

21 April 2015

AZERBAIJAN: Baku's pre-Olympic Mosque closure?

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

Mubariz Qurbanli, Head of Azerbaijan's State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, visited the Lezgin Sunni Mosque in Baku's Old City at evening prayers on Friday 17 April to tell them they had three days to vacate the building. Qurbanli connected the demand to the European Olympic Games, which begin on 12 June. "We want fewer believers", mosque members quoted him to Forum 18 News Service as telling them. "If you don't go within three days we'll remove you by other means". At a meeting the following day, Qurbanli did not repeat the demand to leave immediately, but "openly stated that they want the Mosque to be closed for the European Games", Mosque members told Forum 18. "He didn't want people to be at our Mosque during it, claiming that the sight of bearded men will frighten Europeans". Officials of the State Committee and the Old City Reserve failed to respond to Forum 18's questions as to why officials want the Mosque to close for the Games. Officials of the National Olympic Committee and the Baku 2015 European Games Organising Committee told Forum 18 they had "no knowledge" of such plans. The authorities have long targeted the Lezgin Mosque and other Sunni mosques for enforced closure.

Azerbaijan's senior government religious affairs official is demanding that a Sunni Mosque in Baku's historic Old City close down before the European Olympic Games, which begin on 12 June. Mubariz Qurbanli, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, told members of the Lezgin Mosque verbally that the authorities are unhappy with the numbers of worshippers who attend prayers. He added that the sight of bearded men in such a central Baku location is "not desirable" as it would frighten participants of the European Games, mosque members told Forum 18 News Service.

The Lezgin Mosque (also known as the Ashur Mosque) in Baku's Old City is one of many Sunni Muslim mosques the government seeks to close (see eg. F18News 18 November 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2016).

The Mosque was put under a police blockade during Friday prayers each week in May 2014, restricting the number of worshippers who could enter. The blockade lasted several months. One police officer also tried to pressure the community to close the Mosque each evening at 8 pm.

In July 2014, officials of Baku's Icherisheher (Old City) State Historical-Architectural Reserve told Mosque leaders verbally without prior warning that it would immediately have to close for renovation. However, the Reserve did not go ahead with the closure and renovation (see F18News 14 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1985).

The Mosque's imam, Mubariz Qarayev, was arrested in February 2015. He is one of five known Sunni Muslim prisoners of conscience in pre-trial detention at the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police facing criminal prosecution for selling uncensored religious literature. There are also other Muslim as well as Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 9 April 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2054). The criminal charges against Imam Qarayev and Azad Qafarov have recently been changed (see below).

In addition, several members of the Mosque have been sacked from their jobs in 2015.

"No knowledge", no answers

Forum 18 received no response by the end of the working day on 21 April to its written questions, submitted to the State Committee late on 17 April, as to why Qurbanli is seeking to close the Lezgin Mosque. The woman who answered the phone of Yaqt Aliyeva, the State Committee spokesperson, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself on 21 April. Subsequent calls were routed to a fax machine.

An aide to Kamal Abdullayev, the Presidential advisor on inter-ethnic, multicultural and religious affairs, told Forum 18 on 18 April that he is out of Azerbaijan on holiday until early May.

Narmin Azadgil, spokesperson for the Old City Reserve, did not respond by the end of the working day on 21 April to Forum 18's written questions sent late on 17 April. Her colleague Sona Bayramova failed to respond to similar questions sent on 21 April. The man who answered the phone of Old City Reserve deputy head Elchin Yusupov on 18 April told Forum 18 it was a wrong number.

On 21 April he asked Forum 18 to call back the following day.

An official of Azerbaijan's National Olympic Committee, who gave her name only as Halida, said that she had "no knowledge" of the demand to close the Lezgin Mosque. "Of course it's not a demand of our organisation", she told Forum 18 on 21 April. "I don't think it's true." Similarly, a spokesperson for the Baku 2015 European Games Organising Committee told Forum 18 the same day that "Baku 2015 has absolutely no knowledge of any such action".

The International Olympic Committee in the Swiss city of Lausanne referred Forum 18 to the European Olympics Committees (EOC) in the Italian capital Rome, which is sponsoring the Baku Games. However, the EOC had not responded by the end of the working day in Rome on 21 April.

The attempt to close the Lezgin Mosque before the European Games is part of an increasing state crackdown on people exercising human rights Azerbaijan's government has solemn international obligations to protect. This has led to the jailing as prisoners of conscience of many lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders and public figures the government dislikes, including Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses exercising their freedom of religion or belief. It also includes one conscientious objector to military service (see F18News 9 April 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2054).

"If you don't go within three days we'll remove you by other means"

Qurbanli of the State Committee visited the Lezgin Mosque late on 17 April, accompanied by Samir Nuriyev, head of the Old City Reserve, his deputy Yusupov, and several other officials, Mosque members told Forum 18 the same day. The officials arrived just before 5.30 pm, as afternoon prayers were underway.

Once prayers were over, Qurbanli demanded that the community vacate the building within three days as, he claimed, repairs on the mosque needed to begin. He promised that the community would be able to return to the building once repairs were complete. Asked where mosque members were expected to take the mosque property and continue their prayers while the Lezgin Mosque was closed, Qurbanli reportedly told them: "We won't give you anywhere. Go to other mosques".

Qurbanli connected the demand to vacate the building to the European Games. "We want fewer believers", mosque members quoted him to Forum 18 as telling them. "If you don't go within three days we'll remove you by other means."

Faiq Mustafa, the chair of the community who was present, then asked Qurbanli for a copy of his demand in writing. However, Qurbanli refused. He then invited mosque representatives to a meeting at his office the following day, a Saturday.

"They want the Mosque closed for the European Games"

At the Saturday meeting at the State Committee, Mustafa and another Mosque member again met Qurbanli, who was accompanied by his assistant, Amil Javadov, and another State Committee official. Mosque members told Forum 18 this was a "better conversation". They say this time Qurbanli did not repeat the demand of the previous day that the community vacate the Mosque within three days.

However, Mosque members pointed to Qurbanli's continuing "absurd" demands. His first option was that the Mosque would close immediately for repairs. "We rejected this, as we fear our Mosque would never reopen", they told Forum 18. His second option was for the Mosque to close for the duration of the European Games, which last from 12 to 28 June. "We don't want that either", Mosque members added.

"Qurbanli openly stated that they want the Mosque to be closed for the European Games", Mosque members told Forum 18. "He didn't want people to be at our Mosque during it, claiming that the sight of bearded men will frighten Europeans who consider it undesirable".

Mosque chair Mustafa then reluctantly offered a compromise. The Mosque would hold the first prayers at about 5 am and the last prayers at about 11 pm each day during the Games, and forego all other prayers for that period. "State Committee officials responded that they could not themselves decide – the decision will be taken elsewhere", Mosque members told Forum 18.

Although they welcomed the withdrawal of the demand to vacate the Mosque immediately and the fact that other proposals "are now on the agenda", Mosque members remain concerned about what could be the loss of their place of worship. "The issue was left to a further meeting." The Mosque community has received no document with the State Committee's demands.

Complaints over too many worshippers and beards

During the meeting, Qurbanli also told Mosque representatives of his concern over the numbers of worshippers at the Lezgin Mosque. "They're mainly concerned about how many people are in the Mosque. Qurbanli demanded that no more than 50 worshippers should be in the Mosque", Mustafa told Forum 18 after the meeting. "I told him we can't ban people from coming in for

prayers. He responded that you have to control this."

Qurbanli also complained that many Mosque attendees wear beards. "He asked that men up to the age of 60 or so should not have beards", Mosque members told Forum 18.

Azerbaijani officials have often demonstrated concern about men with beards (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690).

Muslim men in various parts of the country have repeatedly complained that police have forcibly shaved off their beards, as happened in Zakatala [Zaqatala] in early 2014 and Sabirabad later that year. After the Sabirabad incident, even the head of the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, condemned "the very serious mistake", adding that the person responsible "should be punished for their arbitrary action", according to July 2014 press reports.

After police raided a Sunni Muslim prayer room in a private home in Sumgait [Sumqayit] in November 2014 (for which the owner Zohrab Shikhaliyev was imprisoned), officers similarly demanded that the men they detained shave off their beards. The men refused to do so (see F18News 18 November 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2016).

State Committee officials told the Lezgin Mosque representatives that the community would get re-registration (which it has never had since the State Committee was established in 2001) if it agrees to "work closely" with it. This would entail limiting the number of attendees and making sure that young male attendees do not wear beards.

Criminal charges amended

Lezgin Mosque Imam Qarayev, who is 40, and three other Sunni Muslims – Habibullah Omarov, Salim Qasimov and Eyvaz Mammadov – were arrested on 24 February. Another Sunni Muslim Azad Qafarov was arrested on 26 February. They were accused of running shops in Baku's Narimanov District selling uncensored religious books and other items. All four prisoners of conscience were ordered held in pre-trial detention for three months while the criminal investigation continues (see F18News 16 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2048).

Imam Qarayev, Qasimov and Mammadov are being investigated under Criminal Code Article 167-2.1. This punishes: "Production, sale and distribution of religious literature, religious items and other informational materials of religious nature with the aim of import, sale and distribution without appropriate authorisation". Punishments for first time offenders acting alone are a fine or up to two years' imprisonment.

Initially the other two, Omarov and Qafarov, were being investigated under Criminal Code Article 167-2.2.1. This punishes: "Production, sale and distribution of religious literature, religious items and other informational materials of religious nature with the aim of import, sale and distribution without appropriate authorisation" when conducted by an "organised group". Punishment is a fine or imprisonment of two to five years. NSM Investigator Samir Aliyev is leading the case against the two.

However, the criminal charges against Omarov and Qafarov have now been amended to the same Criminal Code Article 167-2.1 the other three imprisoned Sunni prisoners of conscience are facing. This carries lesser penalties than the original accusation, their friends told Forum 18 from Baku on 18 April.

The men are expected to be eventually tried individually at Baku's Narimanov District Court, as their shops are (or were) located in that District, their friends told Forum 18.

Eight secret police prisoners of conscience

The five Sunni Muslims are among eight known prisoners of conscience currently being held for exercising their freedom of religion or belief at the NSM secret police Investigation Prison in Baku. The others are two female Jehovah's Witnesses arrested on 17 February – Valida Jabrayilova and Irina Zakharchenko – and Shia Muslim theologian and translator Jeyhun Jafarov, arrested on 10 March (see F18News 9 April 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2054).

The NSM secret police Investigation Prison in Baku – where all eight of these prisoners of conscience are being held – is on the upper floor of the main NSM building in Baku. The address is:

Milli Təhlükəsizlik Nazirliyinin

Istintaq Təcridxanası

Parlament Prospekti 14

Baku AZ-1006

Azerbaijan

Appeal against harsh prison transfer postponed

Meanwhile, another imprisoned Muslim prisoner of conscience, Shia preacher Taleh Bagirov (also known as Bagirzade), has failed in his challenge to the decision to transfer him in December 2014 to a harsher prison.

Bagirov, who is 30, was arrested in May 2013. He was given a two-year strict regime prison sentence in November 2013 on charges his supporters insist were fabricated. At a further trial in August 2014, a Baku court sentenced him to an extra four months' imprisonment for allegedly having an illegal mobile phone in his cell. He then spent five weeks in the punishment cells (see F18News 18 November 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2016).

However on 28 November 2014, Baku's Qaradag District Court ordered Bagirov's transfer to a harsher prison regime. In December 2014, even before the decision had come into force, Bagirov was transferred from Labour Camp No. 12 in the village of Puta – an ordinary regime camp. He was sent instead to the harsher Qobustan Prison, along the coast to the south-west of Baku, where prisoners are held in isolation, his lawyer Javad Javadov complained to Caucasian Knot news website on 11 April 2015.

Javadov appealed on Bagirov's behalf to Baku Appeal Court against the transfer to a harsher prison. However, after hearings on 10 and 17 April, Judge Aflatun Qasimov suspended consideration of the appeal, according to the court website. The Judge rejected Javadov's motion to have a full court re-examination of the evidence allegedly justifying the transfer, Caucasian Knot noted.

Bagirov's prison address is:

Qobustan qasabasi

Qaradag rayonu

Baku AZ-1080

Azerbaijan

"Illegal" mosque uncovered

Also in Qobustan, officials of the State Committee and the 11th Police Station of Qaradag District raided what they described as an "illegal" mosque in mid-April, the Qafqazinfo news agency noted on 21 April. The Ashiq Rza Mosque had been founded and led by a 25-year-old local resident Asif Narimanov. An investigation against him continues. If brought to court, he could face a large fine to punish him for exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief. (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>.

See also the Norwegian Helsinki Committee/Forum 18 report on freedom of religion or belief in Azerbaijan at http://www.nhc.no/content/uploads/2018/07/Rapport2_15_Aserbajdsjan_web.pdf

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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