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Religious Dialogue in Azerbaijan

(Bonn, 20.09.2016) Christine and Thomas Schirmmacher have paid a visit to the ministry of religious affairs in Azerbaijan as well as to government organizations having to do with the areas of religion and culture. Additionally, they visited the leaders of the different Muslim confessions as well as leaders of the Jewish community and the leadership of the officially recognized denominations within the



country (Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran), all in an effort to construct a picture of the situation relating to religious freedom and the status of the dialogue conducted between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Besides that, they also met with the chairpersons of the most important human rights organizations in the country.

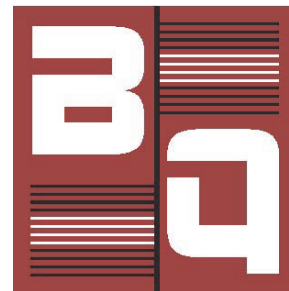
The ministry of religious affairs [“State Committee for Work with Religious Associations” (SCWRA)] oversees all religions in the country. However, it oversees organized Islam in particular. The chairman is Mubariz Gurbanli. His deputy, Siyavush Haydarov, organized the discussion.

The government’s multicultural institute [Baku International Multiculturalism Centre] was represented by its heads, Dr. Ayten Gahraman and Neriman Qasimzade. The Institute is meant to promote the linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity of the country and the - alleged - individual development of the many ethnic groups.

The Institute is also responsible for the close to one million refugees from Armenian occupied Nagorno Karabakh, about which the visiting experts from Germany became thoroughly informed.

Included in the visit with the leader of official Islam was a conversation with the Islamic Religious Council of the Caucasus, which is responsible for all of Caucasus, and a comprehensive visit of its library of historic hand-written documents as well as a viewing of the Taza Pir Mosque.

Sheik Allahşükür Paşazadə, the Grand Mufti in Caucasus and Chairman of the “Religious Council of the Caucasus,” himself a Shiite, is the only grand mufti in the world who speaks at the same time for both Sunnis and Shiites. Azerbaijan is also the



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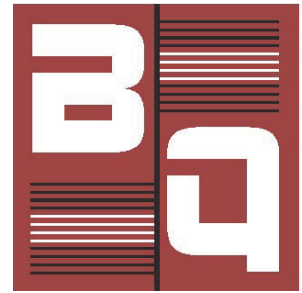
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only country on earth in which Sunni and Shiite Muslims jointly offer prayers in the same mosques, even if it was originally due to state pressure.

Among the participating board members of the “Caucasus Muslim Board” were the Vice President Dr. Kamer A. Javadli, Shimran Hasanov, and the Vice President, who explained the Islamic educational system in the country in detail.

Christine and Thomas Schirrmacher later also met with Mrs. Prof. Antiga Gurbanova, who out of protest against the increasing Islamization had left the Islamic university she founded and has become one of the most important women’s rights activists in the country.

They also met the head of the underground Shiites, officially the Chairman of the Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion (DEVAMM), Ilgar Ibragimoglu, in private surroundings. He is called the “Muqtada as-Sadr of Azerbaijan.” “Muqtada al-Sadr . . . (* 12. August 1973 in Iraq) is a radical Iraqi cleric, militia leader, and Shiite politician whose forces fought against US and Iraqi troops from 2004 to 2008” (Wikipedia, August 5, 2016).

“The predominant religion is Shiite Islam, which spread in the 8th century through Arab conquerors. In addition to Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, Azerbaijan is one of the few countries with a majority Shiite population. 85% of Muslim Azerbaijanis profess to be Shiite and 15% Sunni. Many Azerbaijanis were secularized during Soviet rule. For that reason, only about 10% of the people label themselves as regularly practicing Muslims. Most Azerbaijanis only practice Islam on the high holidays such as Ramadan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam experienced a rebirth. More and more people again turned to Islam. Particularly in the south of the country, one finds that there has been an orthodox form of Islam which has emerged over a number of years due to Iranian influence. Already in 1991, the first political organizations with Islamic character were founded in Azerbaijan. These include the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani Party of Islamic Progress, and the Azad Ruhaniler organization. Subsequent thereto, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani Party of Islamic Progress, and other Islamic parties and organizations were forbidden in 1995 under the updated laws of Azerbaijan; the founding (and the re-establishment) of religious parties is now legally forbidden” (Wikipedia, August 5, 2016).



In front of the Taza Pir Mosque of the “Religious Council of the Caucasus”

The Chairman of the “Religious Community of Mountain Jews of Azerbaijan,” Rabbi Yevdayev Milikh Ilhanonovich, led the German subject matter experts through the synagogue built in 2003 in Baku. He reported that Jews in Baku can go out walking in

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traditional clothing without there ever being a problem. In addition to the so-called 'mountain Jews,' there are Ashkenazi Jews of European descent in Azerbaijan as well as Georgians who have converted to Judaism. It is estimated that the total number of Jews in the country is 25,000 to 30,000.

Finally, the experts also viewed Ateschgah. Ateschgah is a *Zoroastrian* fire temple near the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, in which Hindu pilgrims also worshiped fire. Gas

streams from the earth at this point, and it continually burns on its own. This used to be seen as a divine miracle.

The Russian Orthodox Archbishop of Baku and the Azerbaijani Eparchy Alexander Ischein has his official seat next to the cathedral. The Archpriest Mefodiy Afandiyev, Secretary of the office of the diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church in Baku and Azerbaijan, gave Christine and Thomas Schirmmacher a comprehensive insight into the



(from left) Saadat Benanyarly, Rabbi Yevdayev Milikh Ilhanonovich, Thomas Schirmmacher in the Baku synagogue

situation facing the church in the country, which included a tour through the Russian Orthodox cathedral. It was built in 1909, but it was closed in 1920 and destroyed in 1991 by Russian shelling. Thanks to donations by an Azeri Russian businessman, the cathedral was rebuilt in 2000 and dedicated in 2001 by Patriarch Alexius II as the bishop's church since the famous Alexander Newski Cathedral was blown up by the Soviets. In 1998, 3.8% of the population professed to being Russian Orthodox; there is no data available which is more recent.

There are an estimated 7,000 Protestants and 400 Catholics, and in addition there are 1,200 Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition to a visit to the leader of Catholic congregation, Fr. Jozef Cerkov, in the so-called Pro-Cathedral of the Apostolic Prefecture in Azerbaijan, worship services and a visit to the congregation of the Evangelical-Lutheran Redeemer Church were also included in the program of activities. Pastor Vera Nesterova is responsible for the Russian worship services, and Pastor Manzar Ismayilova is responsible for the worship services in Azeri. Worship services take place in the imposing Redeemer Church, which belongs to the state, in return for a rental payment.

In addition to mentioning the official churches, the website of the Ministry of Religion mentions Baptists, Adventists, two small Orthodox groups, and additional very small groups.

Azerbaijan is ranked at position 38 on the 2013 World Watch List persecution index produced by the aid organization Open Doors, which follows where Christians are persecuted most. "The Azerbaijani Constitution formally guarantees all religious communities religious freedom. However, all religious communities have to register.

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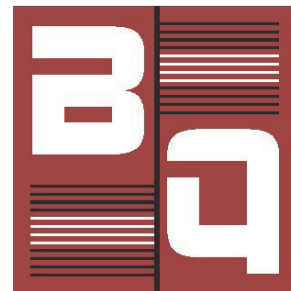
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Non-registered Christian churches are therefore illegal. The production or importation of Bibles and the sale of Bibles without expressed state permission are all considered acts of crime. The activities of Christian churches are often observed and controlled by the state committee for religious affairs or by the secret police. In May 2009 a new law regarding religion became effective, and there were amendments made to the associated administrative and penal laws. Religious communities not registered by January 2010 were no longer accepted” (Wikipedia, August 6, 2016).

In the 1990s, all Christians counted as a sort of fifth column of Armenia and for that reason were viewed as suspicious by the state as well as by the majority population and were discriminated against. This has essentially changed under the present-day president, as is consistently reported by all denominations. Local Christians are no longer being linked with the conflict in Armenia.



At the Lutheran Holy Communion in the Redeemer Church in Baku

Russia is basically on the side of the likewise ‘Christian’ Armenians in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and is keeping the conflict simmering. At the same time, Russia has been delivering weapons to both sides. Russia does not want to lose its influence over what used to be the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.

Human Rights Organizations

The discussion with leaders of most human rights organizations in the country, which lasted several hours, included the following:

- Dr. Saadat Benanyarly, President of the ISHR in Azerbaijan,
- Novella Jafarova-Appelbaum (Chairman of the Association for the Protection of Women’s Rights in Azerbaijan after D. Aliyeva),
- Eldar Zeynalov (Azerbaijan Human Rights Center, AHRC),
- Zaliha Tahirova (Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan),
- Avaz Hasanov (National Coordinator of the Azerbaijani National Platform of the Civil Society Forum Eastern Partnership),
- Alimammad Nuriyev (President of the “Constitution” Research Foundation),
- Sahib Mammadov (Chairman of the Citizens’ Labour Rights Protection League),

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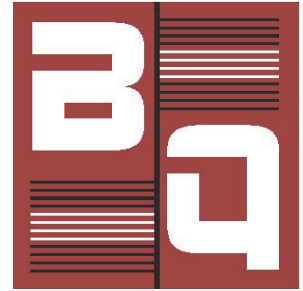
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- Saida Godjamanli (Bureau of Human Rights and Law Respect),
- Avaz Qasanov (Chairman of the Humanitarian Research Public Union).

Most human rights organizations originated in the later years of the Soviet Union when it was first possible to address human rights violations in a more organized manner.

Lawyers from the organizations reported at length on the conditions in the prisons, as they have the right to inspect any prison in the country at any time.

A particular topic had to do with 15 current political prisoners whom international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been making efforts to help. According to concurring statements by the assembled human rights organizations, it is almost exclusively a question of dangerous Islamists.

Downloads and Links:

- <http://www.scwra.gov.az>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mubariz_Gurbanli
- [Photo 1](#): Discussions in the ministry of religious affairs [“State Committee for Work with Religious Associations” (SCWRA)]
- [Photo 2](#): In the ministry of religious affairs (from the left): Saadat Benanyarly, Christine and Thomas Schirmmacher, Minister Siyavush Haydarov
- [Photo 3](#): In discussion with the Chairman of the Islamic “Religious Council of the Caucasus”
- [Photo 4](#): In discussion with Rashad Aliyarli of the “Religious Council of the Caucasus” before the Taza Pir Mosque
- [Photo 5](#): In front of the Taza Pir Mosque of the “Religious Council of the Caucasus”
- [Photo 6](#): Discussions in the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre
- [Photo 7](#): The Baku synagogue
- [Photo 8](#): (from left) Saadat Benanyarly, Rabbi Yevdayev Milikh Ilhanonovich, Thomas Schirmmacher in the Baku synagogue
- [Photo 9](#): The Catholic Church of Baku
- [Photo 10](#): In discussion with the Catholic Priest Fr. Jozef Cerkov
- [Photo 11](#): In front of the Orthodox Cathedral in Baku
- [Photo 12](#): The interior of the Orthodox Cathedral of Baku
- [Photo 13](#): The Evangelical Redeemer Church in Baku
- [Photo 14](#): At the Lutheran Holy Communion in the Redeemer Church in Baku

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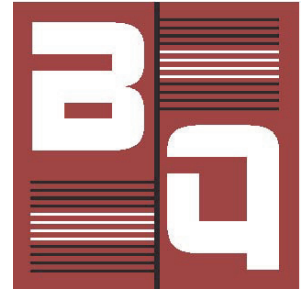
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- [Photo 15](#): In the community center of the Lutheran congregation in Baku
- [Photo 16](#): In discussion with the Lutheran Pastor Vera Nesterova
- [Photo 17](#): The two Lutheran clerics in Baku, Vera Nesterova and Manzar Ismayilova
- [Photo 18](#): Zoroastrian fire temple of Ateschgah

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