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AZERBAIJAN: Where is prayer allowed?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service

On 25 April, Police in Azerbaijan's capital Baku tried to prevent worshippers unable to fit into the small Lezgin Sunni Mosque for Friday prayers from praying in the surrounding streets. On the four Fridays since then, police impose a cordon from mid-morning and allow no prayer around the mosque, the imam Faiq Mustafa complained to Forum 18 News Service. Colonel Kamal Velishov also tried to order the mosque to close at 8 pm each evening. "This would prevent us holding the last two prayers, at 9 pm and 11 pm," Imam Mustafa noted. Colonel Velishov refused to discuss his actions, including threats to close the mosque. "Talk to the Interior Ministry," he told Forum 18, putting the phone down. Other Sunni Muslim mosques were closed in 2008-9. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations appears to have been behind this spring's enforced change of leadership at the previously Sunni mosque in Mushfiqabad near Baku.

The deputy district police chief overseeing the cordon around a mosque in Azerbaijan's capital Baku each Friday has refused to discuss his actions, including threats to close the mosque. "Talk to the Interior Ministry," Colonel Kamal Velishov of Sabail District Police repeatedly insisted to Forum 18 News Service on 27 May. He then put the phone down. The police cordon has been imposed around the Lezgin Mosque in Baku's Old City on each of the four Fridays in May so far to prevent Muslims who cannot get in from praying around it.

Because of the 28 May public holiday in Azerbaijan, Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone at the Interior Ministry in Baku.

Several mosque members told Forum 18 that Colonel Velishov has tried to force the mosque to close each evening at 8pm. "This would prevent us holding the last two prayers, at 9 pm and 11 pm," the imam Faiq Mustafa told Forum 18 on 27 May. "We can't agree to this," another mosque member told Forum 18 on 28 May. "Allah instructed us to pray."

Colonel Velishov "also ordered us not to use a loudspeaker for the azan [call to prayer], but this is part of our faith," Imam Mustafa added. "We told him all this is none of his business."

Imam Mustafa, and several other mosque members, told Forum 18 that Colonel Velishov had even threatened to close the mosque down if it refused to comply with his orders.

In August 2008 - shortly before the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan - a "temporary" ban on praying outside all mosques in the country was imposed, whose text has apparently never been made public. It appears to remain in force (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690>).

Baku's only two Sunni Muslim mosques

The Lezgin Mosque is one of just two Sunni Muslim mosques still open in Baku. All the others - such as the Abu Bekr Mosque and the Martyrs' Mosque, also known as the Turkish Mosque, near parliament - have been closed by the authorities on various pretexts since 2008. The only Sunni Muslim mosque in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] was also forcibly closed in 2009 (see F18News 18 September 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1350>).

Another Sunni mosque, in Mushfiqabad near Baku, has long faced state pressure. Earlier this year it was transferred to new control (see below).

Officials, including staff of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, frequently accused the Lezgin and Mushfiqabad mosques of sending young men to fight in Syria's civil war. However, they produced no evidence and no prosecutions for this are known to have been brought against current or former leaders of these mosques.

Orhan Ali, spokesperson for the State Committee, has repeatedly told Forum 18 he does not answer questions by telephone. The Chair of the State Committee, Elshad Iskenderov, was sacked by President Ilham Aliev on 2 May. The Acting Chair is 62-year-old Sayyad Salahli, who was appointed to the State Committee in 2012.

Cordon imposed

The latest trouble for Baku's Lezgin Mosque began at Friday prayers on 25 April, when police tried to prevent worshippers from praying outside on the street. The mosque is very small, and can accommodate only about 150 worshippers, so those who had arrived could not all fit in. Police insisted the worshippers outside were obstructing traffic, and scuffles broke out. However, police soon backed down and worshippers completed their prayers outside.

Beginning on the following Friday, 2 May, and continuing on successive Fridays, large numbers of police vehicles and officers arrived soon after 10 am and installed a cordon around the Lezgin Mosque, which also extended around the adjacent and much larger Juma Shia Mosque. "Each week there seem to be more police," Imam Mustafa complained to Forum 18. "They stay until the namaz is over - and then they try to pressure worshippers to disperse quickly."

Forum 18 was unable to reach Natiq Jamalov, head of Sabail District's 9th police station, which oversees policing in the Old City. Similarly his deputy Sahman (last name unknown) was unavailable on 27 May. The duty officer, who would not give his name, dismissed suggestions that access to the Lezgin Mosque is restricted. "The first time I hear of this is from you," he claimed to Forum 18. "People can freely enter the mosque and pray around it."

About 600 people used to attend Friday prayers, but now only about 150 are allowed in to pray, with no one allowed to pray outside, Imam Mustafa added. He said some Sunni Muslims who used to attend the Mushfiqabad Mosque and other closed Baku Sunni mosques began to attend prayers at the Lezgin Mosque.

Imam Mustafa said that the Juma Mosque next door does not face such obstructions, even though it is within the same Friday police cordon.

Another mosque member, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 on 27 May that about 70 would-be worshippers who were refused entry to Friday prayers at the Lezgin Mosque on 16 May asked a police officer if they could be allowed through the cordon to attend prayers at the Juma Mosque. The officer telephoned the Juma Mosque's imam, but he would not allow them entry. "The authorities are trying to crush Sunnis," the mosque member complained to Forum 18.

The mosque member also complained that on 16 May, a police officer named Khagani - who has often been present outside the mosque - "accused us of being gay". Imam Mustafa added: "People got angry and started to fight. It was all a provocation. We had to calm people down."

Forum 18 was unable to reach Officer Khagani to ask why he made these remarks to mosque members.

Earlier re-registration refusal

The mosque member said he and fellow-believers had registered a Sunni Muslim community in the mid-2000s, using his home as the legal address. They then sought to recover another former mosque in the Old City, which was lying empty. The former mosque, which remains empty today, is owned by the Culture Ministry, though Shia Muslims have occasionally used it for worship. The mosque member said the Sunni community would still like to gain ownership and use it for worship.

The State Committee refused to re-register the Sunni Muslim community and similar communities after the 2009 Religion Law because they did not have places of worship to meet, the mosque member complained.

Mosque leadership change state-imposed?

The Sunni Muslim mosque in the village of Mushfiqabad in Baku's Garadag District was subjected to a leadership change, apparently at the instigation of the State Committee. Unnamed State Committee officials told the APA news agency on 5 March that the old community which ran the mosque had "dissolved itself". Muslims close to the community denied this to Forum 18.

The old community gained state registration with the Justice Ministry in 1998 before the State Committee was created in 2001. It was unable to get the compulsory re-registration with the State Committee after the adoption of the harsh 2009 Religion Law as the government-backed Caucasian Muslim Board refused to give its required approval. Police repeatedly threatened to close the mosque down (see F18News 1 September 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1482>).

After the imam Mubariz Gachaev was removed, the Muslim Board approved a new community and the State Committee registered it, officials told APA. The Muslim Board named as imam Shaiq Aliyev, who was presented to the congregation on 1 March. The imam indicated that the mosque would cater to both Shia and Sunni Muslims.

With its new state registration in spring 2014, the state-backed Mushfiqabad mosque community was thus one of only a handful of Muslim communities allowed to gain the compulsory state registration in the two years that Iskenderov headed the State Committee. No non-Muslim communities were registered during that period, despite many unfulfilled registration applications lodged since

2009.

Mosque community liquidated

In March the State Committee moved to annul the state registration of the community of the Fatima-Zahra Mosque in the Yeni Guneshli residential district in Baku's Surakhani District. Baku Administrative Economic Court No. 2 upheld the State Committee's suit. However, community members are challenging the stripping of registration in Baku Appeal Court. The Court is due to hear the appeal on 4 June, former community member Tofiq Razizade told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 May.

Court officials were unavailable because of the 28 May holiday.

The community gained state registration in 1992 and sought to build a mosque. However, the half-finished building has not been completed. After state pressure on the community and threats to bulldoze it, the Caucasian Muslim Board took over the building in 2010 and promised to complete it with state backing (see F18News 5 April 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1558>). However, it has failed to do so, Razizade noted.

Since that time the community has been divided into competing factions, Razizade told Forum 18, though Friday prayers have continued at the site. He said the former imam Mirnasib Hasanli and his daughter Amira Hasanova are leading the legal challenge to the stripping of registration.

Special controls on mosques

Under the Religion Law, Muslim communities face discriminatory measures not applied to religious communities of other faiths. Mosques need the approval of the Shia-dominated Caucasian Muslim Board before the State Committee will register them. This effectively bans any Muslim communities of other affiliation from even seeking the compulsory state registration.

Only citizens who have received their education in Azerbaijan are supposed to be allowed to lead prayers in mosques and they must be named by the Muslim Board, which also informs the local authorities (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690>).

Muslims who insist on exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief independent of the Muslim Board and the State Committee risk punishment. Following their 12 April arrest, Eldeniz Hajiyev and Ismayil Mammadov have been held in the National Security Ministry secret police investigation prison in Baku facing criminal charges for leading a gathering of readers of works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Arrested in May 2013, Islamic theologian and preacher Taleh Bagirov and his driver Anar Melikov are both serving prison sentences on charges their supporters insist were trumped up (see F18News 8 May 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1956>).

However, the State Committee also retains tight control over their activity and makes decisions on their behalf. When the Teze Sheher mosque in the northern town of Khachmaz [Xacmaz] was closed for alleged "temporary repair" from 1 March, the decision seems to have been taken by the State Committee.

The mosque's imam Zaur Mamedov told the Islam.az website on 11 March that the closure had been agreed with the State Committee and the Muslim Board. He insisted that the mosque needed extensive repairs which could only be undertaken with the mosque's complete temporary closure. Imam Mamedov said that long before the closure, alternative places for worship had been agreed "with the appropriate bodies", though he did not identify which they were.

However, state officials have long alleged that Wahhabis or Salafis have frequented the mosque. Local Sunni Muslims have complained that the mosque was closed in a bid to make it easier to exclude them from the community. Imam Mamedov dismissed this and other suggestions as to why the mosque was closed to Islam.az as "nonsense". On 17 March, the State Committee insisted that the mosque had been closed for repairs.

Where is prayer allowed?

A group of about 15 workers building the new Olympic stadium in Baku were sacked to punish them for praying the namaz (Muslim prayers) at the site, the Baku-based journalist Mehman Huseynov noted on his blog on 19 March. The sackings reportedly came several days after pictures of the men at prayer appeared on the internet. Representatives of the state-owned Socar oil company - which is overseeing construction by a Turkish company - arrived at the site soon after. They sacked the workers and issued warnings to others, Huseynov said.

Socar's press office in Baku refused to answer Forum 18's questions by phone on 27 May. That afternoon, Forum 18 asked in writing if the workers had been sacked because they had prayed together on site and, if so, why and whether the sackings had come at the instigation of Socar officials. No response had been received by the end of the day in Baku on 28 May (though 28 May is a public holiday). (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>.

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Azerbaijan>>.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY