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**OP-ED** | Center for American Values

# U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM HIGHLIGHTS AZERBAIJAN AS TOP VIOLATOR

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Persecution is on the rise around the world. Religious minorities continue to be the target of growing violence and pressure from governments, culture, and civil society organizations. The recent [annual report released by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom \(USCIRF\)](#) stands as a measure of accountability for those who seek to use their power to suppress people of faith. While the Commission makes recommendations to the Department of State, the public nature of the report creates an opportunity for international and public scrutiny. The bipartisan commission established by the United States Congress continues to shine a light on the worst oppressors of religious minorities and recommend which countries should be designated Countries of Particular Concern or be placed on the Special Watch List.

The report rightly shines a light on the ongoing religious freedom violations in countries like China, Russia, and North Korea, which have a long history of heinous oppression of religious groups ranging across the religious spectrum.

Significantly, among this year's commendable developments was to recommend the designation of Azerbaijan as a Country of Particular Concern (an upgrade from the previous recommendation). This enhanced designation, among others, underscores the Commission's unwavering commitment to safeguarding religious liberties worldwide and its unbiased approach to safeguarding this precious human right no matter where the country might exist.

Azerbaijan has a history of persecuting Armenian Christians, and that persecution has grown worse in recent years. In 2022 and 2023, Azerbaijan carried out a campaign of violence and oppression that included the inhumane blockade of nearly 120,000 ethnic Armenian Christians in Nagorno-Karabakh. That campaign culminated in a military offensive that ethnically cleansed the area of its Christians and began erasing centuries of



history from the region. This included the systematic desecration of Christian churches and cemeteries that had been there for centuries.

Decision-makers in the executive and legislative branches of the government should take note of this recommendation and reexamine the existing commitments of the United States and its relationship with Azerbaijan.

The United States must lead with its unwavering commitment to the most precious human right — religious freedom. It is crucial to acknowledge the significance of this development that will help bring awareness to the difficulty faced by the oldest Christian nation in the world. The Gospel was originally brought to the region by the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew, and Armenia formally embraced Christianity before the Roman Empire. Furthermore, Mt. Ararat, the symbol of Armenian faith and culture, is where Noah's Ark landed according to Genesis 8:4. Armenia's history and place in the global Church are invaluable.

Sadly, the endurance of this ancient Christian community has not come without significant challenges and tragedies, including the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the repressive period endured under the Soviet Union. Now, it faces genocidal violence and aggression from Azerbaijan, and it has become clear that [Azerbaijan seeks to erase Armenian presence and history from the region](#).

By identifying Azerbaijan as a Country of Particular Concern, USCIRF amplifies the voices of persecuted Armenians whose persecution has not received the same international attention as other victims of human rights abuses. This acknowledgment provides a platform for advocacy, dialogue, and diplomatic pressure to address the regional issues in the Caucasus and promote stability and the preservation of rich religious history tied to the region. Moreover, the Commission's recommendation provides the United States government an opportunity to lead in its unwavering commitment to advance religious freedom.

The plight of Armenian Christians must be a priority for the United States. In championing the cause of religious liberty in the Caucasus, the United States sets a powerful example for nations around the globe to lead with values.

By shining a spotlight on Azerbaijan's egregious actions to suppress Armenian Christians, the Commission has opened the door for meaningful attention to the situation. It is an opportunity for Azerbaijan's leaders to repeal policies and foster an environment that promotes peace and stability in the region. Furthermore, the Commission's actions serve as a reminder of the collective responsibility we bear in protecting religious identity and freedom worldwide.



In a world marked by increasing polarization and growing tensions, the United States must defend this fundamental human right and hold countries accountable for continuing to violate this basic principle. By advocating for the rights of all people to practice their beliefs freely, the United States upholds these shared values and contributes to building a more peaceful world for future generations.

As we celebrate the release of USCIRF's annual report and applaud its recommendation to designate Azerbaijan a Country of Particular Concern, let us remain steadfast in our commitment to promote religious freedom and shine a light on those who would seek to strip humanity of this precious freedom.

