

Network of Concerned Historians				NCH
Campaigns				
Year original	Year follow-up	Circular	Country	Name
2024		110	Azerbaijan	Igbal Abilov
	2025			<i>follow-up 1</i>

### *Announcement*

Last year we supported an Amnesty International campaign for Igbal Abilov, a historian and ethnographer of the Talysh people (a Persian-speaking minority in Azerbaijan), who was detained on fabricated charges. Last month, the prosecutor requested a nineteen-year prison sentence. Therefore, Scholars at Risk is asking us now to sign a pre-formatted letter of protest ([here](#)).

Please find below a NCH summary of the case and the Scholars at Risk appeal.

Please take action now.

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### **NCH SUMMARY OF THE CASE**

On 22 June 2024, Igbal (Iqbal) Abilov (1989–), a historian and ethnographer of ethnic minorities, especially the Talysh people (an ethnic Iranian minority in Azerbaijan), and lecturer in international relations at Belarusian State University, Minsk, Belarus, was arrested by the State Security Service in Masalli during a family visit to southern Azerbaijan, and on 24 July 2024 remanded to four months in pre-trial detention in the capital Baku on charges of high treason, foreign-agent-instructed public appeals against the state, and incitement of ethnic hatred. The charges were based on Abilov's communications with Garnik Asatryan, an Armenian professor specializing in Iranistics and Kurdology. Abilov's lawyer stated that Abilov's communications with Asatryan were purely academic. On 19 November 2024, the court extended Abilov's pre-trial detention by four more months, until 22 March 2025. On 26 February 2025, the Lankaran Serious Crimes Court began virtual hearings. On 2 May 2025, the court held Abilov's final hearing; at the end of the hearing, the prosecutor requested a nineteen-year prison sentence. The charges were reportedly fabricated in retaliation for his research on the history and culture of ethnic minorities, including the Talysh, in the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Iran, and his collaboration with Armenian scholars while attending meetings and conferences held

under the auspices of European research institutions. An ethnic Talysh, he had co-founded the Talysh National Academy in Belarus and he was the editor of *The Herald of the National Academy of Talysh*, an international journal dedicated to the scholarly study of the Talysh. One of his publications was *Essays on the History and Ethnography of the Talysh* (2011). Abilov's arrest was part of a crackdown on dissidents who had criticized the September 2023 Azerbaijani offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh, during the lead-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29), scheduled for 11–22 November 2024 in Baku.

*Sources:* Network of Concerned Historians, [Azerbaijan: Iqbal Abilov \(Talysh historian and ethnographer\)](#) (4 November 2024); Network of Concerned Historians, [Follow-up](#) (17 June 2025); “[Appeal for Iqbal Abilov](#),” *International Talysh Foundation* (no date [July] 2024); Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, “[Iqbal Abilov](#),” *Scholars at Risk* (22 July 2024); “[Azerbaijan: Academics Arrested on Fabricated Charges: Iqbal Abilov and Bahruz Samadov](#),” *Amnesty International* (23 September 2024); “[Azerbaijan: Academics Face Up to 20 Years in Prison for Speaking Out](#),” *Amnesty International* (23 September 2024); “[The Persecution of Iqbal Abilov Undermines Academic Freedom–SAR](#),” *Turan* (6 October 2024); Anton Troianovski, “[Repression Intensifies in the Country Hosting a Major Climate Meeting](#),” *New York Times* (1 November 2024); “[AHA Sends Letter to the President of Azerbaijan Expressing Concern for Jailed Historian](#)” (press release; Washington: AHA, 20 November 2024); Amnesty International, *The State of the World's Human Rights* (London: AI, April 2025), 87–88; Scholars at Risk, “[Release Wrongfully Imprisoned Academic Iqbal Abilov](#)” (New York: SAR, 16 May 2025).

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<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2025/05/release-wrongfully-imprisoned-academic-igbal-abilov/?emci=57c4fb34-9c3d-f011-a5f1-6045bda9d96b&emdi=d5c3adca-cd46-f011-8f7c-6045bdfe8e9c&ceid=7528309>

## SCHOLARS AT RISK

### Release wrongfully imprisoned academic Iqbal Abilov

Posted May 16, 2025

Scholars at Risk sent the below letter to Azerbaijani authorities, urging them to secure the immediate release of Mr. Iqbal Abilov. Take action by signing a letter [here](#).

*Via email*

The Honorable Ilham Aliyev  
President of Azerbaijan

May 16, 2025

**RE: Release wrongfully imprisoned academic Igbal Abilov**

Your Excellency:

I write on behalf of Scholars at Risk to respectfully urge you to secure the immediate release of Igbal Abilov, a researcher and lecturer at Belarusian State University, who has been wrongfully detained on charges of “high treason” in Azerbaijan in apparent retaliation for his research on ethnic minorities across the region. If convicted, he could face up to 20 years in prison.

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of more than 600 universities and colleges in over 40 countries dedicated to protecting the human rights of scholars around the world, and to raising awareness, understanding of, and respect for the principles of academic freedom and its constituent freedoms of expression, opinion, thought, association, and travel.

Igbal Abilov, a researcher and lecturer at Belarusian State University, specializes in history and ethnography, with a focus on ethnic minorities of the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Iran. Mr. Abilov is an ethnic Talysh and a member of the Talysh National Academy, a consortium of academics who study the Talysh indigenous group. SAR understands that he was conducting research into the history and culture of the Talysh people at the time of his arrest.

SAR understands that on June 22, 2024, Azerbaijan security forces detained and questioned Mr. Abilov while he was conducting field research; he was released later that day. Nearly one week after his detention, Azerbaijani border officials prevented Mr. Abilov from boarding a flight back to Belarus, confiscating his passport and phones. One month later, on July 22, security forces summoned him to a local police station, purportedly to retrieve his personal items, but when he arrived, the authorities arrested him. SAR further understands that two days later, the Sabail District Court of Baku remanded Mr. Abilov to four months in pretrial detention on several charges, including “high treason,” “foreign-agent-instructed public appeals against state,” and “incitement of ethnic hatred.” The court also prohibited him and his lawyer from sharing any documents associated with the case, including with his relatives.

SAR further understands that on July 31 and August 7, the court denied appeals respectively challenging the order detaining him, and the order prohibiting him from sharing documents associated with the case. On November 19, the court extended his pre-trial detention by four more months, until March 22, 2025. We understand that on February 26, the Lankaran Serious Crimes Court began virtual hearings. Mr. Abilov's lawyer requested an open hearing and home detention for Igbal; the court denied both requests. On May 2, the court held Mr. Abilov's final hearing; at the end of the hearing, the prosecutor requested a 19-year prison sentence.

According to news sources, the factual bases for the charges relate to Mr. Abilov's communications with Professor Garnik Asatryan, an Armenian professor specializing in Iranistics and Kurdology. Mr. Abilov's lawyer denies that he committed a crime, stating that Mr. Abilov's communications with Professor Asatryan were purely academic.

We welcome any additional information that may clarify our understanding of these events. Absent this, the facts appear to indicate that Mr. Abilov was arrested and charged as a result of his peaceful exercise of the rights to academic freedom and freedom of expression—conduct that is expressly protected by international human rights instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Azerbaijan is a party. Any charges for what we can only assume—absent clear public evidence from the state—to be nonviolent expressive conduct is clearly excessive and contrary to international standards. Detentions and prosecutions in response to scholarly activity raise serious concerns about protection for free expression, academic freedom, and the higher education space in Azerbaijan.

SAR therefore respectfully urges you to direct the appropriate authorities to intervene and ensure that any charges related to Mr. Abilov's peaceful academic activities are reversed. In the interim, we ask that you ensure his access to family, and guarantee that his case proceeds in a manner consistent with internationally recognized standards of due process, fair trial, and detention, in accordance with Azerbaijan's obligations under international law.

We appreciate your attention to this important matter and look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Robert Quinn  
Executive Director

**CC:**

Colonel-General Eyvazov Vilayat Süleymanoğlu  
Minister of Internal Affairs

The Honorable Khazar Ibrahim  
Ambassador of Azerbaijan to the United States

The Honorable Yashar Aliyev  
Permanent Mission of Azerbaijan to the United Nations

The Honorable António Guterres  
Secretary-General of the United Nations

The Honorable Volker Türk  
High Commissioner for Human Rights

The Honorable Michael O’Flaherty  
Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe

The Honorable Marco Rubio  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State