



MUSLIMS IN GEORGIA

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Georgia, located in the Caucasus region of Eurasia, lies at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe. It shares borders with Russia in the north, Turkey and Armenia in the south, and Azerbaijan in the southeast. The current population of Georgia is about 3.718 million. Tbilisi is the largest city in Georgia and its capital. It is also the economic and cultural hub of the country. Georgia is a predominantly Christian country, with Orthodox Christians making up 83.4% of the population. Armenian Christians make up 2.9% of the population while Roman Catholics constitute about 0.5%. The number of Jews in Georgia is

estimated to be around 8,000. The Orthodox Church is the most influential institution in Georgia and one of the main pillars of Georgia's national identity.

Islam reached Georgia in 645 AD during the caliphate of Uthman. The Muslim army conquered Eastern Georgia and established Islamic rule in Tbilisi. During this period, Tbilisi (*al-Tefelis* in Arabic) was a flourishing centre of trade between the Muslim world and northern Europe.

Timur (1336-1405) invaded Georgia between 1386 and 1404. In 1555, western Georgia and the western part of southern Georgia came under Ottoman rule while eastern Georgia and parts of southern Georgia came under the control of Safavid Iran. In 1703, Vakhtang VI, ruler of the kingdom of Kartli, embraced Islam. Georgia was annexed by Russia in 1801 and subsequently became a part of the Soviet Union. It became independent after a referendum held in 1991.

Muslims in Georgia



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A Georgian Muslim Imam and scholar from Tbilisi

The number of Muslims in Georgia is estimated to be around 465,000, which accounts for 10.7% of the country's population. Muslims are mostly concentrated in the Adjara and Kvemo Kariti regions. Tbilisi has a sizeable Muslim population, estimated at 150,000. Muslims in Adjara – now known as the Autonomous Republic of Adjara – number about 133,000 and make up nearly 40% of the region. Adjara was a part of the Ottoman Empire from the 16th to the 18th century. Adjara Muslims are ethnic Georgians. Muslims form the majority in the Kvemo Kariti region.

There are two major ethnic groups among Georgian Muslims: ethnic Georgians who follow the Sunni-Hanafi creed, and Azerbaijani Muslims, who are a part of the Shia sect and are largely concentrated in the region bordering Azerbaijan and Armenia. In addition to these two groups, there are Meskhetian Turks, who number approximately 115,000. Meskhetian Turks were deported to Central Asia by Stalin in 1944 on suspicion of espionage and collaboration with the Ottomans. There are also smaller Muslim communities of Greek Muslims, Armenian Muslims and Ossetians.



Mosque in Tbilisi

Georgia's national identity is invariably conflated with Orthodox Christianity. Though Muslims have been living in Georgia for centuries, the Orthodox Christian majority looks upon Islam as alien to Georgia's national identity and Muslims as traitors who abandoned their ancestral faith in favour of the religion

of the invaders – Arabs, Persians and Ottoman Turks. Georgian Muslims face hostility from the Orthodox Christian majority and discrimination and indifference by the state. Though Georgia’s constitution guarantees freedom of religion and expression and espouses the principle of equality, there is a yawning gap between constitutional ideals and ground realities. While the Orthodox Church receives an annual grant of \$12.5 million from the state, a meagre grant of less than \$2 million is divided among four minority religious groups: Muslims, Armenian Christians, Jews and Roman Catholics.



Meskhetian bride in traditional wedding attire



A Georgian Muslim woman walks down a Batumi street, Adjara, 2013. (c) Demotix/Oleksandr Rupeta

Georgian Muslims face enormous hurdles in respect of construction of new mosques. Though Muslims in Tbilisi number over 150,000, there is only one mosque in the city. Similarly, Batumi – Georgia’s second-largest city where Muslims make up a quarter of the population – has only one mosque (known as Orta Jami Mosque), which was built by a Georgian Muslim nobleman in 1886.



Orta Jami Mosque in Batumi



Prayer on the occasion of Eid-e Qurban in the Orta Jami Mosque, Batumi, 1 September, 2017



Muslims offer Friday prayers outside the Jami Mosque on the street in Batumi

The Orta Jami Mosque in Batumi can accommodate a maximum of 1,500 worshippers. On Fridays and the feasts of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, thousands of Muslims roll out carpets on the pavement and streets to offer prayers. For the past two decades, Muslims have been making efforts to construct a new mosque in Batumi. They collected \$400,000 and purchased a piece of land for the purpose and applied to the local authorities for permission for constructing the mosque. But despite verbal assurance, the permission was never granted. The main opposition against the construction of a new mosque in Batumi comes from the Orthodox Church and the local Christian population. Frustrated over the refusal of the local authorities, Muslims in Batumi decided to build a makeshift prayer hall on the premises they have purchased. Now Friday prayers are held in this makeshift mosque.

For several years, there have been negotiations between Georgia and Turkey concerning the restoration of Ottoman monuments in Georgia and Georgian monuments in Turkey. The Orthodox Church is opposed to this move.



Muslims protested for the construction of the new mosque in Batumi in 2012 (Photo: Batumelebi magazine)



Makeshift mosque in Batumi



In the village of Chela in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, the minaret of a newly built mosque was demolished by the local Christians. Another problem faced by Georgian Muslims is the shortage of graveyards. Some cemeteries are commonly shared between Christians and Muslims, with a dividing line separating Christian and Muslim graves. When Muslims apply for land for a new cemetery, they face protests from the local Christians.

The US State Department says that religious freedom in Georgia is problematic. Overt and covert discrimination by the state, hostility from the Christian majority population and demonization by the media and the Orthodox Church have alienated Georgian Muslims and exacerbated tensions between them and the Christians. Faced with this grim situation, some young Georgian Muslim men have converted to Christianity.