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Azerbaijan's Jehovah's-Witnesses-Jihad and Other High Jinks

May 21, 2014 - 9:09am, by [Giorgi Lomsadze](#) ^[1]

[Tamada Tales](#) ^[2] [Azerbaijan Civil Rights](#) ^[3] [Council of Europe](#) ^[4]

Editors' Picks:

No

The Azerbaijani government has never been celebrated for its sense of irony. Yet even as it settles into its chair at the Council of Europe's Commission of Ministers and assures the world that it's got that democracy thing down pat, Baku appears to be busy cracking the whip.

Most recently, with a demand for lengthy prison sentences for three imprisoned civil-rights activists -- deemed political prisoners by [international human-rights groups](#) ^[5] -- and by the May 19 arrest of three Jehovah's Witnesses.

How this jives with Baku's [recent pledge to uphold rule of law and promote "intercultural dialogue"](#) ^[6] during its six-month CoE tenure is open to interpretation.

But perhaps Council of Europe Secretary-General Thorbjørn Jagland got the full story. Jagland spent May 20-21 in Baku for the official kickoff of an ["action plan"](#) ^[7] intended to help Azerbaijan meet its CoE obligations and "address some fundamental human rights and rule of law issues," as the document states.

On May 21, prosecutors addressed those issues in their own way -- by requesting [prison sentences of between six to nine years](#) ^[8] for civil-society activists Anar Mammadli, Bashir Suleymanli and Elnur Mammadov, charged, after critical monitoring of the 2013 presidential election, with alleged violation of NGO-registration rules and abuse of their official duties.

Similar energy on the human-rights front was shown on May 19 when, tipped off by concerned citizens, Baku police arrested three Jehovah's Witnesses for doing what Jehovah's Witnesses do -- proselytizing.

[Local news](#) ^[9] reported so eagerly about the police "operation" against two middle-aged women and one teenage girl distributing leaflets that the reader might think it took quite an effort to subdue the three women.

Yet before the Witnesses could breach even the most rudimentary of biblical topics, their Watchtower magazine and other religious swag had been confiscated.

Granted, the Azerbaijani authorities have [experience in this area](#) ^[10]. But, more frequently, with alleged Islamic radicals.

Largely seen in the Caucasus more as public nuisance than a public menace, the Jehovah's Witnesses are not the most jihad-prone of religious groups. It is not clear how they ended up lumped together with Islamic fighters. But the group's pamphlets have been confiscated just like any <http://ru.apa.az/news/270765> ^[11] "banned pro-jihad writings.

In a rare case of defying President Ilham Aliyev's administration, [a Baku court](#) ^[12] ruled in 2011 that confiscations of Jehovah's-Witnesses materials are illegal.

Maybe in the midst of all the excitement over Azerbaijan's plans to defend "intercultural dialogue" for the CoE, the Baku police simply forgot . . .

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