Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.

Azerbaijan

Population: 9.69 millions (#92 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 86,600 square km. Located in southwestern Asia in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan borders Iran, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, and the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijan also includes the exclave of Naxcivan, which is sandwiched between Armenia and Iran. The Apsheron Peninsula stretches into the Caspian Sea and houses the capital city, Baku. The Kura-Araks Lowland consists of low-laying plains that occupy the central interior. The Caucasus Mountains reach into the north, and the Karabakh Upland dominates the west. Semi-arid climate occurs in most interior areas, with temperate climate along the coast and subtropical conditions in the extreme southeast. Droughts are natural hazards. Environmental issues include severe air, soil, and water pollution. Azerbaijan is administratively divided into sixty-six rayons and eleven cities.

Peoples

Azeri: 91.6%

Lezghin: 2.0%

Russian: 1.3%

Armenian: 1.3%

Talysh: 1.3%

Other: 2.4%

Azeri constitute most of the population and are a significant minority group in neighboring Iran. Lazghins and Russians populate the Baku area and in the north by the Dagestan border. Nearly all Armenians reside in Nagorno-Karabakh. Talysh reside in southern areas near the Iranian border.

Population: 9,961,396 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.87% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 1.89 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 69.7 male, 76.1 female (2017)

Languages: Azerbaijani dialects (94%), Legzi (2.0%), Russian (1.3%), Armenian (1.2%), other (1.5%). North Azerbaijani is the official language and only language with over one million speakers (9.2 million).

Literacy: 99.8% (2016)

History

The ancient Persians heavily influenced modern-day Azerbaijan, which in antiquity was a Zoroastrian center. Arabs conquered the region in the seventh century and spread Islam, which several centuries later was followed by the Mongol invasions. Prosperity returned between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, during which time the Mongols, Shirvan Shahs, and the Persian Safavid Dynasty successively ruled the country. In the nineteenth century, regional powers fought for control over Azerbaijan, resulting in the splitting of the original Azeri homeland between Russia and Persia in 1828. The vast oil fields in the region began to be exploited in the late nineteenth century. Azerbaijan gained brief independence from 1918 to 1920, during which time it became the first democratic Muslim nation and granted women the right to vote. Azerbaijan was subsequently annexed by the Soviet Union. Following independence in 1991, Azerbaijan and Armenia engaged in a military conflict over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh until a cease-fire agreement in 1994. Oil export revenues have funneled more money into the country, reduced poverty, and improved infrastructure. Human rights conditions deteriorated in the 2000s, with stricter government control of the media, religious affairs, and politics.[1] However, there have been some improvements with addressing corruption in recent years.

Culture

One of the most Western Muslim nations in the Middle East/Caucasus region, Azerbaijani culture draws upon native, Persian, Western, and Arabic influences. Islam is a traditional cultural influence. A proud legacy of carpet weaving has endured for millennia, known for its intricate and beautiful designs. Numerous native dances are performed at festivals or special occasions, such as Novruz, which is a widely celebrated national holiday that traces its origins to the Zoroastrian faith. Cigarette consumption rates are high, and alcohol use is among the highest for Muslim nations in the region.

Economy

GDP per capita: $17,500 (2017) [29.4% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.757

Corruption Index: 31 (2017)

Azerbaijan has posted some of the most rapid economic growth rates worldwide since the mid-2000s due to increasing oil exports and growth in other sectors of the economy, namely construction, banking, and real estate. Oil profits have been made possible primarily due to the construction and use of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, which made previously land-locked Azerbaijani oil accessible to the international market. Trade has significantly expanded into Europe as a result of new oil pipelines. Prospects for greater economic growth are favorable, due to Azerbaijan's geographical location, well-educated population, and sizeable population. However, economic growth remains strongly correlated to oil prices and demand. The government has taken recent measures to diversify the economy, particularly with development in the agriculture sector. Natural resources include oil, natural gas, iron ore, and bauxite. Services employ approximately half the labor force and generate 45% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 14% of the work force and generates 49% of the GDP. Primary industries include oil, natural gas, steel, iron ore, cement, chemicals, and textiles. Agriculture accounts for 37% of the work force and generates 6% of the GDP. Cotton, grain, rice, fruit, vegetables, tea, and tobacco are common crops. Livestock is also an important agricultural commodity. Primary trade partners include Italy, Turkey, Russia, and China.

Corruption is perceived as widespread and a major deterrence toward greater economic growth and reducing wealth-poverty divides. Government control over civil liberties and the economy have hurt foreign investment. Corruption appears most severe in the judicial system and the police force.[2]

Faiths

Muslim: 96%

Other (primarily Christian): 4%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelicals – 18,517

Jehovah's Witnesses – 1,414 – 14

Roman Catholic – less than 700

Seventh Day Adventists – 531 – 11

Latter-day Saints – ~40 – 1

Religion

Muslims account for 96% of the population; two-thirds are Shi'a and one-third are Sunni. Few Muslims are active in their faith, but the number of religiously active Muslims has slightly increased in recent years. Orthodox Christians account for much of the rest of the population, but few practice their religion. There are approximately 15,000-20,000 Jews. Traditional religious groups consist of Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, Russian Orthodox Christians, and Jews. Other religious groups are deemed untraditional and primarily consist of Protestant Christians and other Muslim groups, many of which tend to reside in the Baku area.[3]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 45th (2018)

The constitution protects religious freedom, but the government has restricted this right. The government generally tolerates religious activity among Shiite and Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox. The constitution protects the individual right for citizens to convert to another religion, but forbids the propagation of religion, especially by foreigners. Raids conducted by national and local authorities have occurred on nontraditional Muslim and Christian groups. The registration process is difficult, time consuming, and allows the government to regulate the practice of religion by the selective harassment of religious groups that are denied registration such as small, nontraditional religious groups. To register, a group must submit a notarized application signed by at least 50 of its members as well as additional information such as charter, founding, and legal documents. The law specific prohibits activities of unregistered religious groups which may be punished by fines or imprisonment. A recent change to the law permits foreigners to conduct religious services if the foreigner is invited by a registered religious group. Evangelical Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and some Muslim groups are the most heavily persecuted.[4]

Largest Cities

Urban: 55.7%

Baku**, Ganca, Sumgait, Mingacevir, Khirdalan, Garachukur, Sirvan, Naxcivan, Bakixanov, Seki.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

One of the ten largest cities has an LDS congregation. Twenty-five percent (25%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

In 2000, Azerbaijan was assigned to the Europe East Area.[5] Azerbaijan was assigned to a mission for the first time in 2015 when the Central Eurasian Mission was organized. A branch operated in Baku until the mid or late 2010s when it was discontinued. Today, only a member group appears to function in Baku.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: ~40 (2018)

There are no known Azerbaijani Latter-day Saints in the country. Missionaries in Eastern Europe have occasionally taught Azerbaijanis, but few have joined the Church. Any members in the country likely consist of expatriates from Europe and North America. Most members have historically worked for oil and gas companies or in embassies.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 0 Group: 1? (2012)

The Europe East Area Branch solely administered Azerbaijan until the early 2010s when the Baku Branch was organized. The Baku Branch closed sometime in the mid or late 2010s. A member group appears to continue to operate under the supervision of the mission branch.

Activity and Retention

Member and convert retention rates among known Latter-day Saints appears consistent with the countries of origin for foreign members who live in the country. However, activity rates may be higher than the home nations of foreign members as many small Latter-day Saint groups can become tight-knit and offer socialization opportunities for socially isolated expatriates.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Russian, Armenian (East), Armenian (West).

All LDS scriptures are available in Armenian (East) and Russian. A wide selection of Church materials is translated in Russian, whereas several priesthood, unit, temple, Relief Society, Sunday School, teacher development, young women, primary, missionary, audio/visual, family history, church proclamations, hymns, and children's songs are available in Armenian (East). The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Book of Mormon selections, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price are translated in the western dialect of Armenian, which is spoken outside of Armenia.

Health and Safety

Nontraditional Christian groups report frequent government surveillance, arrests, and police raids.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Latter-day Saints have participated in humanitarian projects providing clothing or hygiene kits to the needy.[6] There have been at least nine community projects in Azerbaijan sponsored by the Church.[7]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Current laws and government policies severely restrict any activity by Latter-day Saints. Prospects for attaining government registration appear unlikely for the foreseeable future. The constitution prohibits the use of foreign missionaries in proselytism, which the LDS Church greatly relies upon for establishing the Church. Member-missionary efforts also face government restrictions, requiring any local members to be passive in their conversations with others about their beliefs. Foreign members are unable to take an active stance in establishing the Church among Azerbaijani citizens until the Church is registered with the government. Such missionary efforts would be limited to ecclesiastical support and not proselytism given legal prohibitions.

Cultural Issues

Azerbaijan experiences low levels of religious participation comparable to many former Soviet Republics. Few have a background in Christianity or have developed regular habits of mosque or church attendance, although Islamic influence has increased significantly in recent years. Any prospective Latter-day Saint outreach would need to address the potential needs of

a population that has little familiarity or background knowledge with religious principles, such as prayer or scripture reading. The marginalization of nontraditional religious groups challenges the prospects of Azerbaijanis considering membership in the LDS Church, as investigators would likely face social reprisal and potential government harassment. The lack of Azerbaijani Latter-day Saints abroad challenges future efforts to understand local culture and develop suitable proselytism approaches and resources. Furthermore, the Church has no resources that present the LDS gospel message to the religious background of Muslims. As a result, Muslims may struggle to understand and relate to LDS teachings as resources and approaches have been primarily developed to address a Western Christian audience.

National Outreach

The entire population remains unreached by Latter-day Saints. Those who have met a member of the Church or are aware of church teachings are limited to those who have traveled abroad and come into contact with missionaries or a member, or those who have close personal contacts with any expatriate members who have lived in Baku over the years. The Church did not establish a presence in the 1990s, likely due to distance from operating mission outreach centers, the lack of any language materials in Azerbaijani, few, if any, local or expatriate members, warfare with Armenia over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh, and the high percentage of Muslims. The implementation of new religious legislation in the early 2010s further reduces the prospects of any future LDS Church establishment. Armenia and Georgia (also administered by the Armenia Yerevan mission) are the only nations that border Azerbaijan with nearby LDS congregations. The Azerbaijan-Armenia border is totally closed, and the Azeri-Russian border is closed to foreigners. It is unlikely that the Armenia Yerevan Mission would one day administer church work in Azerbaijan due to severe tensions and closed borders. Distance from mission headquarters in Sofia, Bulgaria pose challenges for mission president oversight and the allocation of resources to the country.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Local Latter-day Saints may struggle to develop regular church attendance and other habits indicative of a lifestyle directed by church teachings due to low religious participation in traditional faiths.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Azerbaijanis have historically demonstrated little conflict with other ethnic groups, but in recent years face significant challenges interacting with Armenians due to conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Among Caucasian ethnic groups, Latter-day Saints have experienced the greatest success attracting converts and establishing the Church with Armenians. Almost all Armenians have left Azerbaijan since the early 1990s. Ongoing tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia have contributed to the marginalization of Christians and increased Islamic solidarity.

Language Issues

As of 2018, there remained no LDS scriptures or materials translated into Azerbaijani dialects, which are spoken by some 20 million people in Azerbaijan and Iran. Restrictions on proselytism and few Azerbaijani-speaking Latter-day Saints worldwide will likely continue to delay any forthcoming translations of LDS materials for many decades to come. LDS materials translated into Armenian dialects can be utilized in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Missionary Service

No Azerbaijanis are known to have served a full-time mission. LDS missionaries have never been assigned to Azerbaijan.

Leadership

Local leadership is dependent on transient foreign workers. Foreign members moving away from Baku may have contributed to the closure of the Baku Branch, especially given the small size of church membership in the country.

Temple

Azerbaijan pertains to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district.

Comparative Growth

Azerbaijan is one of the least reached former Soviet Republics and the only sovereign nation in the Caucasus without an official Church presence. All former Soviet Republics in Central Asia are Muslim-majority, and most are unreached by Latter-day Saints. However, most of these countries have a few known local Latter-day Saint converts or LDS expatriate families. In the

early 2010s, Azerbaijani was the language with the tenth most speakers worldwide without any LDS materials.

Several missionary-oriented Christian groups entered Azerbaijan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union but have faced increasing restrictions regarding their operation and religious freedoms. Emigration among converts to nontraditional Christian groups appears common. Seventh-Day Adventists have reported a net decrease of approximately 200 members during the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses have gained hundreds of followers but are heavily persecuted by the government. Limited success by these groups indicates that Latter-day Saints have missed their opportunity to enter Azerbaijan for the foreseeable future and that meaningful church growth opportunities exist despite challenging social and political conditions. However, current opportunities appear only among religious groups that have a base of citizen members from which to build upon.

Future Prospects

There appear to be no realistic opportunities for Latter-day Saints to enter the country and establish the Church among citizens unless recent government restrictions prohibiting foreign missionary proselytism and member-missionary activity by unregistered groups are amended. There may be some unexplored development projects that humanitarian senior missionary couples based in Armenia can implement. The translation of basic proselytism materials in Azerbaijani will be greatly needed for any missionary work to occur one day. Outreach among Azerbaijanis who live in other former Soviet Republics with higher levels of religious freedom appears the most practical method for the Church to make a foothold among the Azerbaijani population within the foreseeable future.

[1] "Background Note: Azerbaijan," Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 14 June 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2909.htm

[2] "Azerbaijan," 2010 Index of Economic Freedom, retrieved 8 October 2010. http://www.heritage.org/index/country/azerbaijan

[3] "Azerbaijan," International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 28 September 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280882#wrapper

[4] "Azerbaijan," International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 28 September 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280882#wrapper

[5] Lloyd, Scott. "European continent realigned into three new areas," LDS Church News, 16 September 2000. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38475/European-continent—-realigned-into-three-new-areas.html

[6] "Projects—Azerbaijan," Humanitarian Activities Worldwide, retrieved 8 October 2010. http://www.providentliving.org/project/0,13501,4607–1-2008–49,00.html

[7] "Where We Work," LDS Charities. Accessed 28 September 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work