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Sunni and Shia Muslims in Georgia: a Societal Margin in Motion?

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Abstract

This article offers a concise overview of the different Muslim groups in Georgia, and discusses their identity issues and socioeconomic situation as well as the current actions of the state directed towards their integration. The Muslim communities in Georgia, which consist primarily of Azeri, Adjarians and Kist, generally form a marginal group in society since they are not perceived to be full members of the Georgian nation due to their confessional background and, in case of Azeri and Kist, linguistic factors. A large majority of the Muslims in Georgia also live in rural regions where the overall economic and social predicament often negatively differ from that in the majority culture and in urban areas. Hence the question is whether specific socioeconomic conditions and identity issues and alienation contribute to forms of radicalization among Georgia's Muslim communities or whether there are dynamics of integration in Georgian society.

Georgia's Muslims: a Social Topography

Georgia is a country with a predominant Christian population. As can be seen in the annex of this issue, roughly 83 percent of the population of Georgia considers themselves followers of the autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church, which is a key element of Georgian national identity. If we add the near 3.9 percent adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the followers of Armenian and Georgian Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy and the dozen or so of Evangelical, Protestant and Pentecostal denominations that are active in the country, the Christian majority comes at about ninety percent. Near one-tenth of the population identify themselves as Muslims, of which roughly a bit more than half are culturally and traditionally Sunni and the rest Shia. Ethnically, socially and ideologically, though, they form an all but homogeneous community.

The largest Muslim group in the country are ethnic Azeri or Azerbaijani. Currently, around 284,000 Turkic Azeri live in Georgia, with a clear concentration in the rural south-eastern regions of Kvemo Kartli (some 226,000) and Kakheti (33,600) which border Azerbaijan and Dagestan. A sizeable community, perhaps as large as 18,000, also lives in the capital Tbilisi. Though predominantly of Shia tradition, some authors claim that there is a sizeable Sunni minority of up to one-third among them. In everyday life and practice, though, the line between both is not clear-cut and mosques serving both denominations are common. At the country's other end on the Black Sea, in the autonomous republic of Adjara, lives most of Georgia's second-largest Muslim community, Sunni Muslims of Georgian ethnicity and language.¹ Adjara, whose center is the city of Batumi, used to be a part of the Ottoman empire from 1614 until the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–78, which explains the presence of an Islamized

Georgian group there. In the USSR, it was, along with the Birobijan Jewish autonomy in the Far East, one of the two territorial-administrative units specifically designed for a confessionally-defined community in a borderland area.

According to the latest official census data, about one-third of the region's population consider themselves Sunni Muslims, compared to near two-thirds adherents of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The majority of the Sunni Adjarians are generally living in rural, mountainous part of the area with a concentration around Khulo. There are also Adjarian communities in Batumi and Tbilisi. Furthermore, the Pankisi valley in the north-eastern part of Kakheti, is home to a reportedly 8,110-strong Kist community. The Kist, who are a Chechen sub-group, are mostly Sunni although a few villages are Orthodox Christian. Their traditional folk Sufism incorporated not a few animist and Christian elements. Over the last fifteen years, however, under the influence of movement and dynamics in neighboring Chechnya and Dagestan, Salafi Sunnism gathered a following among the younger segments of the Kist population. Finally, other Muslim groups in the country include about 2,000 Caucasian Avars who live in three villages in Kakheti, and Meskhetian Turks, who historically lived in Samtskhe-Javakheti but were deported to the Uzbek SSR under Stalinist rule before small numbers returned to Georgia after 1989–91. However, this article will not specifically elaborate on these latter groups, concentrating instead on the Azer(baijan)i, Adjarians and Kist.

Exclusion from the National Imaginary

One of the biggest challenges to a Muslim living in Georgia is the perception of Georgian Orthodox Christianity as a fundament of Georgian national identity. In other words, only members of the Georgian Orthodox Church are seen by many among the grassroots, as belonging to the Georgian nation. The Georgian Orthodox Church is the most trusted public institution with 82 percent

¹ Muslims of Georgian ethnicity and language will be further referred to as Adjarians.

of the country's population trusting it, and has a strong influence in political and public discourse.² Also Georgian and international academics argue that the two following aspects are emphasized in the national Georgian narrative: Georgian language and Orthodox Christianity. They are perceived as the corner stones of Georgian culture and distinct national identity. By preserving their language and religion throughout the turmoil of history and wars with neighboring powers, Georgians believe to have preserved their national selves as well. Thus, at least in the eye of the majority, ethnic minority Muslims, in the first place Azeri and Kists, lack both crucial elements of Georgian identity since the Georgian language is not their native tongue and since they do not belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The Azeri identity is traditionally mostly based on their distinct Turkic ethnicity and language more than on religion. However, in line with what is happening in Azerbaijan itself, both Shia and Sunni Islam are experiencing revival among the minority's younger segments. Nowadays, more younger than aged people are attending Friday prayers in the main mosque in Tbilisi as well as in mosques in the province, just like increasing numbers are conducting the Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca) and pilgrimages to Shia religious sites in Iran and Iraq. In addition, similar to what happens among the Kist in Pankisi, there are estimates that around 20 percent among the 15–35 age bracket of the Azeri population of Kvemo Kartli are at least influenced by Salafism. The reported rise in religiosity among Azeri goes hand in hand with the increase in cross-border religious activity during the past decade or so. In the 1990s, a lot of missionaries from Iran made their way to Georgia's Azeri-populated areas and gave an opportunity to local youth to study in religious centers in Iran.

Students from Georgia who attended Islamic institutions abroad later returned, often armed with religious knowledge superior to that of the traditional religious leaders and elders, to their communities and established religious foundations, run by ethnic Azeri but often funded by foundations from Iran, Iraq and Shia and Sunni networks from Turkey. Kist, on the other hand, have always perceiving Islam to be a more integral part of their culture and society. There are now fault lines, though, between older and younger generations because the older generation is more attached to traditional Sufism while Salafi influence is clearly present among part of the young. An important vector of Salafism were refugees fleeing the Chechen Wars of 1994–96 and 1999–2000. Kist people claim that they have two homelands: Chechnya, which they see as the core area of their language and much of

their culture and customs, and Georgia, their actual homeland where they developed a specific Kist identity. In contrast to Azeri, Kists have few problems with the Georgian language in the sense that most inhabitants from Pankisi are bilingual or trilingual, using the local Chechen-based dialect to converse among themselves and Georgian and Russian for talking to officials or outsiders. In addition, their family names usually have Georgian suffixes like *-shvili* and *-adze*.

Adjarians are in a more peculiar situation. They are not complete 'others' since they always had Georgian as their mother tongue, yet not complete 'ours' because they are not Christians. They are seen as 'incomplete selves'. Importantly, Adjarian Islam is generally perceived to be in retreat, especially in Batumi and in the lowlands, because of a trend among (parts of) this population groups to convert, or, as some would say, revert, to Georgian Orthodoxy which is not only perceived to be the religion of their forefathers before the Ottoman era, but also a necessary prerequisite to fully belong to the Georgian nation and to obtain adequate social-economic status. It results in younger, socially mobile and better educated middle class and urban dwellers opting for Christianity or at least diminishing their Muslim identity, and in Islam becoming more concentrated in rural mountainous areas among more traditional population.

Finally, in recent years, Georgian and international media as well as former president Mikheil Saakashvili reported that up to 'several hundreds' young Georgian citizens from the main Muslim communities—Adjarians, Azeri and Kist—left the country to join the ranks of Daesh (Islamic State) in Syria. Although the actual proportions of this phenomenon are subject to speculation if not rabble-raising by opinion makers and interest groups, it did strengthen the perception of the presence of the 'other' in the core areas of Georgian national identity. Mainstream Muslim leaders in Georgia tend to advocate interfaith solidarity and condemn radical Islamists, but there is a plethora of reasons why a number of Muslims in Georgia are susceptible to adopt non-traditional religious practices and currents if not religious radicalism. The lack of socioeconomic opportunities in the rural regions is certainly one, yet a sense of alienation from the Georgian majority and a search for their identity at times of stark social change are certainly as important.

The Institutional Inequalities

In Georgia, religious freedom is protected by the constitution and other laws and policies. At the same time, the constitutional agreement between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the state stresses the unique status of the Church and gives it special rights and a privileged partnership not granted to other religious denominations, includ-

2 CRRC Online Data Analysis—Caucasus Barometer, 2013

ing to those under the official Administration of Georgian Muslims. This agreement, among other rights, allows the Church to advise the government in the sphere of education (although the parliament needs to adopt legislation to implement this) and gives it exclusive rights to staff the military chaplaincy. In addition to that, the Church has a long history of state funding. Between 2002 and 2015, for instance, it received 250 million lari (then around \$105 million) or an average of 19.2 million lari per year, from the state budget. In comparison, the Administration of Georgian Muslims, established in 2011, just recently started receiving public funds, along with other traditional religious minorities like Catholics, Armenian Apostolics and Jews.³ For 2014–15, the government promised to allocate 3.3 million lari (about \$1.38 million) or an annual 1.65 million lari, to the institution.

Although Muslims thus started to get funding from the state, the main funding and support for their religious activities and infrastructure comes from private as well as semi-official foundation and sources from abroad. A number of Sunni mosques in Adjara are thus financed from Turkey (Liles, 2012), while Shia foundations from Turkey, Iran, Iraqi and individual Shia leaders like al-Sistani support religious organizations in the Shia Azeri community. Some Salafi groups who are active among the Kist in Pankisi are believed to be sponsored by charities from the Arab Gulf and by Salafi Chechen networks in Russia. Such real and perceived external support, and the agendas embedded in it, adds to a climate of suspicion creating extra tension and distrust for religious minorities among the country's Christian majority. It should be noted here that Georgian law separates religious and secular education. Religious classes can take place only after school hours and cannot be controlled by the authority or teachers of a given public school. At the same time, outside instructors, for example priests, cannot regularly attend or direct students' clubs or any extracurricular activities at public schools. However, in practice, there is a strong trace of religious agenda in secular curriculum, especially in history classes, in which a lot of attention is being devoted to the historical role of the Georgian Orthodox Church as the preserver of Georgian national identity against neighboring Islamic empires and entities like the Ottomans, Persia and the southern Caspian khanates.

The Social-Economic Predicament(s)

As mentioned above, the Azeri form the largest Muslim group in Georgia. According to the most recent census,

the one of 2002, there were over 284,000 ethnic Azeri in Georgia. This is an 8 percent drop from the more than 307,000 in 1989, which can be attributed to emigration to Turkey and Azerbaijan due to the radical change in social and economic conditions and the political turmoil and armed conflict after the demise of the USSR. Azeris mostly live in rural areas and mainly rely on agriculture, both growing for themselves and for selling, to support themselves. Around half of the Azeri rural households indicated that they live in poverty, with 46.4 percent of ethnic Azeri families in Kvemo Kartli spending more than 70 percent of their income on food as compared to 25.3 percent of ethnic Georgian families. A representative study of socioeconomic situation and attitudes among the population in Kvemo Kartli, a region where Azeri form 36.8 percent of the population, revealed that there is a substantial lack of knowledge of Georgian language among members of this minority.⁴

Azeri tend to live in close-knit communities, predominantly Azeri villages, and use the Turkic Azeri language instead of the Ibero-Caucasian Georgian language for intergroup communication and Russian for interethnic communication. Data showed that 78.3 percent of ethnic Azeri in Kvemo Kartli do not speak Georgian, which in turn alienates them from the labor market, distances them from ethnic Georgians and prevents them from getting enough information about various development projects and support structures implemented in this region. In addition, Azeri tend to be more disengaged from local politics than their Georgian counterparts. However, the same data suggest that ethnic Azeri understand the necessity of knowing Georgian, and respondents did not indicate any discrimination regarding their access to education or serious obstacles that would obstruct them from learning Georgian. At the same time, Azeri children show a somewhat lower involvement in education than their ethnic majority counterparts: 6.6 percent of Azeri children are not enrolled in school, compared to 2.5 percent Georgian children in the same region. In rural municipalities where Azeri constitute the majority like Marneuli, Tsalka, Dmanisi and Bolnisi, named reasons for students dropping out of school were their own choice due to lack of desire to study, no school in the vicinity, necessity to work, problems with documentation, lack of money for school supplies, and early marriages.

Although under-age marriage does occur among Georgia's majority culture too, especially in rural areas—according to the UN Population Fund, up to 17 percent

3 Established under the Saakashvili administration, the AGM was viewed by part of the respective Muslim communities to be an attempt to exercise control over in-group affairs in the Muslim community.

4 Iago Kachachishvili, Nino Korinteli, Teona Mataradze, and Mamuka Nadareishvili (2012). *Study of social and economic conditions and attitudes of Kvemo Kartli population*. Tbilisi: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC-DEZA).

of women in Georgia were married before they turned 18⁵—there seem to be a higher prevalence among highland Adjarians and among Azeri in Kvemo Kartli than in other parts of Georgia. In Pankisi also, a number of social factors impede social mobility. Although, as mentioned above, fluency or at least workable knowledge of the Georgian language is higher among Kist people than among Azeri, the socioeconomic conditions in Pankisi are also rather difficult. Local non-governmental organizations, for example, estimate that only one-tenth of the population in Pankisi is employed officially, although this of course does not exclude lots of activity and sometimes opportunities in the informal economy. Approximately half of the population is aged 15–25 though, and against a background of limited opportunity in education and formal employment in Pankisi itself, it remains to be seen how people will cope. Finally, the ethnic Georgian Muslims from upper Adjara share a similar socioeconomic predicament with the two above-mentioned groups. The main sources of income are paid labor in the service industry, construction and the hospitality industry, agriculture and pensions. Reportedly, around one-third of the rural population in Adjara lived below the poverty line of \$2 per day in 2006–2007. Although this has shifted, a lot of households are still precarious.

Current Trends

This concise overview of the Muslim populations in Georgia touched upon different issues that this religious minority faces in this predominantly Christian country and society. Yet, and this is important, it is false to conclude that the situation is deadlocked and not changing for the better. To start with, Muslims already have state-level representation via the Administration of Georgian Muslims, established in 2011. In addition, the current state administration has created a new institution, the State Agency for Religious Issues, whose main goal is to ensure religious freedom and non-discrimination in the country. However, this agency has not gained public promi-

nence yet. Second, Georgia is trying to implement better state language teaching programs in ethnic minority regions, including the Azeri villages in Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti, by training teachers to teach Georgian as a second language. Similarly, affirmative action programs are applied for students with ethnic minority background who apply to universities in Georgia. Such institutional approach has a potential to improve Azeri integration into Georgian society. No such programs are being set up or planned for the Kist community though.

Third, the parliament of Georgia adopted law changes in 2015, which stipulate that underage marriage is a criminal offence. In addition, numerous grassroots organizations are taking upon themselves to educate adolescents about damages of underage marriages for women. One of the biggest current challenges though are posed by real and perceived radicalization trends among Muslims in Georgia. This issue is not new. In 2002–03, for example, the Pankisi gorge attracted international attention when it was reported to be a hideout for alleged al-Qaeda militants and armed Chechen Salafi groups. More recently, a number of Georgians citizens have reported to have joined Daesh in Syria. The exact numbers are unknown, but the media speculates that it is under 100 people. In both chapters, part of the commotion was and is artificial. In any case, the state has strengthened its antiterrorism laws, making it illegal to join paramilitary organizations abroad. There is still a lack, however, of community-driven action and bottom-up approach, such as moderate Islamic teaching by credible actors or the creation of social and economic opportunities for adolescents. Finally, the prevalence of the Georgian Orthodox Church discourse in politics, media and education, and a religiously-infused national narrative fuse religion and the state together and keep Muslims (and other religious minorities) in Georgia in the margins of the nation. As a very influential actor, the Church should also adopt a more inclusive narrative and work on social inclusion of this religious minority into a greater society.

About the Author

Inga Popovaite is a graduate student at the Department of Sociology of the University of Iowa. She holds an MA Degree in Nationalism Studies from the Central European University, where she defended her thesis on Georgian Muslim women's national and religious identity in Adjara. Her academic interests include ethnic and religious identity, intergroup conflicts and minority inclusion in post-Soviet nation states.

Recommended Reading

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5 This number is not exact because most child marriages are not officially registered. United Nations Population Fund (2014). *Child marriage in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: regional overview*, Istanbul: UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, <<http://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%20Marriage%20EECA%20Regional%20Overview.pdf>>

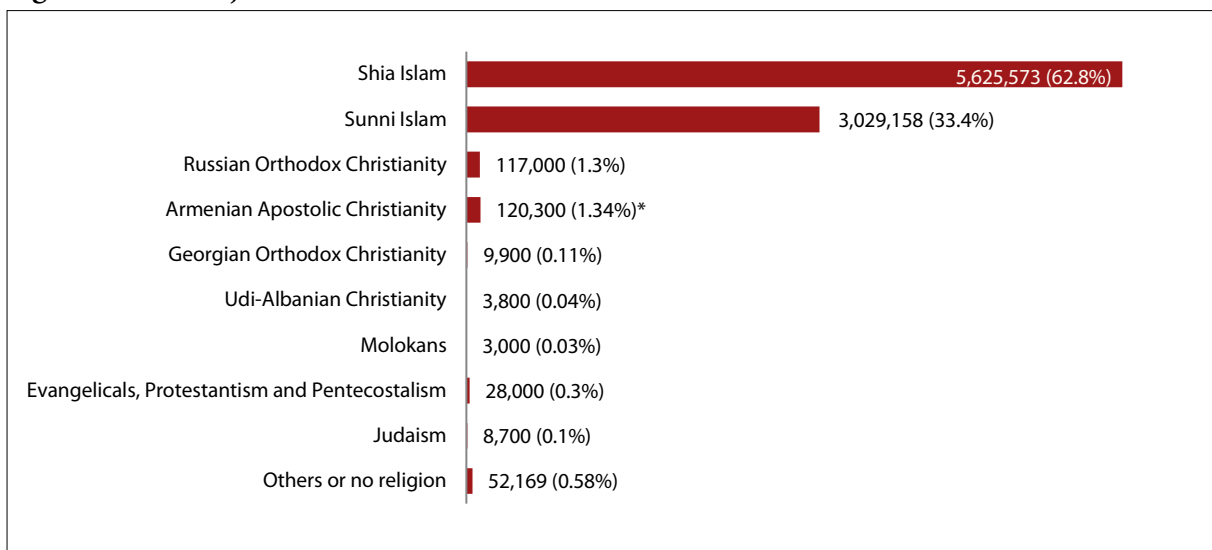
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DOCUMENTATION

The Confessional Demography of the Southern Caucasus

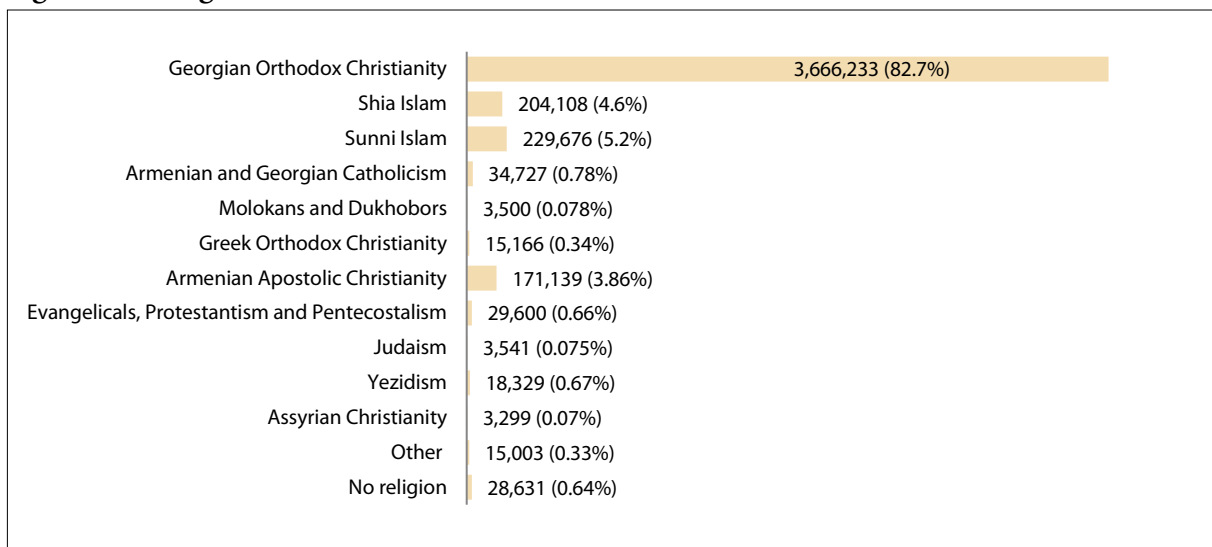
Graphics prepared by Bruno De Cordier and Inga Popovaitė on the basis of data from the population censuses of Azerbaijan of 2009, of Georgia of 2002 (the full results of Georgia's 2014 population census are only expected in mid-2016, that is after this issue goes to press) and of Armenia of 2011, the 2008 report on religious movements in Georgia by the Public Defender's Office, and Pew Research Centre—Religion and Public Life. Due to the differing methodologies of the respective sources, at times conflicting figures and differences in figures, and the lack of clarity on the distribution between Shia and Sunni, the data are approximate. They also reflect the religious (self-)identification of the population, but not the actual religious practice.

Figure 1: Azerbaijan

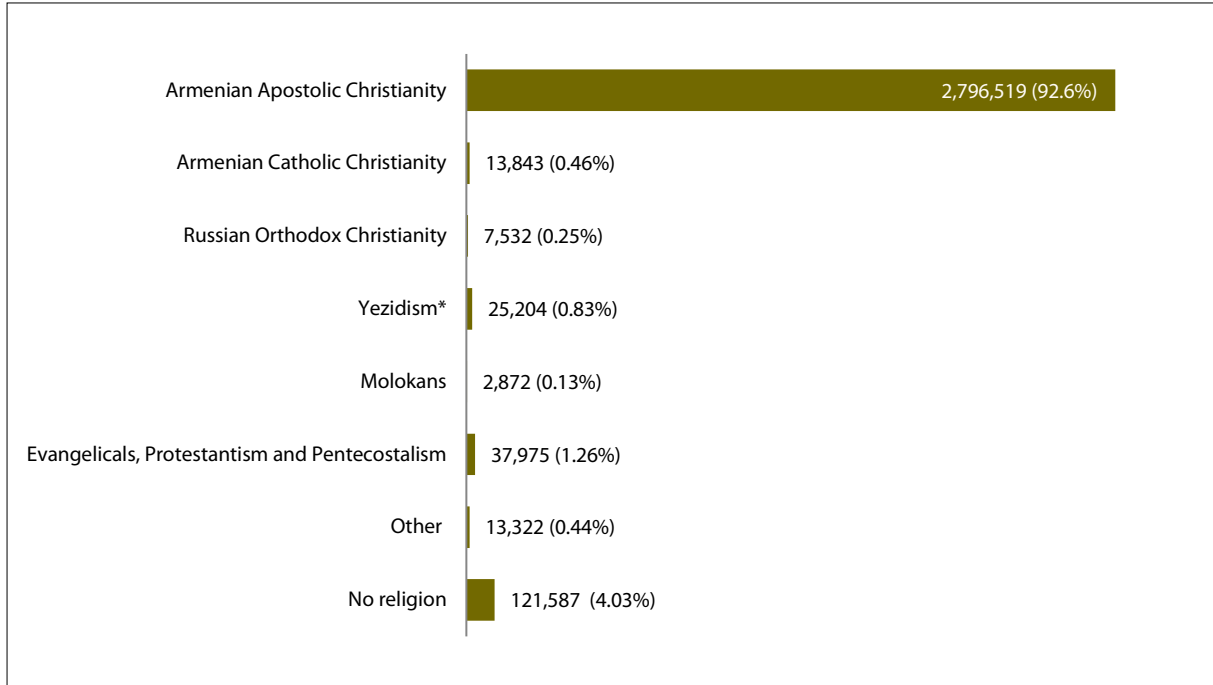


*Concentrated in occupied Nagorno-Karabakh

Figure 2: Georgia*



*Without Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Figure 3: Armenia

* Number of citizens of Armenia declaring to follow or identify with the Yezidi faith (called 'Sharfadinism' in the census) as opposed to 'ethnic Yezidi', some of whom declared to follow Armenian Apostolic Christianity or Protestantism.