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AZERBAIJAN: Mosques ordered to close for "repairs"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Two Baku mosques abruptly closed for "repairs". A Quba mosque is restricted to Friday prayers only after an official thought replacing a window was "Salafi activity". Army and police are outside Nardaran's mosques. But the Georgian Orthodox are after a year allowed a priest.

A police officer summarily ordered closed two Mosques in Baku's historic Icherisheher (Old City) – one the long-threatened Sunni Lezgin Mosque and one Shia - on 25 July, local Muslims complained to Forum 18. Officials claim they both need "repairs". Earlier in July a Sunni Mosque in a village in the northern Quba Region was ordered to close for all activity except Friday prayers. A local Muslim told Forum 18 that the local state religious affairs official "complained that the community was engaged in 'Salafi activity' because it had replaced the window." The Muslim regarded the complaint over the new window as an excuse to restrict the mosque's activity to only being open for Friday prayers (see below).

Both the now-closed Baku mosques are in a UNESCO-recognised world heritage site administered by the Icherisheher (Old City) State Historical-Architectural Reserve, which has contradicted its own report and an expert report to UNESCO in an attempt to justify the closure (see below).

And eight months on from the November 2015 police assault on Nardaran, villagers remain "intimidated" and its Shia mosques closed, a human rights defender has told Forum 18. "An undeclared state of emergency continues, with armed soldiers and police units patrolling." Army and police units stand outside each of Nardaran's mosques. "They change over every two hours and in full view of everyone." He added that "five or six people were in each house, in silence, and all were praying for the release of the prisoners." (see below).

Meanwhile, after a break of nearly a year, the two state-permitted Georgian Orthodox parishes in the north-western Qakh Region once again have a resident priest. The Azerbaijani authorities had abruptly banned the previous parish priest from returning from Georgia in June 2015. However, officials refuse to allow other historic Georgian Orthodox churches to be used regularly for worship (see below).

Sunni mosques closed and taken over

The authorities have consistently closed down Sunni Muslim mosques in recent years on various pretexts, including several in Baku and one in Gyanja. The authorities have closed all Baku's Sunni mosques (apart from the Lezgin Mosque – see below), such as the Abu Bekr Mosque and the Martyrs' Mosque (also known as the Turkish Mosque), on various pretexts since 2008 (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081).

In a typical example, a Sunni Mosque in Qobustan near Baku was forced to give up its Sunni identity. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations warned its leaders that if they did not liquidate the community, hand back documents for the Mosque, and allow the Mosque leadership to be replaced, the State Committee would go to court to enforce its liquidation. The Mosque leadership reluctantly complied with the state demand (see F18News 24 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2042).

Wide-ranging state crackdown

The crackdown on people exercising freedom of religion and belief is part of a wide-ranging state crackdown on people exercising human rights Azerbaijan's government has solemn international obligations to protect. This has included the arrest and jailing as prisoners of conscience of many lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders and public figures the government dislikes.

Baku Old City: two mosques ordered to close for "repairs"

At about lunchtime on 25 July, the Deputy Head of the police in Baku's Sabail District, Colonel Fuzuli Humbatov, summoned the head of the Lezgin Mosque (also known as the Ashur Mosque), Faiq Mustafa, to a cafe near the Lezgin Mosque. The head of

another nearby mosque, which conducted its prayers according to Shia practices, was also summoned. In the cafe Colonel Humberov told both men that their communities had to leave their mosques immediately before "repairs" began, Mustafa told Forum 18.

The Lezgin Mosque has repeatedly been threatened with closure under plans to allegedly "renovate" the building. Samir Nuriyev, Director of the Icherisheher (Old City) Reserve, summoned the leader of the Mosque community in July 2014 and told him verbally that it must voluntarily leave the building. However, no document on the proposed alleged "renovation" was given to the community (see F18News 11 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1984).

Police Colonel Humberov twice claimed on 27 July 2016 that he could not hear Forum 18's question as to why he had been involved in ordering both mosque communities to summarily vacate their places of worship. He had heard when Forum 18 had introduced itself.

"I had come to the mosque as usual that day when I was summoned," Lezgin Mosque community leader Mustafa said. "I told the Colonel that we have no other building to go to and no one had told us officially. He told us it was our last day at the mosque." Mustafa said the head of the other mosque listened to the police officer for about half an hour and left without commenting.

The second mosque, built in the 17th century, is close to the southern exit of the Old City. The Mosque was closed for about a year for repairs about 10 years ago, before being reopened for Shia worship. It belongs to the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board.

Back at the Lezgin Mosque, Mustafa and his community began discussing the Colonel's demands. They were joined by Anar Kazimov, the representative for Baku of the State Committee, and Israfil Karimov, the religious affairs official of Sabail District Administration. (Religious affairs officials have recently been named to many local Administrations across Azerbaijan.)

Mustafa complained to the officials that the mosque community had received no letter from the Icherisheher (Old City) State Historical-Architectural Reserve. "I asked for a document providing alternative accommodation for the community while the 'repairs' were underway, and a guarantee that the community would be able to return to its mosque once the 'repairs' were complete," he told Forum 18.

Elchin Yusubov, the Deputy Head of Administration of the State Historical-Architectural Reserve, provided written notification of the enforced mosque closure for "repairs" after some hours. The notification, dated 25 July and seen by Forum 18, orders the community to vacate the building by the following day, 26 July. However, neither the Deputy Head, nor the officials at the meeting would offer alternative accommodation or guarantee the community's right to return to its Mosque, Mustafa added. Nor would they say how long the "repairs" are expected to last.

"They just told us that Baku has plenty of mosques and that we should pray in any of them," Mustafa told Forum 18.

"Everyone was crying"

Mustafa said officials wanted the mosque community's property to be removed that same evening. However, he persuaded them to wait until the following day. "They organised the removal of our property, sending two lorries and about 10 State Historical-Architectural Reserve employees. They mobilised everything and everyone to complete it quickly."

About half a dozen community members prayed the last namaz in their mosque at lunchtime on 26 July as the workers were still taking out their property. "Everyone was crying," Mustafa told Forum 18. "We had lost our mosque."

"Repairs" unnecessary

The State Historical-Architectural Reserve's most recent detailed report, from January 2014, to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO - which recognised the Old City's status as a World Heritage Site in 2000), only identified the 19th century Beylar Mosque as scheduled for conservation work (see <http://whc.unesco.org/document/127142>). This was before the Reserve's 2014 demand that the Lezgin Mosque community leave their place of worship because of an alleged need for "renovation" (see F18News 11 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1984).

In 2008, an expert report published by UNESCO described 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>).

Reserve contradicts its own reports

The Old City State Historical-Architectural Reserve claims that the work on the two mosques is part of its Conservation Master Plan, allegedly adopted under UNESCO rules and adopted under a 2010 Cabinet of Ministers Decree.

The Reserve contradicted their own reports to UNESCO and UNESCO's own expert report in trying to justify the closure of the Lezgin or Ashur Mosque. "Per the plan on restoration developed and submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers, the restoration of Ashur

Mosque was planned for 2012-2014," Reserve spokesperson Narmin Azadgil told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 July. "In 2013, the Scientific Restoration Atelier examined the mosque building and identified the main problematic issues to be addressed during the restoration process. Following this the restoration project has been developed."

"However, due to the fact that 'de-facto' users of the mosque were not willing to vacate the monument in violation of the law (despite several notices given in 2014 and 2015), the restoration was delayed and this started to significantly harm this ancient monument." Azadgil told Forum 18 that this was why the State Historical-Architectural Reserve had sent a "final notice" to the "users of the mosque".

Until the state of the mosque has been assessed, Azadgil said, it is not known how long the "repairs" are likely to last. She said it is "beyond the responsibilities" of the Reserve to offer the mosque community alternative premises to hold worship during the "repairs" or to guarantee the return of the mosque to the community once "repairs" are complete. She insisted these were issues for the State Committee.

Azadgil denied absolutely that a second Old City mosque had similarly been ordered closed on 25 July.

State Committee decision

District Administration official Karimov – who had been present for discussions at the Lezgin Mosque on 26 July - said it will be a decision for the State Committee as to the future use of the building once repairs are completed. "This is not within my power to decide," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 July. He insisted that the decision to undertake the repairs was the sole responsibility of the Reserve.

Karimov denied that the order to vacate the Mosque was sudden when Forum 18 noted that the 25 July police verbal order in a cafe was given with no notice. "They were told some years ago, with letters six months ago and three months ago." Asked why the District Police Deputy Head had been the official to tell the mosque community to vacate the building, he responded: "They are responsible for law and order."

An aide to Kazimov, the State Committee representative for Baku, refused to discuss with Forum 18 on 27 July his involvement in ousting the two communities from their Mosque. The aide referred all enquiries to the State Committee spokesperson.

No information on "repairs", no guarantees for worshippers

Bahrouz Muslimov, spokesperson for the State Committee, insisted too that the State Historical-Architectural Reserve was responsible for all decisions over the "repairs" of mosques in its territory. He told Forum 18 on 27 July that he had no information on whether the Lezgin Mosque community would be offered alternative accommodation for prayers while the "repairs" are underway, how long the "repairs" would last, and whether the same mosque community would be allowed to resume worship in their mosque once the "repairs" are complete.

Lezgin Mosque and worshippers under long-term pressure

The Lezgin Mosque has repeatedly come under great pressure from the authorities to close, including the July 2014 demand to leave the building because of alleged "renovation" (see F18News 11 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1984). In April 2015 the European Olympics were used to justify pressure to close the Mosque (see F18News 21 April 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2057).

Five men from the Lezgin Mosque congregation – including the Imam – were jailed as prisoners of conscience for periods of between six and 15 months in 2015, for exercising their freedom of religion and belief (see F18News 8 October 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2109).

In April and May 2016 police continued stopping Muslims praying in the yard around the Lezgin Mosque. The Sunni mosque is small and is often too full for all those wishing to attend Friday prayers to find space inside (see F18News 2 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2184). Such police obstruction of people coming to worship at the Mosque has long been frequent (see eg. F18News 28 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1962).

In June and July, up to the enforced closure of the Mosque, Colonel Humbatov came every Friday during prayers. "Some weeks he banned praying outside, some weeks not," Mustafa told Forum 18.

Karimov of Sabail District Administration defended the ban on praying around the Mosque. "They're not allowed to pray outside on the street." Asked why, given that the Mosque is too small for all the community members to pray inside during Friday prayers, he responded to Forum 18: "Tourists don't like it. Besides, it obstructs people from passing along the pavement."

In August 2008 a "temporary" ban on praying outside all mosques in the country was imposed, whose text has apparently never been

made public. It appears to remain in force throughout Azerbaijan (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690).

From 17 to 20 June 2016, the authorities closed both the Lezgin Mosque and the nearby Juma Mosque because Baku was hosting the Formula 1 motor race, human rights defender Elshan Hasanov told Forum 18 from Baku on 26 July. The prayer leader of the Juma Mosque told one Muslim privately that the head of the Muslim Board, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, had ordered him to close the Mosque "so that foreigners wouldn't find out that we hold Friday prayers".

Among Azerbaijan's other violations of Muslims' freedom of religion and belief has been the imposition of a Shia calendar on all Muslims (see F18News 31 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2183).

Shia mosques also closed and taken over

Shia mosques – like the newly closed mosque in Baku's Old City – have also been forcibly closed or taken over. Most recently at least four mosques in the village of Nardaran – the Rahima Hanum, Gulam Ali, Kichik and Aga mosques – because they did not have the compulsory state registration and were not subject to the state-backed Muslim Board.

Nardaran near Baku is known as a stronghold of Shia Islam, and mosques can open again for meetings for worship only if they submit to the Muslim Board and get registration with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (see F18News 26 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2142).

The Nardaran mosques were forcibly closed immediately after the November 2015 armed assault by the authorities on the village, during which at least seven people were killed, to suppress the Muslim Unity Movement and arrest its leader Taleh Bagirov. Asked if the Muslim Unity Movement had killed or proposed killing anyone, a Presidential Administration official replied to Forum 18 "No" (see F18News 1 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2127).

The imam of Nardaran's closed Rahima Hanum Mosque, Nuhbala Rahimov, was given an 18-month prison term on 27 May, apparently without a trial (see F18News 22 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2190).

Eight months on from the November 2015 police assault on Nardaran, villagers remain "intimidated", human rights defender Hasanov told Forum 18. "An undeclared state of emergency continues, with armed soldiers and police units patrolling. I wanted to take a photo of them but when they saw they grabbed me and ordered me to delete the photo."

Hasanov said army and police units stand outside each of Nardaran's mosques. "They change over every two hours and in full view of everyone." His early July visit to the village at the end of Ramadan made a "pitiful impression", he added. "Five or six people were in each house, in silence, and all were praying for the release of the prisoners."

Quba District: replacing window "Salafi activity", so only Friday prayers

In early July Eynulla Nurullayev, the regional representative of the State Committee, ordered the Mosque in the village of Digah in Quba Region to remain closed for all activity except Friday prayers. Most Muslims in the area are Sunni and follow Sufi practices, a local Muslim, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 from Quba Region on 27 July. The Muslim said many of the mosque attendees are young.

"Nurullayev was unhappy that the community had collected money and replaced an old wooden window with a new, plastic window," the Muslim told Forum 18. "He complained that the community was engaged in 'Salafi activity' because it had replaced the window." The Muslim regarded the complaint over the new window as an excuse to restrict the mosque's activity.

Nurullayev denied that he had ordered the mosque closed apart from at Friday prayers. "It's open day and night," he claimed to Forum 18 from Quba on 27 July. "Who says it's closed? That's absurd."

Asked about his comments after seeing the mosque's new window, Nurullayev responded: "We were simply looking at it. They need permission for any such work from the mosque owner, that's all. I'm not against the new window." He indicated that the mosque belongs not to the community but to the local administration.

Azerbaijan is hostile to anyone exercising their freedom of religion and belief, and other human rights, without state permission (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690).

Georgian Orthodox churches kept closed

The new parish priest for the two state-permitted Georgian Orthodox parishes in Gakh Region, Fr Petre Khumarashvili, was finally able to move to Azerbaijan to take up his service in late June, Georgians told Forum 18 on 27 July.

The Azerbaijani authorities imposed a sudden ban on 21 June 2015 without explanation on the previous parish priest, Fr Demetre Tetrushvili, from re-entering Azerbaijan from Georgia. This meant that the Sunday liturgy and other rites essential to the Orthodox faith could not be celebrated in Azerbaijan (see eg. F18News 8 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2097). The ban meant that no Christmas services and only limited Easter services were celebrated (see F18News 31 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2183).

Azerbaijan's Georgian Orthodox community – most of whom live in Gakh Region - have long struggled to be allowed to re-open places of worship forcibly closed in the Soviet period and provide clergy for them. Their parishes have faced repeated arbitrary state obstacles, including extra-legal bans on meeting for worship, as well as arbitrary bureaucratic obstacles to gaining the compulsory state registration to be allowed to exist. Only a limited number of churches have been allowed to re-open, often for highly restricted times (see eg. F18News 8 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2097).

Many belief communities have complained of arbitrary State Committee decisions and delays in dealing with re-registration applications required under 2009 changes to the Religion Law (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081.

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.

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at <http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Azerbaijan>.

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