

2 December 2004

AZERBAIJAN: Police disperse and harass academic religion researchers

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

Azeri authorities have repeatedly broken up meetings of a local academic research group investigating the state of religious freedom across the country, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Project leader Hikmet Hajizade told Forum 18 that "we wanted about eight people in each group, but even such a small group was not allowed to meet – the police often drove us out of town." Police told FAR Centre researcher Haji Hajili that "they had received instructions to drive us out and said it would be better if we left peacefully of our own accord." The researchers faced such problems as the cancellation of premises' availability, police breaking up meetings, obtrusive eavesdropping by police informers, widespread fear of the authorities' reaction amongst local participants, police surveillance of participants' homes, some Muslim participants accusing researchers of working with "enemies of Islam" and then calling police to meetings, as well as threatening other participants.

Azeri authorities have repeatedly obstructed a local research group engaged in a project to measure the state of religious freedom in Azerbaijan, project leaders told Forum 18 News Service in the capital Baku. "We have faced serious official obstruction to our work, although we are conducting purely academic research," project leader Hikmet Hajizade told Forum 18 at the offices of the Baku-based FAR Centre on 25 November. He said police in different towns across the country stopped people gathering for focus groups and participants often backed out citing fear of retaliation from the authorities. "We wanted about eight people in each group, but even such a small group was not allowed to meet – the police often drove us out of town."

The research on the state of religion and relations between religion and the state in Azerbaijan in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States is being conducted by the FAR Centre under a grant from the US-based National Endowment for Democracy. The project began this summer with focus groups made up of local religious leaders and non-governmental group activists in Baku and in other towns across the country, to be followed up by a public opinion survey with 1,000 respondents and finishing with scholarly conferences on the state of religious freedom.

Haji Hajili, a FAR Centre researcher who led many of the focus groups, told Forum 18 that his centre wanted the authorities to know about the project and the way it was proceeding. "Each time they gave verbal permission, but when we began to discuss the religious situation the police arrived," he reported. "They told us unofficially they had received instructions to drive us out and said it would be better if we left peacefully of our own accord. The government is very sensitive on religious questions."

He insists their survey questions are "normal, simple enquiries", such as how many members there are in a participant's religious community, whether the authorities intervene in communities' religious life, how believers regard other faiths and how local people regard them. Hajili told Forum 18 that many respondents were often afraid to respond openly even to such apparently innocuous questions.

Hajili pointed out that research was not too difficult in Baku, but was obstructed almost everywhere else. He believes the real power on the ground in the regions is the local executive authority, and it was these leaders who organised the breaking up of focus groups in their towns.

As Hajizade and Hajili told Forum 18, problems began with the first focus group meetings outside Baku, held in July in central Azerbaijan in the second city Gyanja [Gänca], as well as Shamkir [Simkir], Tovuz and Kazakh [Qazax]. When the eight focus group members arrived with the moderator at the House of Culture in Kazakh on 21 July as arranged, an employee of the venue informed them that only the day before the local authorities had instructed the House of Culture not to make its premises available.

Participants then decided to talk in a nearby teahouse in a park. "However, it soon became clear that participants' words were being listened to by people nearby who had quietly sat themselves as close as they could to our table," survey organisers reported. Of the three apparent eavesdroppers, one participant recognised one as a well-known local informer for the authorities. When the moderator remarked to them that it was not polite to listen to other people's conversation, the eavesdroppers responded that they were interested in what was going on. "It became clear that the local authorities were interested in the identity of the focus group participants and the theme of the discussion." Participants then decided to cancel the focus group meeting and resume elsewhere.

When the group reconvened in the chess school in the nearby town of Shamkir, several participants refused to attend further, fearing retaliation from the authorities, Hajili told Forum 18. The rump focus group was in mid-discussion when the director of the chess school told them that the authorities had demanded that he should immediately halt the meeting. Organisers were forced to meet individual participants privately.

Even at this early stage of the research, FAR organisers noticed that participants were afraid to speak freely and responded with terse answers. "It was obvious that they were afraid." Some even believed it was a trap devised by the authorities. "They all demanded that the content of the meetings and their names be kept confidential." Participants later told the researchers that on their return home they were immediately subjected to police surveillance.

Between August and October focus groups were due to take place in northern Azerbaijan, but with even less success. "Despite our approaches to the executive authorities of four northern regions – Balakan , Zakatala [Zaqatala], Oguz and Sheki [Saki] – not even in one of them were we given permission to hold meetings with representatives of religious communities and other interested individuals," the organisers report sadly. "Therefore, as on previous occasions we had to work without official permission." Organisers were finally able to hold meetings in the local administration building in one village in Sheki region, though the administration leader asked the organisers to keep the meeting secret. "The representatives of the clergy present at the meeting refused point-blank to give their names, citing the unfriendly attitude towards them of the law-enforcement and state security agencies." (For an example of the local authorities' hostile attitude see F18News 1 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=466).

When the focus group attempted to meet to discuss attitudes to religious freedom among participants in the town of Ali-Bairamali [Ali Bayramli] in south eastern Azerbaijan, Muslim participants accused FAR Centre organisers of working with "enemies of Islam" and threatened to call the police. Twenty minutes later the police duly appeared outside the Shirvan human rights resource centre where the meeting was taking place. A man in civilian clothes came into the room and ordered the organisers to leave the town immediately. "The frightened participants dispersed." When the meeting was reconvened a week later, the police gave verbal approval, but begged the organisers not to inform the "official organs". Participants again gave terse answers to survey questions, apparently fearing official retaliation. NGO participants reported that they received threats from local supporters of an Islamic state in Azerbaijan.

Few religious believers or human rights activists were surprised to learn of the problems the survey organisers had encountered, telling Forum 18 in late November that the very subject of religion was so sensitive that any investigation into it, even on an academic level, would be obstructed. While agreeing with this, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, the imam of the Muslim community forcibly ousted in June by the police from Baku's Juma mosque (see F18News 2 July 2004

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=354), pointed to the researchers' affiliation with the opposition Musavat party as a further reason why the authorities might be obstructing their survey. "Even if Hikmet Hajizade went out onto the street to play rock and roll he would have problems from the authorities," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 in Baku on 24 November. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY