

“I have been blessed to represent a country with a Shiite Muslim majority that supports Israel and ensures the Jewish community lives here in security, prosperity, and peace.”



Rabbi Zamir Isayev

Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Azerbaijan

Introduction

Azerbaijan, strategically located at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, is renowned for its rich cultural and religious diversity. As a secular republic, the nation has enshrined religious freedom within its constitution, fostering an environment where multiple faiths coexist harmoniously. This paper explores the positive aspects of religious freedom in Azerbaijan, emphasizing its constitutional guarantees, state-led multicultural initiatives, and the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious communities.

Constitutional Guarantees of Religious Freedom

The foundation of religious freedom in Azerbaijan is rooted in its constitution. Article 48 explicitly ensures the freedom of religion, allowing every individual the right to determine and express their religious beliefs. It states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and religion. Everyone has the right to independently define their attitude towards religion, to profess or not to profess, individually or together with others, any religion, and to express and disseminate beliefs concerning religion.” Furthermore, Article 18 establishes the separation of religion and state, ensuring that all religions are equal before the law and prohibiting the promotion of religions that undermine human dignity or contradict the principles of humanism. This secular framework ensures that

religious institutions operate independently of governmental influence, promoting an environment where diverse religious practices can flourish.

Multiculturalism and State Support

Azerbaijan has actively promoted multiculturalism as a state policy, recognizing the nation's diverse ethnic and religious composition. In 2016, President Ilham Aliyev declared the "Year of Multiculturalism," underscoring the country's commitment to cultural and religious diversity. The Baku International Multiculturalism Center was established to foster dialogue among various cultural and religious groups, both domestically and internationally. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations plays a pivotal role in maintaining religious harmony. It ensures that all religious communities can practice their faith freely. Dr. Rafiq Aliyev, the committee's chairman, emphasized, "All religions are equal in the eyes of the law," highlighting the government's dedication to fostering healthy and productive relationships among various religious organizations to prevent conflicts.

Diverse Religious Communities Coexisting Peacefully

Azerbaijan is home to a myriad of religious communities that coexist peacefully. While Islam is the predominant faith, the country hosts significant populations of Christians, Jews, Bahá'ís, and others.

Christianity: Orthodox Christianity is represented by both Russian and Georgian Orthodox churches. The Catholic community, though small, has seen support from the state. Notably, in 2002, President Heydar Aliyev allocated land for the construction of a new Catholic church in Baku, which was inaugurated in 2008.

During his visit to Azerbaijan in October 2016, Pope Francis praised the nation's commitment to religious tolerance and multiculturalism. He remarked, "The world, unfortunately, is experiencing the tragedy of many conflicts fueled by intolerance," and emphasized the importance of fostering a culture of peace and encounter among different faiths.

He also highlighted the significance of interreligious dialogue, stating, "Religions... are called to build a culture of encounter and peace, based on patience, understanding, and humble, tangible steps."

These statements underscore Pope Francis's recognition of Azerbaijan as a model for religious harmony in a world often divided by intolerance.

Judaism: Azerbaijan is unique in the Muslim-majority world for its long-standing Jewish community. The Red Town (Qırmızı Qəsəbə) in the Quba region is one of the

world's few all-Jewish towns outside Israel. Jews have lived in this area since the 13th century, enjoying freedom to practice their religion, with access to synagogues and schools.

Bahá'í Faith: The Bahá'í community, re-established after the Soviet era, has been officially recognized since 1993. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Azerbaijan was elected in 1992, marking a significant milestone for the community.

Interfaith Harmony and International Recognition

Azerbaijan's commitment to religious freedom and interfaith harmony has garnered international attention. Pope John Paul II visited Baku in 2002, and Pope Francis followed in 2016, both acknowledging the country's dedication to religious tolerance. During his visit, Pope Francis remarked on Azerbaijan's embrace of religious diversity, highlighting it as a model for peaceful coexistence.

Jewish Stance on Azerbaijan

Rabbi Zamir Isayev, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Baku, has highlighted Azerbaijan's commitment to religious tolerance and multiculturalism. He stated, "Azerbaijan showed that through a good educational system without signs of fanaticism and hate toward others, peacebuilding was possible." He further emphasized the harmonious relationship between Shia Muslims and Jews in the country, noting, "Shia Muslims and Jews here show mutual respect to each other. We feel safer here than in Europe now. This country could set an example to other Muslim ones."

Belgian Jewish MP impressed by a visit to Azerbaijan:

"It might sound counter-intuitive, but many countries in Europe can actually learn from this example of Azerbaijan on how to live and sustain their Jewish communities," Michael Freilich said.

"In all of my talks I heard how Jews are accepted in Azerbaijan and how they feel like an integral part of society," declared Belgian Jewish Member of the Parliament Michael Freilich after returning from a visit to the Jewish community of this Muslim nation."

Azerbaijan's dedication to religious freedom is evident in its constitutional provisions, state-led multicultural initiatives, and the harmonious coexistence of its diverse religious communities. By upholding secularism and promoting interfaith dialogue, Azerbaijan serves as a positive example of how religious diversity can be embraced in a modern nation-state.

