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AZERBAIJAN: "They don't want a Sunni mosque in the Old City"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Samir Nuriyev, director of Baku's Icherisheher (Old City) State Historical-Architectural Reserve, summoned the leader of the Lezgin Mosque community in mid-July and told him verbally that it must voluntarily leave the building in advance of full renovation, community leader Faiq Mustafa and Reserve official Emil Huseynli separately told Forum 18 News Service. Mustafa fears this might be an attempt to oust the community, in line with earlier moves against other Sunni communities. Reserve spokesperson Narmin Azadgil has not responded to Forum 18's questions on why no document on the proposed renovation has been given to the community and whether the community will be able to resume use of its Mosque once any renovation is complete. Despite the consistent closures of specifically Sunni mosques, Sarkhan Halilov of Azerbaijan's State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations insisted that the government "has nothing against Sunni mosques". But he admitted to Forum 18 that Baku's (Sunni) Martyrs' Mosque – closed by the state in 2009 - will never be reopened.

The head of the mosque community at one of the last remaining Sunni Muslim mosques in Azerbaijan's capital Baku fears that the proposed full renovation of the historic Lezgin Mosque in the Old City might be used as an excuse to close it down or oust the community. "This attempt is just a new method to achieve the same goal," Faiq Mustafa told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 9 August. "They don't want a Sunni mosque in the Old City."

Mustafa fears that after any closure for renovation, the authorities could turn the Mosque into a museum or, if they do reopen it as a mosque, they could create a new Shia community and hand the Mosque to them instead. "Then where would we worship?" Mustafa asked.

The Lezgin Mosque (also known as the Ashur Mosque) has been under a police blockade during Friday prayers each week since early May, restricting the number of worshippers who can enter. One police officer also tried to pressure the community to close the Mosque each evening at 8 pm (see F18News 28 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1962).

An official at the Administration of the Icherisheher (Old City) State Historical-Architectural Reserve, Emil Huseynli, confirmed to Forum 18 that he had been present at a meeting on 16 July when the Director Samir Nuriyev informed mosque community leader Mustafa verbally of the planned renovation. But neither Huseynli nor other officials there would say if the Lezgin Mosque is to be permanently closed or handed to a different community after any renovation.

Azerbaijan has a record of forcibly closing mosques and other places of worship, as well as in other ways restricting people's ability to meet to exercise freedom of religion or belief. This includes an August 2008 "temporary" ban on praying outside all mosques, which appears to be still in force (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1690).

State restrictions continue

The possible closure – temporary or permanent – of Baku's Lezgin Mosque comes amid continuing state restrictions on individuals and communities exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

State censorship of all religious literature and other materials produced in Azerbaijan or imported continues. Texts such as the Old Testament, the writings of Islamic theologian Said Nursi, and some Jehovah's Witness texts are banned (see F18News 6 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1955). It has taken the Baptist Union more than seven months to gain the required state approval to print 3,000 copies of the New Testament in Azeri (see below).

In early August, a Baku court extended for a further two months the detention in National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police custody of three Muslim prisoners of conscience. Eldeniz Hajiyev, Ismayil Mammadov and Revan Sabzaliyev face up to three years' imprisonment for participating in a meeting which was raided by armed police and the NSM secret police. The men had met with other Muslims to discuss their faith with the help of the writings of Islamic theologian Said Nursi. In July an appeal court rejected the appeal of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Kamran Shikhaliyev against a one-year sentence in a military disciplinary unit. Raids on religious meetings and administrative fines continue (see F18News 7 August 2014).

Verbal, not written notice

Old City Reserve Director Nuriyev summoned Lezgin Mosque community leader Mustafa for a meeting on 16 July. Huseynli and another official Forum 18 has been unable to identify were also present. Nuriyev told Mustafa verbally that the Lezgin community is being requested to leave the mosque voluntarily as it is among a number of Old City buildings scheduled for full renovation, Mustafa and Huseynli separately confirmed to Forum 18.

Curiously, the Reserve's January 2014 report to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which recognised the Old City's status as a World Heritage Site in 2000, identifies the only Old City Mosque scheduled for conservation work in 2014 as the 19th century Beylar Mosque (see <http://whc.unesco.org/document/127142>).

"I asked them [the Reserve] to provide an alternative mosque for us to use before any repairs go ahead and for a commitment that the community will be able to return to the current Mosque as soon as any repairs are complete," Mustafa of the Lezgin Mosque community told Forum 18. "Nuriyev refused." Mustafa also asked Nuriyev to document in writing when the proposed repairs are planned to begin and end.

"I told them the building is our property to use and we have all the documentation to prove that it was assigned to us," Mustafa noted. "I also told them we reject any repairs to the interior, as we believe it does not need renovation – we have kept it in good repair at our own expense. Nuriyev rejected this."

Nuriyev of the Reserve's opinion on the Mosque's state of repair is contradicted by a 2008 report by Arthur H. Chen of Minnesota University, published by UNESCO with a Foreword by the Reserve. It describes the Ashur or Lezgin Mosque's state of conservation as "good", noting that "the building is in use as a mosque and is clearly cared for" (see <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001791/179133e.pdf>).

Mustafa of the Lezgin Mosque told Forum 18 on 9 August that no document about the proposed repair has arrived from the Old City Reserve. "When we get it, we will go to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, the Caucasian Muslim Board and the courts to protect our rights," Mustafa insisted. He repeated that the mosque community does not believe the Mosque needs renovation.

Huseynli of the Reserve struggled to explain why the proposals outlined by Director Nuriyev in mid-July have still not been sent to the community in writing. "Perhaps the process has not yet fully started," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 11 August. He denied that the mosque community is being targeted because it is Sunni, claiming that he had "not heard" of the enforced closure of other Sunni mosques in Baku (see below).

Unanswered questions

Huseynli had earlier refused to answer Forum 18's questions, referring it to Old City Reserve spokesperson Narmin Azadgil. She refused to answer any questions by phone on 6 August, insisting that Forum 18 send questions in writing.

Forum 18 asked that day in writing: If the Reserve is planning the renovation of the Mosque building; if so, when the renovation is planned to start; who decided that the renovation is needed; if the renovation is planned to be of the exterior, interior or both; if the Reserve has informed the mosque community of the proposed renovation in writing (and if so, for a copy of the letter); if the mosque community has been given the opportunity to give its views on the proposed renovation; when the renovation is planned to be completed; if the Mosque will be returned to the same mosque community when the renovation is complete; and, if so, when this return of the Mosque building to the community will take place.

Despite follow-up calls, Azadgil had not responded to these questions by the end of the working day in Baku on 11 August.

Lezgin Mosque no longer?

The Lezgin Mosque – as it is widely known - was built in 1169. It gained its name a century ago as workers from Dagestan came to Baku to work in the burgeoning oil industry. In April 1968, during the Soviet period, the Azerbaijan SSR Council of Ministers included the "Lezgin Mosque" among 44 protected historical monuments in the Old City. It remains a protected monument under subsequent Azerbaijani government lists.

When Azerbaijan applied for World Heritage status for Baku's Old City with UNESCO, the government made specific mention of the "Lezgin Mosque" among protected monuments in the Old City.

However, the government and Old City Reserve officials now dispute this naming, insisting it is called only the Ashur Mosque, in honour of the mosque builder Najaf Ashur Ibrahim. Asked on 6 August about the Lezgin Mosque, Reserve spokesperson Azadgil

instantly retorted to Forum 18: "That isn't its name – it's the Ashur Mosque."

Community leader Mustafa insists that officials are trying to remove any ethnic designation from mosques. "That's why they don't like calling it the Lezgin Mosque," he told Forum 18. "But it's attached to the Lezgin national centre."

One of last Sunni mosques

The Lezgin Mosque is one of just two specifically Sunni Muslim mosques still open in Baku. All the others – such as the Abu Bekr Mosque and the Martyrs' Mosque, also known as the Turkish Mosque, near the parliament, the Milli Mejlis – have been closed by the authorities on various pretexts since 2008. The only Sunni Muslim mosque in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] was also forcibly closed in 2009 (see F18News 18 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1350).

Another Sunni mosque, in Mushfiqabad near Baku, was transferred to new control in spring 2014. Unnamed officials of the State Committee said in March that the old community which ran the mosque had "dissolved itself". Muslims close to the community denied this to Forum 18. The mosque is no longer specifically Sunni (see F18News 28 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1962).

"Nothing to fear"?

Sarkhan Halilov, appointed in early August as the Baku representative for the State Committee, insisted that the Lezgin Mosque community has "nothing to fear". He insisted that while the state has restored many mosques across Azerbaijan, he knows of no current plans to close the Lezgin Mosque for renovation. "But it would be wrong to say as the community does that the mosque doesn't need renovation," he told Forum 18 on 7 August from Baku.

Despite the consistent closures of specifically Sunni mosques, Halilov insisted that the government "has nothing against Sunni mosques". Asked why so many have been closed or turned into Shia or Shia-dominated mosques, he responded: "In Azerbaijan Shias and Sunnis pray together in the same mosques."

Asked why police had instituted a cordon around the Lezgin Mosque from mid-morning each Friday until after prayers were completed and why they restrict the number of worshippers allowed in, Halilov claimed that "negative people" gathered there. "It is being done in their [mosque members'] interests – for their security," he maintained.

Asked why the Martyrs' Mosque near the Milli Mejlis had been closed for "repair" so soon after it was built, Halilov replied: "How can a mosque be built so near the Milli Mejlis? You wouldn't have a place of worship so near parliament in any other country. And when the mosque was built, they didn't take account of water pipes that run underneath it." Asked whether Azerbaijan does not have qualified engineers who could resolve any problem with the water pipes, Halilov responded: "It's also a question of security."

Halilov insisted that the Martyrs' Mosque will never be reopened, given its location.

Asked when the Abu Bekr Mosque will be reopened for worship, Halilov said he did not know. "Ask the Mayor's Office."

Forum 18 was unable immediately to reach anyone in the Mayor's Office able to say if and when Abu Bekr Mosque will be reopened.

Scriptures approved after seven months

Meanwhile, more than seven months after the Baptist Union applied in writing for permission to print 3,000 copies of the Azeri-language New Testament, the State Committee finally approved the request in full and in writing on 3 July. Baptist Union head Ilya Zenchenko noted to Forum 18 from Baku on 31 July that the positive response had been "long awaited".

Azerbaijan imposes tight prior state censorship on all religious literature published in or imported into the country (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690). As Azerbaijan's Jehovah's Witnesses have pointed out: "Azerbaijan is the only Council of Europe member state that has set up a system of compulsory censorship of religious literature, in violation of its own Constitution" (see F18News 3 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1964).

Pastor Zenchenko wrote to the then State Committee Chair Elshad Iskenderov for permission for the 3,000 New Testaments on 26 November 2013. State Committee officials repeatedly refused to respond in writing, but insisted verbally – without explanation – that Pastor Zenchenko should re-write the request, giving the requested quantity as 1,000. He repeatedly refused (see F18News 6 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1955).

Iskenderov was abruptly sacked as Chair of the State Committee on 2 May after just two years in the post (see F18News 6 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1955).

New State Committee Chair

On 21 July, President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree naming Mubariz Qurbanli as the new head of the State Committee. The decree was published on the presidential website the same day.

Now aged 60, Qurbanli was a school teacher and then a university professor during the Soviet period. After independence, he joined the New Azerbaijan ruling party set up in 1992 to back Heydar Aliyev's return to political life and subsequent presidency and, from 2003, the presidency of his son. Qurbanli has been a ruling party member of the Milli Mejlis since 1995.

Qurbanli vocally supported further amendments to the harsh Religion Law in June 2009, describing them as "completely justified". His remarks were published the day before the Milli Mejlis approved the amendments banning foreign citizens, and those who have not had Islamic education within Azerbaijan, from leading prayers in mosques and requiring everyone who leads mosques and places of pilgrimage to have state approval (see F18News 18 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1314).

"Qurbanli is a party functionary, but is well-mannered, unlike his predecessor Iskenderov," one Baku-based commentator who has met both men told Forum 18. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1690.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482.

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