

## **Learning about successful model of multi-faith harmony and peaceful coexistence.**

Consul General of Azerbaijan to Los Angeles, Nasimi Aghayev spoke before students and faculty at Utah Valley University on October 8, 2018. The title of his presentation was: "Eurasia and Azerbaijan today: religious security and the political/ economic outlook for this critical area." I attended the lecture as part of my class on Islam in World Affairs.



*Consul General Nasimi Aghayev during presentation at UVU*

As Consul General described, his native country of Azerbaijan has Russia to the North, and Iran to the south with the Caspian Sea to its east and Armenia to the west. So, this landlocked country is at a strategic geo-political location having to deal with Russia and Iran and all potential conflicts rising from the two sides. Azerbaijan is a predominantly Muslim country, but it has made secularism, and good relations with all a focus for its foreign policy.

In 1918, the country first gained its independence and established a secular government; it even gave the women the right to vote that very same year (notably one year before the U.S. did the same). People of Azerbaijan only enjoyed this independence for a few years, as they were swallowed into the Soviet Union, and stayed a part of the USSR until its collapse in the 1990's. During this time under Soviet rule all religion was forbidden, along with many other oppressions.

You would imagine that living so long under these conditions would change the country, but that was not the case.

Upon receiving their independence for a second time that century they instantly implemented their strict secular government and began to foster their culture of tolerance. They are inclusive to all religions. Their demographics are 95% Muslim (70% Shi'ite and 30% Sunni), then about 3% Christian and 2% Jewish. Very interestingly this dominate Shi'ite Muslim country is extremely open, and secular especially in regard to their Shi'ite neighbor Iran who is a theocracy, and extremely strict. Every year they appropriate funds for all state registered religions. Beyond these funds they recently built a Synagogue for a Jewish community with state funds and donated a parcel of land for a Christian Church. They are the only Muslim nation to do such things for other religions. The Consul General stated: **“You need more than tolerance—you need acceptance”**

Their acceptance goes beyond financial support for all religions. Distinguished guest showed us a picture of leaders from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities having a casual lunch together. They have had events where the Shi'ite Muslims and the Sunni Muslims praying together. This would be unthinkable in some areas of the world. The Consul General had said it was powerful to see all of them mixed in a room, and the only difference you can see is how their hands are positioned. They even have a temple of the Zoroastrians in their country, it is a sacred fire temple for the religion, and they allow for a great pilgrimage to the temple yearly.

At the end, I personally asked Consul General Aghayev, if there are non-Muslims in their government, and he was enthusiastic to answer that there is a Jewish Woman, who sits on their Supreme Court, as well as Christian and Jewish members of parliament. One of the Jewish members of Parliament was elected from a Muslim area. It is surprising to me to see Azerbaijan able to maintain a friendly relationship with so many countries and different ideologies. As the Consul General talked about being placed at ideological crossroads geopolitically, it would have been easier to stick to their Muslim heritage and maintain a theocracy with sharia law as their neighbor and demographically similar neighbor Iran.

It is clear to see that relations are key to this country in the resume of the Consul General himself. He is fluent in five languages and he has spent much time studying and building relations around the world. The Consul General had stressed that even though they share the Shi'ite heritage with powerful Iran, it does not mean there are regional and political conflicts. Eluding to the fact that Azerbaijan stands for relationships, and tolerance. For this decision, I believe in an ever-polarizing world we will hear more and more of this tiny nation and their dedication to bringing all of us together.

This was very interesting lecture and visit of dignitary like Consul General Nasimi Aghayev provided all of us an opportunity to learn that in a world where polarization and divisiveness, it is still possible to show kindness and choose acceptance. This model, which he, and more importantly his country has implemented has proven as a successful one. It is through these policies, that such a small landlocked country as Azerbaijan can have a flourishing country, that continues to grow on the world stage. I thank UVU office of Global Engagement for bringing such a great caliber of a guest. The office of Global Engagement continues to bring a wide variety of high importance

guests that enrich all students who attend. Their efforts are helping UVU students to learn about the world as a whole and get intimate looks into all corners of it through the invited speakers.

*Jesse Sandstrom, UVU Student*