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AZERBAIJAN: Muslim Nursi texts, Old Testament, and Jehovah's Witness texts "banned"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Members of several religious communities in Azerbaijan have expressed concern to Forum 18 News Service over a list of "banned" books, which may be used to confiscate books in raids. Most of the banned books are Islamic texts such as those by theologian Said Nursi, but the list also includes the Old Testament and Jehovah's Witness texts. The list was apparently compiled by police based on State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations "expert analyses", but is not so far known to have been published officially. Police have long confiscated texts named on the list as well as others during raids on private homes and meetings of people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. "We need to pray to God for wisdom as to how to respond to this ban on the Holy Scriptures in Azerbaijan", one Protestant noted. Azerbaijan has long imposed tight censorship on all religious literature and items, and the State Committee seems to be delaying permission for the Baptist Union to print New Testaments.

Members of several religious communities in Azerbaijan have expressed concern to Forum 18 News Service over texts included in a list of banned books. The list includes "Holy Book – Old Testament", and as with other items on the list gives no details of the edition or language concerned, apart from in some cases a named author. It also includes the 14-volume Risale-i Nur (Messages of Light) collection of writings by the late Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi, as well as two Jehovah's Witness publications, including their magazine "Watchtower" (which appears twice).

"Some of the most radical and dangerous banned religious books"

The list of what Baku-based APA news agency described as "some of the most radical and dangerous banned religious books" was published by them on 5 May, three days after President Ilham Aliyev abruptly dismissed Elshad Iskenderov. He had been Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations since 2012 (see below).

The list – apparently compiled by police based on State Committee "expert analyses" - is not so far known to have been published by any state agency. However, members of several religious communities told Forum 18 that even if the list is not an official list provided by the State Committee directly, it might be used by police to seize further copies of religious publications from individuals' homes.

The State Committee itself in 2013 claimed it would publish a list of banned books, but has not yet done so (see below).

"Illegal" books confiscated

Numerous copies of works by Nursi have been frequently confiscated as "illegal" in raids on meetings or homes of Muslims who read his works. The most recent known raids and confiscations have been in Baku, Goychay and Qazakh in April. At least 11 people have been fined and two men remain in National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police custody under investigation on criminal charges (see F18News 28 April 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1952).

Protestant literature, including personal Bibles, and Jehovah's Witness literature is also frequently confiscated as "illegal" in police raids on private homes (see eg. F18News 12 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1906).

What is on "banned" list?

Of the 28 works on the "banned" list supplied to APA, most are given with titles only, though some also have a named author. No publication details are given for any of them. The list does not appear to include all texts confiscated by police, and may not be the only such list in existence.

Most texts on the list are Muslim, including for example Nursi's Risale-i Nur. "Judging by the titles of others they are Shiite and relate to its religious ideology and history", one Muslim told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 May. "Some of them express hatred of Wahhabism/Salafism. One – entitled "The consequences of Jewish evil" – appears to be an antisemitic text."

As well as the "Holy Book – Old Testament", the list also includes two Jehovah's Witness publications. One – their monthly magazine "Watchtower" – appears twice in the list, once under its title and once under its subtitle. The other work is the Azeri translation of the booklet "Who are doing Jehovah's will today?".

Concern and outrage over Old Testament "ban"

The Baku Muslim expressed surprise and concern to Forum 18 at the inclusion of the Old Testament. Christians from a variety of churches – including Pastor Ilya Zenchenko of the Baptist Union - have also expressed concern and outrage to Forum 18 over the inclusion of the Azeri-language translation of the Old Testament in the "banned" list.

One Christian pointed out to Forum 18 that some local Jews also use this Azeri language Old Testament as the Azeri translation of their Bible.

"We need to pray to God for wisdom as to how to respond to this ban on the Holy Scriptures in Azerbaijan," one Protestant noted. "It could be a mistake, a lack of attention by officials and irresponsible attitude to Sacred Scripture. Or it could be an intentional act."

Tight censorship

Azerbaijan has long imposed tight censorship on all religious literature and items produced in Azerbaijan or imported into the country, and such items have long been confiscated in raids on private homes as "illegal". Both the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offences provide punishments for "illegal" distribution of religious literature (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690).

Orhan Mansurzade, Head of the Information Department of the Interior Ministry in Baku, which oversees the police, refused to discuss why police raid private homes and seize religious literature. "Everything is done in accordance with the law," he claimed to Forum 18 on 6 May. "The reasons are explained in the statements we put on our website in individual cases."

Told that police statements on the confiscation of religious literature in such raids merely state that the literature is confiscated without providing any basis for this action, Mansurzade told Forum 18: "Ask the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations – it's within their competence." He then put the phone down.

State Committee officials are normally reluctant to provide any legal basis for their actions, including participation in raids, which routinely violate Azerbaijan's international human rights obligations (see eg. F18News 13 June 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1579).

"Bans" disputed

Several religious communities told Forum 18 that they had contacted the State Committee after the 5 May APA publication of the "banned" list. State Committee officials told them adamantly that the list was "false" and did not come from them. Pastor Zenchenko, one of those who approached the State Committee over the Old Testament "ban", asked officials to put this in writing. "They told me they could do nothing until a new Head is appointed," he told Forum 18.

Muslim readers of Nursi's works – who have faced repeated raids and confiscations of their literature over many years – point out that as recently as December 2013, the State Committee wrote to one of them indicating that it did not regard Nursi's Risale-i Nur collection of writings as dangerous or extremist.

The remarks came in a 19 December 2013 State Committee "expert analysis" of confiscated Nursi materials sent on by State Committee Deputy Chair Gunduz Ismayilov on 23 December 2013 and seen by Forum 18. "So his writings are not banned," one Nursi reader who has seen these documents insisted to Forum 18 from Baku on 6 May. "And even if it was I'd carry on reading them."

But despite this, the Risale-i Nur is routinely confiscated by police in raids (see eg. F18News 28 April 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1952).

Similarly, Jehovah's Witnesses pointed out to Forum 18 that while the State Committee has refused permission to import some copies of the "Watchtower", it approved the import of other issues of the magazine.

In 2011 a Baku court overturned an arbitrary State Committee ban on the magazine's import, but this ruling was itself subsequently overturned (see F18News 25 April 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1693).

New Testament request stalled for five months

On 26 November 2013, in a letter seen by Forum 18, Pastor Zenchenko of the Baptist Union wrote to then State Committee chair Iskenderov asking for permission to print 3,000 copies of the Azeri-language New Testament.

"The State Committee has repeatedly refused to reply to this request in writing, despite our numerous requests," Pastor Zenchenko complained to Forum 18 on 6 May. "Verbally the Head of the Expert Analysis Department and the Head of the State Committee's Department for Baku insisted to me several times to write a new request, putting 1,000 rather than 3,000 as the quantity."

Pastor Zenchenko said he had refused to change and resubmit the request, as he saw nothing wrong with the original request. He also pointed out that if he resubmitted the request with a new date, that would give the State Committee an excuse to delay any response even further. "So more than five months have gone with no written response. They refuse to work competently with religious communities."

Each time Forum 18 reached the "Expert Analysis" Department at the State Committee on 6 May, the official who answered it put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began to introduce itself.

The telephone of the State Committee's official for Baku, Nizami Huseynov, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 6 May.

It has for many years been difficult to import shipments of the New Testament and other religious texts (see eg. F18News 6 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=295). This leads to many religious communities wanting to print texts, but the censorship regime makes it very difficult to obtain permission for this (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690).

Information "from police"

Hafiz Heydarov, the APA journalist who published the list, told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 May that the list was provided by the police. They had compiled it based on religious publications they have confiscated on the basis of assessments by the State Committee.

Late on 5 May, Forum 18 asked Orhan Ali, spokesperson for the State Committee, in writing whether the "banned" list was compiled with information from the State Committee and whether it includes all the religious books the government has banned. Forum 18 also asked for clarification as to whether the Old Testament of the Christian Bible is indeed the item specified on the list. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Baku on 6 May.

On 21 April, Forum 18 had also asked spokesperson Ali: "Are writings by Said Nursi (including Risale-i Nur) banned in Azerbaijan? If so, who banned them and when?" He has also not replied to that question (see F18News 28 April 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1952). The State Committee and other state bodies have repeatedly refused to say if Nursi's works are banned and, if so, which agency took the decision, when and why (see F18News 30 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1686).

State Committee list not published

State Committee officials have repeatedly stated that they have a list of banned books, but have repeatedly declined to make it public. Forum 18 has been seeking – in vain – a copy of the list of religious books the State Committee has refused to give permission for (see F18News 22 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1651).

Then State Committee Head Iskenderov said in April 2013 that the State Committee was preparing to publish "soon" a list of religious publications it has banned. Spokesperson Ali told Forum 18 later that month that it was still not possible to supply the list. "Work in this direction is currently in progress. This will be announced in the near future" (see F18News 2 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1830).

Despite these claims, the State Committee has not yet published any list.

State Committee Head fired

Few people appear to be surprised by the abrupt sacking on 2 May of Iskenderov as Head of the State Committee. The local press had claimed his name was second on a list of adherents of the Pennsylvania-based Turkish imam Fethullah Gulen among senior Azerbaijani officials. The list was reportedly handed over to Azerbaijan's President Aliyev by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan during his 4 April visit to Baku. (Erdogan is involved in a struggle against alleged Gulenists and others he thinks oppose his rule in Turkey.)

Unusually, the 2 May presidential decree sacking Iskenderov said nothing about any future work that would be offered him and no accompanying decree named any successor as Head of the State Committee.

Iskenderov, whose father was a senior member of Azerbaijan's branch of the KGB secret police in the late Soviet period, was himself taken on by the NSM secret police in the early 1990s, a 27 April article on haqqin.az claimed. After working in the diplomatic service Iskenderov was appointed to head the State Committee in May 2012.

Members of various religious communities told Forum 18 privately that they are not unhappy to see him removed from his job. They say he did little to help protect religious freedom.

In a 19 April letter to President Aliyev, Baku's Baptist community had complained about how little it believed Iskenderov had done to support their rights. "It is notable that the Chairman devotes more energy to international contacts and meetings than to ensure competent work by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations of our country," the letter, seen by Forum 18, complained. "Since his appointment as new Chairman, numerous attempts to meet him were unsuccessful." The Baptists also complained in the letter that the State Committee has failed to respond to the Baptist's November 2013 request for permission to print copies of the New Testament (see above).

The State Committee has also refused to re-register any Baptist congregation since major changes were made to the Religion Law in 2009. Many other religious communities have similarly had re-registration applications rejected or ignored – see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690.)

Baku's Baptist community also complained that the State Committee had failed to take any action to help the Church recover its 19th century-built church in central Baku, confiscated during the Soviet period.

Under a 28 February 2014 presidential decree, President Aliyev appointed Kamal Abdullayev as an advisor on "inter-ethnic, multicultural and religious affairs", based in the Presidential Administration. Abdullayev is from an academic background and had headed the Baku Slavic University since 2000.

It has been rumoured in Baku that the State Committee will be moved from the control of the government as a whole to the control of the Presidential Administration, to be overseen by Abdullayev. Forum 18 was unable to reach Abdullayev on 6 May to find out if this is due to happen. (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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