service “in some cases” when military service conflicts with personal beliefs, there is no legislation permitting alternative service, including on religious grounds. Refusal to perform military service is punishable under the criminal code with imprisonment of up to two years or forced conscription.

The law stipulates the government may revoke the citizenship of individuals who participate in terrorist acts; engage in religious extremist actions; undergo military training abroad under the guise of receiving religious education; propagate religious doctrines in a “hostile” manner, which the law does not further define; or participate in religious conflicts in a foreign country under the guise of performing religious rituals.

According to the constitution, the law may restrict participation of “religious officials” in elections and bars them from election to parliament. By law, political parties may not engage in religious activity. The law does not define “religious officials.” The law prohibits religious leaders from simultaneously serving in any public office and in a position of religious leadership. It proscribes the use of religious facilities for political purposes.

The constitution prohibits “spreading propaganda of religions humiliating people’s dignity and contradicting the principles of humanism” as well as “propaganda” inciting religious animosity. The law also prohibits threats or expressions of contempt for persons based on religious belief.

The law prohibits proselytizing by foreigners but does not prohibit citizens from doing so. In cases of proselytization by foreigners and stateless persons, the law sets a punishment of one to two years in prison.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Local human rights groups and others stated the government continued to physically abuse, arrest, and imprison religious activists.

On June 4, the ECHR ruled the government had violated the religious freedom rights of four individuals whom it arrested between 2013 and 2015 by subjecting them to excessively long pretrial detention (between five and 10 months) in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. According to Forum 18, authorities arrested the four – Taleh Bagirov (aka Bagirzade), Zakir Mustafayev, Ismayil Mammadov, and Eldaniz Hajiyeu – for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. The government acknowledged the length of pretrial detention had been excessive. The ECHR ordered the government to pay each of the men 3,000 euros (\$3,700) in compensation. It awarded Mustafayev an additional 500 euros (\$610) for costs associated with applying to the court. Representatives of the men said the compensation was too low and wanted the court to continue hearing the case, but it refused. The ECHR ruling in June followed a similar decision by the same court on January 16 concerning the extended detention of Hajiyeu, Mammadov, and a third man, Revan Sabzaliyev, arrested in April 2014 when they met to study the works of Nursi. Hajiyeu and Mammadov were also among the four men included in ECHR's June decision. Bagirov said authorities tortured him during his detention. In 2015, authorities arrested Bagirov on charges of extremism following a police raid of a home where he was preaching. Five attendees and two officers died in the raid.

In nine cases concluded in September, the ECHR accepted the government's admission that it had violated the rights of multiple individuals to freedom of religion or belief. One case involved seven Muslims who were detained when they met at a home in Baku in 2015 to discuss the works of Nursi. In another case, authorities detained four Jehovah's Witnesses when they met at a member's home in Ganja in 2010. The government paid 4,400 euros (\$5,400) in compensation to the Muslims and 4,000 euros (\$4,900) to the Jehovah's Witnesses following the decisions. In these cases, as well as in earlier cases where the government admitted culpability, the victims said they were concerned by both the low level of compensation the government offered and what they saw as its failure to change the laws to ensure similar violations did not occur again. Forum 18 said there were 34 cases alleging violations of freedom of religion or belief involving 61 individuals and five religious communities that were pending before the ECHR at year's end.

Throughout the year, courts continued reviewing appeals and sentencing individuals detained after the July 2018 assault on Elmar Valiyev, the then-head of the Ganja City Executive Committee, and the subsequent stabbing to death of two police officers during a related demonstration against local government

authorities. In response to the 2018 events, police killed five persons and detained 77 others during special operations in Ganja, Shamkir, Sumgait, and Baku. The government said the convicted individuals were part of a Shia “extremist conspiracy” to destabilize the country, and that those killed had resisted arrest. Civil society activists and family members disputed the government’s account of events and stated the five individuals whom security forces killed had not resisted arrest. The Ganja Court of Grave Crimes conducted the trials in Baku in what observers said was an effort to avoid causing further social unrest in Ganja. Those convicted received sentences ranging from 18 months to 18 years imprisonment. With the exception of Yunis Safarov, who was accused of trying to shoot Valiyev, civil society activists and human rights advocates considered the vast majority of the verdicts to be politically motivated. They estimated 43 individuals connected to the events in Ganja remained in prison at year’s end.

Authorities continued legal action against individuals associated with the unregistered group MUM. Authorities stated the movement mixed religious and political ideology and said they were concerned about its ties to Iran. Charges against MUM members included illegal possession of weapons, violation of the COVID-19 quarantine regime, and “resisting police” (a broad offense that includes not obeying police orders). As in prior years, human rights advocates and other civil society activists characterized the charges as baseless and designed to preclude political activity. According to data collected by human rights advocates, at year’s end, the estimated number of believers who were political prisoners ranged from 41 to 48, compared with 45 to 55 in 2019.

On March 13, police detained MUM member Elvin Muradov. On September 25, the Narimanov District Court sentenced him to two years and three months in prison for illegal possession of a weapon. On June 22, police detained MUM member Shamil Hasanov. On October 27, the Binagadi District Court sentenced him to four years and six months in prison for illegal possession of a weapon. During the year, authorities placed multiple members of MUM under administrative arrest for allegedly violating the COVID-19 quarantine regime and “resisting police.” For example, on March 21, the Sabunchu District Court sentenced Samir Babayev to 30 days of administrative arrest. On April 12, the Khatai District Court sentenced Hikmat Agayev to 25 days of administrative arrest. On June 10, the Imishli District Court sentenced Alik Aslanov to 15 days of administrative arrest.

On April 6, a presidential pardon released a number of individuals over the age of 65 because of concerns over COVID-19-related risks to elderly prisoners. The released individuals included two religious activists whom human rights

advocates considered political prisoners, including one person arrested after a large November 2015 police operation targeting members of MUM.

Some minority Christian communities said the SCWRA made efforts to create more favorable conditions for their activities than in prior years, such as by becoming more responsive to their requests and concerns and establishing closer communication with them. The groups said there were fewer instances of officials raiding the premises of religious communities or detaining and fining individuals in connection with peaceful practice of their religion or beliefs than in years past. Jehovah's Witnesses stated there were no detentions related to practice of their religion during the year, compared with 18 in 2019. They attributed the lack of incidents to improved relations with the SCWRA and their reduced public proselytizing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government did not implement alternative military service for conscientious objectors, despite being required to do so by the constitution, or make any draft law public. According to Forum 18, on March 30, ruling party deputy Siyavush Novruzov recommended parliament adopt an alternative service law. In April 2019, the Supreme Court rejected the appeals of Jehovah's Witnesses Emil Mehdiyev and Vahid Abilov of their 2018 convictions and one-year probation sentences for criminal evasion of military service. Mehdiyev and Abilov filed an appeal with the ECHR, on which the court had not ruled as of year's end.

During the year, the SCWRA registered 14 new religious communities (12 Muslim and two Christian), compared with 34 religious communities registered in 2019 (31 Muslim and three Christian). There were a total 963 registered communities at the end of the year, of which 37 were non-Muslim – 26 Christian, eight Jewish, two Baha'i, and one the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. The SCWRA also said 2,250 mosques, 14 churches, and seven synagogues were registered. There were 23 Christian prayer houses (worship spaces that did not have the status of a church), one Baha'i house of worship, and one Krishna Consciousness house of worship in the country at year's end.

The SCWRA said it continued to provide letters authorizing previously registered communities to operate, based on their pre-2009 registration. While the SCWRA maintained its prohibition on these communities' religious activities in locations not covered under their pre-2009 registration status, it occasionally granted exceptions upon request.

The government said the inability of some groups to obtain registration stemmed solely from the groups' inability to meet the law's requirement of 50

members and that the government did not take administrative action against unregistered religious communities. The government said reducing the minimum number of members below 50 would promote extremism. Religious communities continued to state frustration with government registration requirements, particularly the 50-member minimum. For example, Baptist communities in the towns of Zagatala and Shirvan did not have sufficient members to apply for legal registration. Jehovah's Witnesses were registered only in Baku. Regional branches of Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses stated they were unable to obtain legal registration, although they stated they were able to worship openly despite being unregistered. Forum 18 reported that in January, the SCWRA told the Baptist community in the village of Aliabad, which has been seeking legal status since 1994, that SCWRA had "no objection" to the group meeting once per week for two hours, despite it not having legal status. Some Protestant and home-based church leaders stated their inability to obtain legal registration forced them to keep their activities quiet for fear of government repercussions.

On September 23, the Supreme Court upheld the verdict of the Baku Administrative Court, which on January 30, 2019 declined to review the complaint of former parliament employee Rahim Akhundov. Akhundov stated that in December 2018 he was forced to resign from his professional position in the International Relations Department due to his Christian faith. He stated he had been threatened with dismissal if he did not resign voluntarily. According to Akhundov, security services conducted surveillance on him and his home, and informed parliamentary leadership that he held prayer meetings at his house and proselytized.

On August 28, authorities did not permit Shia believers to gather in mosques or mosque courtyards to mark the Ashura religious commemoration because of COVID-19 quarantine restrictions that applied to all public gatherings, regardless of the purpose. Police detained numerous individuals in Shamkir, Yevlakh, Barda, and Lankaran for trying to observe Ashura in spite of the prohibition on gatherings. Judges sentenced at least six individuals to administrative detention ranging from 10 to 30 days.

Forum 18 said government officials sometimes refused to give birth certificates to Georgian-speaking families for children with Georgian first names or to Baptists wishing to give their children biblical names. According to Forum 18, without a birth certificate, a child may not attend kindergarten or school, be treated in a hospital, or travel abroad. The NGO said that in the early part of the year, following a one-year delay, officials granted a birth certificate to a family in Aliabad who had named their son Daniel. An individual close to the family

told Forum 18, “The parents chose the name for religious reasons. But officials refused and insisted they choose an Azeri name.”

The SCWRA stated it prohibited the importation of 52 books out of 3,680 and the publication of six books out of 205. By comparison, in 2019 the SCWRA prohibited the importation of 216 books out of 3,888, and the publication of 14 books out of 239.

On October 22, the ECHR ruled in the case of Jehovah’s Witness Nina Gridneva. The court dismissed the case because the parties had reached a settlement in which the government recognized it had violated her rights under the European Convention on Human Rights and committed to pay her 4,500 euros (\$5,500) as compensation. In 2010, police stopped Gridneva while she was distributing religious literature on the street and officers seized the materials. A local court subsequently fined her for distributing “illegal” religious literature.

The ECHR ruled on February 20 that the government had violated the rights of Jehovah’s Witnesses by banning three of their publications from importation and distribution in 2008. The ECHR ordered the government to pay compensation for the violation and refund court fees Jehovah’s Witnesses incurred trying to challenge the bans in local courts.

According to Shia Rights Watch, in June, officials demolished the Hazrat Zahra Mosque in Baku, saying the building was condemned, and undertook construction of a new mosque on the same site. The government had attempted to demolish the mosque in 2008; however, due to demonstrations, demolition was postponed.

The government continued to allocate funds to “traditional” religious groups. On June 2, President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree allocating two million manat (\$1.18 million) to the CMB for the needs of Muslim communities and 350,000 manat (\$206,000) each to the Baku Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church and the religious community of Mountain Jews, the same amounts as in 2019. The decree also allocated 150,000 manat (\$88,200) each to the European Jewish community, the Albanian-Udi community, and the Catholic Church of Baku, and 100,000 manat (\$58,800) to the Moral Values Promotion Foundation, the same amounts as in 2019. Some observers stated the Moral Values Promotion Foundation’s funding amounted to further government control over the practice of Islam.

The government did not exercise control over Nagorno-Karabakh or the surrounding territories throughout much of the year. During 44 days of

intensive fighting in the fall in and around Nagorno-Karabakh involving Armenia, Armenia-supported separatists, and Azerbaijan, significant casualties and atrocities were reported by all sides. After Azerbaijan, with Turkish support, reestablished control over four surrounding territories controlled by separatists since 1994, a Russian-brokered ceasefire arrangement announced by Azerbaijan and Armenia on November 9 resulted in the peaceful transfer of control over three additional territories to Azerbaijan as well as the introduction of Russian peacekeepers to the region.

Human Rights Watch stated Azerbaijani forces attacked and damaged the Holy Savior Cathedral in Shusha in two separate incidents on October 8. Reporters on-site during the attack reported a drone flying overhead at the time and that the two strikes were made by high-precision missiles. There was reportedly no evidence the site was used for military purposes. In an October 26 interview, President Aliyev denied purposefully bombing the church, saying it was bombed by accident or was done by the Armenians themselves to frame Azerbaijan. Armenian religious officials accused Azerbaijan forces of desecrating the Holy Savior Cathedral after taking control of the city of Shusha on November 14. Photographs circulated on the internet showed graffiti on the outer walls of the cathedral. Azerbaijani media said the graffiti in the online images had been photoshopped.

Numerous videos circulated during and after the fall fighting that showed attacks on and vandalism of cultural and religious sites. These videos prompted Armenian officials, religious leaders, and civil society representatives to express serious concerns regarding the preservation of the sites as they passed from Armenian to Azerbaijani control. Following the ceasefire, leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church requested that Russian peacekeepers protect the medieval Dadivank Monastery in the district of Kalbajar, a territory returned to Azerbaijani control after the fall fighting, fearing its carvings could be destroyed and that without protection the site would become inaccessible. Russian peacekeepers took control of the site immediately following a November 14 call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. President Aliyev's public claim that "the churches in Kalbajar belong to the ancient Caucasian Albanian state" raised concerns among Armenians that Azerbaijan might seek to sever some religious sites' connections with their Armenian heritage.

Armenian media reported both during and after the fall fighting that representatives of the Azerbaijani armed forces deliberately targeted monuments of historical, religious, and cultural significance. On November 14, a person whom local media identified as Azerbaijani posted a video on Facebook showing the alleged destruction of the dome and the bell tower of the

St. John the Baptist Church (also known as Kanach Zham/Green Church) located in Shusha.

There were also videos of soldiers desecrating and damaging the Church of Zoravor St. Astvatsatsin, located in Mekhakavan settlement, including the breaking of the church's cross. When the Church of Zoravor St. Astvatsatsin was constructed in 2017 by Armenia-supported de facto authorities as a military chapel, Azerbaijan formally protested the construction on "occupied lands" in a depopulated area as a violation of international humanitarian law.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Local experts on religious affairs and civil society representatives stated citizens continued to tolerate and, in some cases, financially support "traditional" minority religious groups, such as Jews, Russian Orthodox, and Catholics, but many persons viewed groups considered "nontraditional," such as Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses, with suspicion and mistrust.

The executive director of the Moral Values Promotion Foundation, Mehman Ismayilov, said that during the year, the foundation provided monthly assistance to 984 Muslim religious figures serving in mosques, including imams and deputy imams, and transferred 100,000 manat (\$58,800) to 22 non-Muslim communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged government officials to advocate for the release of individuals that NGOs stated were imprisoned for their religious beliefs. The Ambassador and embassy officers also pressed the government to implement an alternative to military service for conscientious objectors, as stipulated in the constitution. They met with senior Cabinet of Ministers, SCWRA, and CMB officials to urge resolution of longstanding issues regarding the registration process for smaller religious communities and other obstacles faced by religious minorities. The Ambassador advocated at the highest levels of government for the protection of religious and cultural sites in the newly returned territories. During the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and in the months following the ceasefire arrangement, the Ambassador consistently underscored the importance of granting unimpeded access to religious and cultural sites to UNESCO and international journalists with Azerbaijan's Presidential Administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Ambassador and embassy officers continued to meet regularly with leaders of registered and unregistered religious communities and with representatives of

civil society to discuss issues related to religious freedom, alternative military service, and relations with SCWRA. Officials also consulted with theologians. In a program intended to empower women involved in work with religious organizations, the embassy sponsored the travel of a group of five female employees working for the SCWRA and CMB to the United States from March 4 to March 13. In the United States, the group met with representatives of different interfaith and religious organizations, visited different houses of worship, and learned about the role of women in American religious communities.