



Islam in Georgia

KEY POINTS

- **Around 10% of Georgia's population are Muslims.** Despite the fact that the country's officially-promoted national identity is closely associated with Christianity, inter-religious tensions have largely been absent so far – in part due to the apolitical stance taken by much of Georgia's Muslim community.
- **But points of tension are present below the surface and there are some signs that hostility towards Muslims may be on the increase.** This will bear careful monitoring, since it may affect both internal stability and Georgia's external relations including with neighbouring Muslim states.

DETAIL

1. **Georgia is a Christian country.** That's the message, implicit or otherwise, that has consistently been conveyed by successive Georgian political leaderships to the country's population and the world in general over the last two decades. The strong association of Georgian national identity with Orthodox Christianity is enshrined in the country's Constitution (which, whilst confirming the freedom of religion as a core principle, also recognises explicitly the Georgian Orthodox Church's 'special role' in the country's history), and is reflected in its state symbols – most notably the current Georgian national flag (adopted in 2004), on which five crosses are depicted.
2. **However, this narrative disguises the fact that Georgia is host to a significant Muslim minority,** accounting by some estimates for up to 10% of its population¹. Hitherto, there is relatively little evidence of major societal tensions arising in relation to the country's Muslim communities – but might that change in future?

Georgia's main Muslim communities

3. **Georgia's estimated Muslim population currently stands at just over 400,000,** and is comprised of several distinct communities:

¹ Georgia's current population is estimated at around 4.5 million (this excludes the population of its two breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

- **Georgia's Azeris:** This is the country's largest Muslim community – there are around 280,000 ethnic Azeris living in Georgia, mostly based in the Kvemo Kartli region in the south-east of the country. Primarily Georgia's Azeris are Shi'a,

although some observers claim that there is a substantial (up to 30%) Sunni minority within the community.



Map of Georgia's regions

Source: ICG

- **Muslims in Adjara:** Adjara, an autonomous republic in south-west Georgia, is home to the country's 'indigenous' Muslim community, i.e. Muslims of Georgian ethnicity, currently estimated to be around 120,000 in number. Adjara was part of the Ottoman Empire until the late 19th century, and in 1921 became the only religious-based (as opposed to ethnic-based) territorial entity in the entire Soviet Union to be granted the status of Autonomous Republic. Subsequently, Christian and Muslim Georgians lived alongside each other in Adjara in roughly equal numbers for much of the Soviet period. Since 1991, however, the region's religious balance appears to have shifted significantly, with many young Adjarans in particular succumbing to the implicit societal pressure to adopt a 'true' Georgian identity (i.e. Christianity) in order to achieve socio-economic advancement. It's thus estimated that only 30% of Adjara's population (376,000 in 2002) now considers itself Muslim² – moreover, this population is increasingly concentrated in rural areas and amongst the older generation. Nonetheless, Turkey's influence in the region remains strong, in part through funding provided by Ankara for local mosques and for young Adjarans to study at Turkish universities.
- **Kists:** An ethnic sub-group related to the Chechens, Georgia's Kist community (around 5,000 in number) live primarily in the remote Pankisi Gorge in the north-east part of the country, to which they migrated from their original Chechen homelands in the mid-19th century.

² Reliable estimates of the true number are hampered by the fact that Georgia's last official census in 2002 did not ask respondents to specify their religious affiliation.

- *Others:* There is a tiny (2,000) community of Sunni Muslim Avars (a native Caucasian people) based in Kakheti in eastern Georgia. Up until WWII, Georgia also hosted a 100,000-strong Meskhetian Turk community (an ethnic Turkish sub-group), who were expelled to Central Asia in 1944. Their notional right to return to their former homeland (which the Georgian authorities in principle accept) has proved controversial within Georgia, given the opposition to their return of the large ethnic Armenian community currently living in their former areas of residence.

Points of Tension

4. **To date, Georgia's Christian and Muslim communities have led a largely peaceful coexistence.** One of the most prominent exceptions arose in the early 2000s, when rebel Chechen fighters took refuge with their ethnic kinsmen, the Kists, in the Pankiski Gorge, leading to major bilateral tensions with Russia and an eventual security operation by the Georgian authorities to purge the area of Islamist militants. This, however, was arguably more the result of a spill-over of the conflict in Chechnya itself (which Georgia at the time was ill-equipped to resist), rather than a manifestation of inter-faith tensions within Georgia per se. More generally, the leadership of the Georgian Church has sought to project an image of fraternal co-existence between Christians and Muslims in Georgia – e.g. the Georgian Patriarch, Ilya II, meets regularly with Sheikh Allahshukur Pasha-Zade, Head of the Caucasus Board of Muslims, a region-wide Islamic 'governing body' based in Baku.
5. **This absence of tension in part reflects the generally low levels hitherto of engagement in domestic political life on the part of Georgian Muslims.** Additionally, for many of them, their Islamic identity has historically been associated more with particular customs and a traditional way of life, rather than with a deep sense of religious piety. Consequently, Muslims have generally been seen as amongst the least 'politicised' sections of Georgian society – for example, in contrast to the country's ethnic Armenian community (among which latent separatist sentiments remain a significant issue), there has been no discernible manifestation of separatism among Georgia's Azeri population (nor does neighbouring Azerbaijan seek in any way to promote such ideas, officially or otherwise).
6. That said, however, **there are a number of latent fault-lines in terms of relations between Georgia's Muslim minority and its Christian majority**, some of which have become more visible in recent years:
 - *Conflicting narratives of identity:* There is some evidence of societal tension within Georgia over the inherent contradiction between the country's professed commitment to equal rights for ethnic and religious minorities and the elevated status that Orthodox Christianity continues to enjoy de-facto (and partly de-jure) in defining Georgia's national identity. This manifested itself most clearly in July 2011, when legislative changes made it possible for organisations representing religious minorities to register themselves as legal entities, triggering furious public protests in Tbilisi led by Orthodox priests. There have also been periodic reports in recent years of forcible attempts by

Georgian Orthodox believers (acting, it's widely suspected, with at least the tacit support of some Church officials) to prevent the renovation/construction of mosques in Muslim-populated areas.

- *Anti-Turkish sentiment:* This has become more visible in recent years in Georgia, fuelled in particular by Turkey's growing economic presence in Adjara. It was highlighted in particular in the run-up to last year's parliamentary elections, when prominent local figures in the Georgian Dream coalition openly expressed anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim views during campaigning in Adjara³. Anecdotal reports claim that school teachers in Adjara often refer to the presence of Islam in the region as a 'historical aberration' forcibly imposed on Adjara's population by the Ottomans, and thus a deviation from the 'true Christian heritage' that the region rightfully shares with the rest of Georgia.
- *Suspensions regarding radicalisation:* There is little evidence to date of extremist influences gaining any traction amongst Georgia's Muslim communities, other than in the Pankisi Gorge – and even here, there are no verifiable indications of this leading to the emergence of violent Jihadism. But there are nonetheless concerns within some circles in Tbilisi regarding the potential for greater penetration of the country by Islamist radicals.
- *Tbilisi's attempts to exert 'control':* Following the July 2011 legislative changes, a new body, the Administration of Georgian Muslims (AGM), was legally registered as the formal representative organisation of Georgia's Muslim communities: prior to this, the latter had notionally been subordinated to the Caucasus Board of Muslims. This was presented by the Georgian authorities as a positive step, representing a move toward greater autonomy for Georgia's Muslim communities in managing their own religious affairs. However, within the Georgian Azeri community in particular the AGM's appearance was viewed with deep suspicion, being seen as a Tbilisi-inspired attempt to create a Soviet-style 'loyal' official body that would be entrusted with 'controlling' the country's Muslim population on the government's behalf.
- *Meskhethian Turks:* The lack of progress in ensuring the return to Georgia of more than a handful of Meskhethian Turks since 1991 is also a potential point of tension, particularly given Turkey's periodic expressions of interest in this matter. The fact that in practice their return is hampered (if not blocked) by the antagonism it would generate among Georgia's Armenian community underlines the potential at least for this unresolved problem to be interpreted (and presented) as an inter-religious one.

Conclusions

³ In particular, Murman Dumbadze, who stood successfully for Georgian Dream in Adjara and is now Deputy Speaker in the national parliament, campaigned vociferously against plans to rebuild (with Turkish financial support) the former main mosque in Batumi (previously destroyed during the Stalin era), calling instead for the site to be bulldozed and questioning the 'Georgian patriotism' of those who thought otherwise.

7. **The country's Muslims remain largely disengaged from national politics.** And despite the strain of Orthodox-based nationalism that underpins much of mainstream Georgian politics, both the present and previous Tbilisi administrations have been at pains to demonstrate rhetorically their commitment to promoting religious tolerance (mindful in part of the importance of doing so in terms of strengthening Georgia's credentials as a country that espouses a 'Euro-Atlantic vocation').
8. **But potential points of inter-religious tension are nonetheless present below the surface in Georgian society.** The authorities' rhetoric regarding tolerance and equality masks, rather than resolves, a fundamental question: namely, what is the long-term place of Muslims in Georgian society, given the Christian-oriented definition of Georgian national identity promoted by the state and evidence of a growing undercurrent of suspicion, if not hostility, towards Georgia's Muslims within at least some parts of the country's political elite?
9. **This question remains unanswered for now. But the manner in which it is addressed in future may have implications for Georgia's external relations:** both with the EU, but also with its Muslim neighbours, Turkey and Azerbaijan. Georgia's bilateral relationships with both are generally cordial for the time being. But this cannot be taken for granted, with the treatment of Georgia's Muslim minority only one of a number of issues that might create tensions in both cases if not handled carefully (to some extent, the same applies to Georgia's relations with Iran).