

# The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan

Svante E. Cornell

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*Central Asia-Caucasus Institute  
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# The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan

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**Figure 1: Reference Map of Azerbaijan**

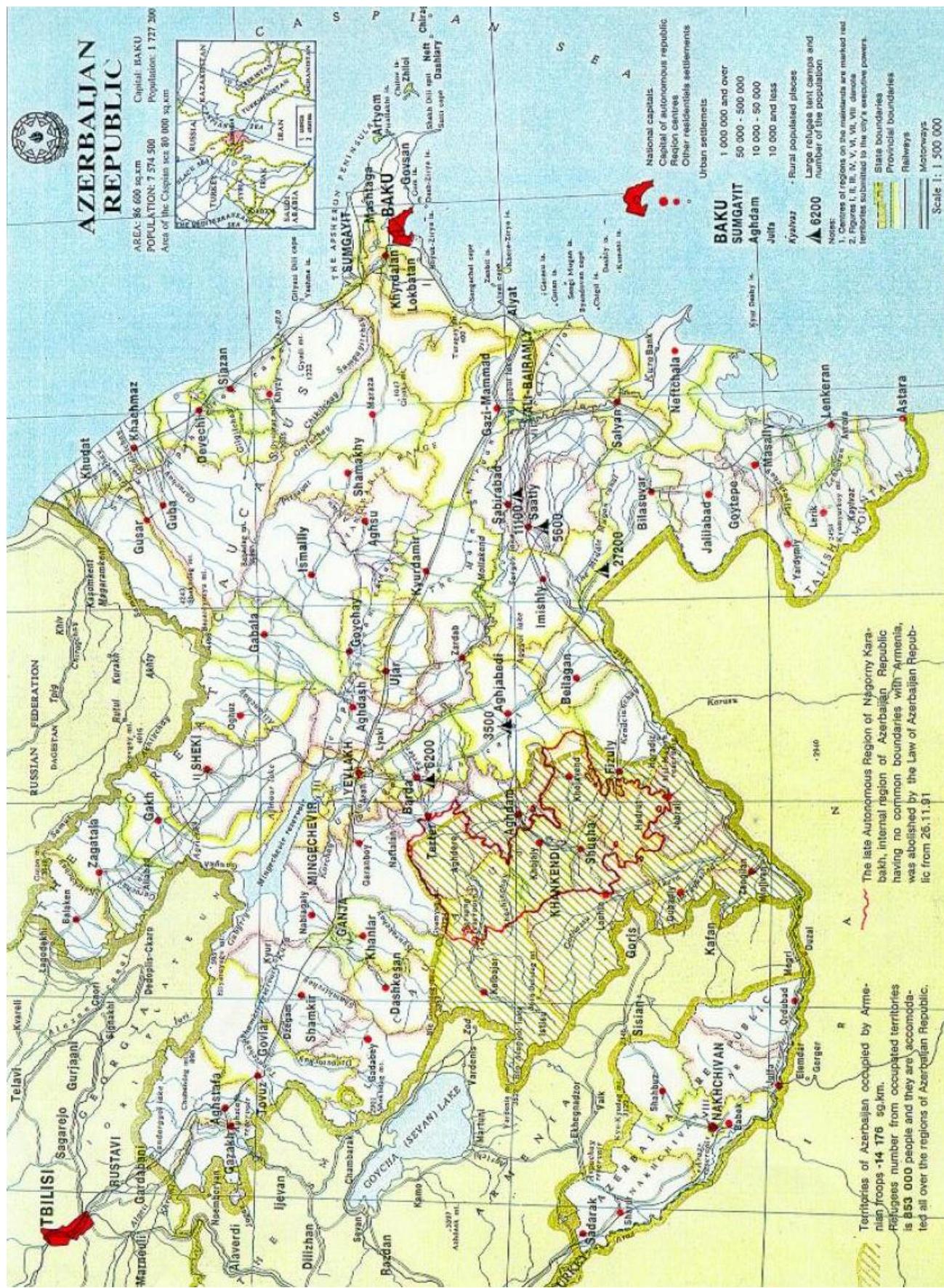
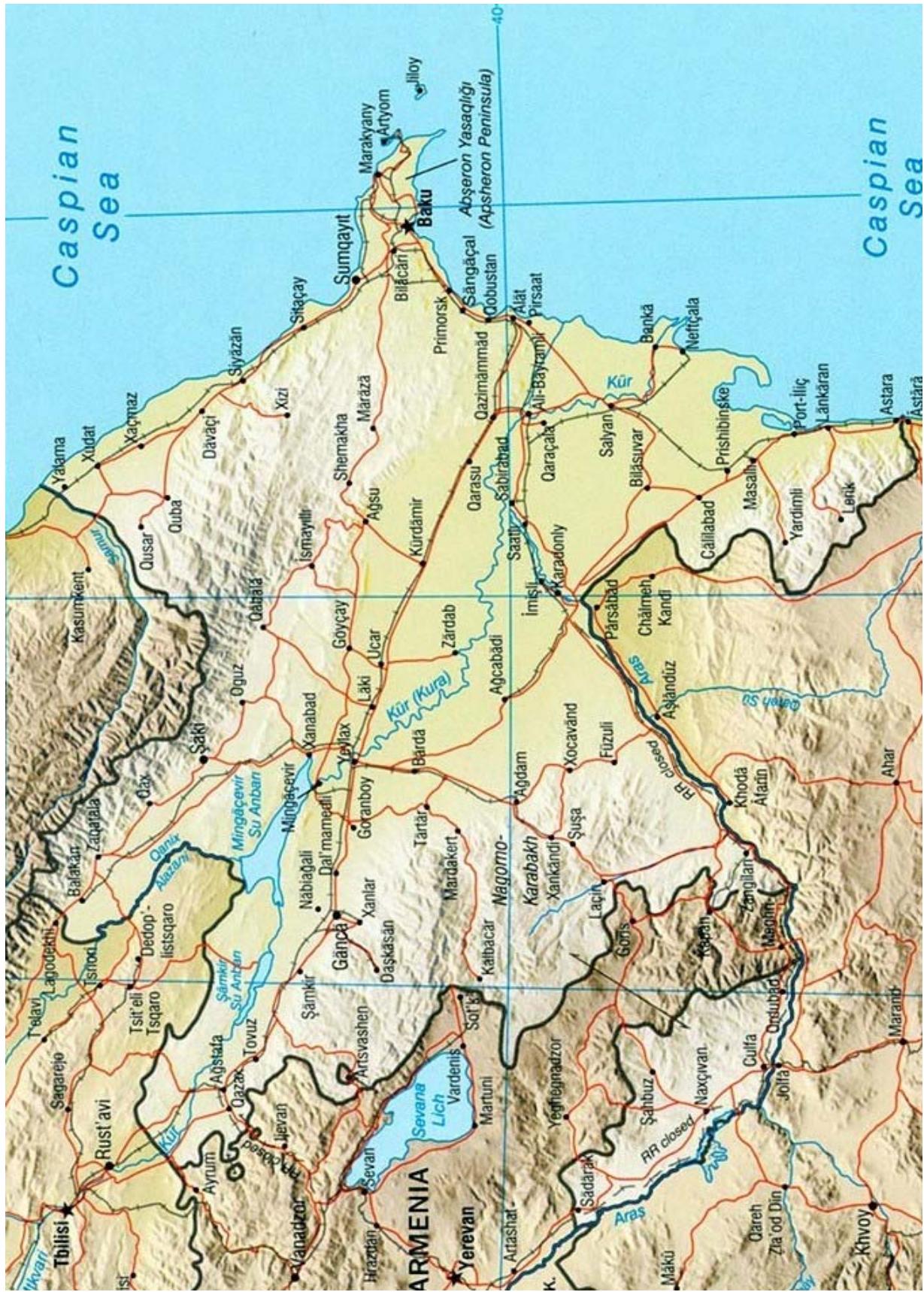


Figure 2: Topographic Map of Azerbaijan



## **Summary and Recommendations**

Azerbaijan can rightly claim to be among the most progressive and secular Islamic societies. Aside from having been the first Muslim country to have operas, theater plays, and a democratic republic, Azerbaijan today is among the Muslim countries where support for secularism is the highest, and where radical ideologies have met only very limited interest. This is all the more remarkable as Azerbaijan has by no means been peripheral to the world of Islam. It was invaded by Islamic armies only decades after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and was subsequently gradually Islamized. It was an Azerbaijani dynasty, the Safavids, who made Shi'a Islam the state religion of Iran. Yet even before Soviet atheism, Azerbaijan saw the rise of a secular intelligentsia that had little interest in religion aside from a marker of cultural identity. This trend has continued after Azerbaijan's independence, and considerably affected its foreign relations. While wary of Iran, Azerbaijan has looked to the West for support and for inspiration. Indeed, in a world where anti-Americanism is rife not only in Muslim countries but in both Europe and Latin America, surveys still report a majority of Azerbaijanis being favorably inclined towards the U.S. Most westerners, visiting Baku, marvel at the secular and western nature of cosmopolitan Baku.

Yet in the past several years, Islam has clearly made a come-back in Azerbaijan. This has been a generally benign and positive factor, providing a reconnection to values and traditions for a nation liberated from seventy years of atheism and Russification policies before that. Accompanied to this has nevertheless also been a rise of radical Islamic groups, many of which guided by external influences.

Several factors have contributed to this. A first has been the return to traditional values and an increased interest in religion, especially on the part of the young generation. This factor, common to all post-Communist states, has been compounded by factors specific to Azerbaijan. First among these is the conflict with Armenia, which has brought increasing frustration in

Azerbaijani society, and accentuated the post-Soviet identity crisis. More particular still has been the disillusionment with the West, and in particular the United States, resulting from U.S. sanctions on Azerbaijan regulated by section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. The waiver to section 907, in place since 2002, has *not* alleviated this problem; Azerbaijanis now feel the yearly waiver is a form of blackmail against their government. American assistance to the separatist government of Karabakh has added fuel to the fire. These issues have contributed to anti-western sentiment, which has fed Islamic radicalism. This has been further compounded by dissatisfaction with the U.S. war in Iraq. Put together, these elements have substantially and negatively affected America's image and popularity in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the continued problems of corruption, poverty, and semi-authoritarian government have contributed to continued dissatisfaction with the political system, which radicals have exploited. It is too early to say whether Ilham Aliyev's reforms will alleviate this trend.

External influences have had paramount importance on the development of radical Islam in Azerbaijan. Indeed, most radical groupings are supported or trained abroad. Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region, Turkey and the Russian North Caucasus are the main sources of external influence on Islam in Azerbaijan. Among these, Iran has particularly supported radical Shi'a groups, and used this as leverage against secular and pro-western Azerbaijan, affecting its freedom of movement in foreign policy. The Arab Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, and the Russian North Caucasus, primarily Dagestan, have been equally important in fostering radical Salafi Sunni groups in Azerbaijan.

Islamic activism, and radicalism, has geographic variations. Shi'a groups are strong in the South, near Iran, while Sunni radicalism is growing in the North, near the border with Russia. The capital Baku is experiencing growth in both Shi'a and Sunni radicalism.

Government policies toward Islam in general and Islamic radicalism in particular have been inadequate. Most damaging has been the lack of legitimacy of the Supreme Board of Muslims of the South Caucasus, the main religious institution in Azerbaijan. A leftover from Soviet times, the board is plagued by cronyism and corruption. To remedy this, the state created the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations. This move, while fundamentally sound and correct, in fact led to a diarchy as the

State Committee and the Supreme Board compete for religious authority in the country. The acrimonious relations between the two bodies has been an important impediment in the Azerbaijani government's attempts to regulate the religious sphere. In turn, this has led to the Ministry of National Security picking up the slack and dealing with the issue of radical movements. The instruments available to this ministry, however, are mainly coercive.

A related problem is the failure of the Ministry of Education to develop a modern curriculum in the humanities and social sciences. The lack of reform in the Ministry of Education has implied that Azerbaijani schools do not provide adequate information and knowledge to students as regards the history and tenets of major religions, let alone the meaning of secularism. This lack of religious knowledge enables radical Islamic groups to attract segments of Azerbaijani youth interested in religious issues.

This study has led to the conclusion that a politicization of Islam is taking place in Azerbaijan. Radical groups remain weak, but have a potential to grow under the current domestic and international circumstances. To confront this, the Azerbaijani state needs to address the diarchy in terms of supervision of religious structures. Adopting a structure modeled on the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs is one possible approach to resolving the current deadlock. In addition, Azerbaijan needs to develop a clergy with both religious legitimacy and respect for secularism, something that is absent today, by increasing the avenues for religious training at home rather than abroad. Addressing long overdue reform in the educational sector remains a high priority, in which the development of a curriculum in the humanities, including history of religions and civilizations, is crucial.

To confront the growing skepticism of the United States in Azerbaijan, there are several measures that the United States could take at limited cost. A first is to abolish once and for all section 907, which consecutive administrations have opposed and which has impeded American policy in the region. A second is to better explain America's aid to Mountainous Karabakh. Finally, the U.S., in cooperation with other western donors, should increase their focus on the educational sector. This includes encouraging educational exchanges with Azerbaijan at all levels to strengthen western values, but also to make reform of the educational sector a priority area in development cooperation with Azerbaijan.

## **Introduction: Azerbaijan's Islamic Revival**

Azerbaijan has generally been considered among the most progressive and secular-minded areas of the Muslim world. Azerbaijan led in many of the most spectacular advances in the Muslim world: the first school for girls, the first western-style theater plays, the first opera, and the first democratic, secular republics in the world of Islam are all claimed by this small country – even before the Soviet Union's domination of the Caucasus implemented state-sponsored atheism and secularization. In the post-Soviet sphere, Azerbaijan has again been standing out by the consensus on secularism that has reigned in the country's political life, and the absence of strong political movements advocating a dominant role for religion in political life.

This has been the case in spite of social and economic conditions that are normally considered incubators of radicalism. Indeed, aside from the travails of transition that it has shared with all post-Soviet countries, Azerbaijan has been affected by warfare and a humanitarian crisis of substantial proportions. As it lost the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1993, Armenian forces overran not only Karabakh but large Azeri-populated areas, from which 800,000 people were ethnically cleansed, some of which live in refugee camps to this day. Not staying at this, Azerbaijan was slammed with U.S. sanctions at the behest of the Armenian lobby in Congress, and a generally lenient western attitude to Armenian aggression. As half-hearted international efforts to resolve the conflict have repeatedly failed, Azerbaijan's predicament is similar to those of the Palestine, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Chechnya: Muslim populations forced into refugee camps as a result of wars with non-Muslims, situations that in all these cases served to spread Islamic radicalism in the refugee populations as well as the wider public.

Nothing of the sort has to date happened in Azerbaijan, which has instead stood out as a country where both the elite and the general public have been

strongly leaning toward the West. Azerbaijan is a safe country for westerners to travel in, its Jewish population is well-accepted in society and faces few problems, and its government has been among the staunchest allies of the United States in the Muslim world. Aside from being among the first to offer support for the U.S. after 9/11, Azerbaijan is together with Kazakhstan the only Muslim-majority country to have sent troops to Iraq.

This has brought Azerbaijan increasing interest on the part of western, and in particular American, policy-makers. Indeed, at a time where Turkey, the traditional poster-child of the compatibility of Islam and secularism, is experiencing increasing anti-Americanism under a religious-minded government, Azerbaijan's value becomes obvious.

Yet the situation in Azerbaijan is not as simple as it seems. Azerbaijan is geographically surrounded by areas with strong Islamic movements, which have all sought an influence there. Closest has been Iran's theocratic government, which has been eager to spread Shi'a radicalism in Azerbaijan. To the North, Dagestan and Chechnya have been centers of Sunni radicalism that have affected the country; while direct influence from the Arab world has grown over the past decade. Turkish Islamic groups, private and state-controlled, have also been present, though they have had a more benign nature. Foreign terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda, have found the Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, an important area of operations, realizing just like the U.S. government the strategic location of the region between Russia, Turkey, the Middle East and Central Asia.

These multiple influences have not failed to affect Azerbaijan's society. In turn, the social upheavals of the past two decades have made a deep mark on the country, while the population's hopes on western support have faded. Social frustration is increasing, while a post-Soviet identity crisis has affected the country's youth. Politically, Azerbaijan has been affected by the same anti-American currents that are affecting diverse areas of the world including, be it to different degrees, Western Europe, Latin America, or the Middle East.

Hence it should come as no surprise that a religious revival has taken place in Azerbaijan, as has been the case in Georgia, Armenia, Russia, or Central Asia. This has been a predominantly benign process, yet signs of Islamic

radicalism are present also in Azerbaijan. Opinion polls show a growing minority viewing positively the application of Islamic law in the country's politics and government. Visual observation over time shows an unmistakable growth in Islamic dress in the country, indicating the growth of Islamism in the country. And politically, the presence of both home-grown and foreign militant groups in the country have been recorded. The most dramatic example is the bombings of the U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998: though far from Azerbaijan, it is established that the Al Qaeda fax message taking responsibility for the attacks was sent from Baku.

Azerbaijan, much like Turkey, is hence an increasing complex country from the point of view of political Islam. The majority of the population, and the political elite, is overwhelmingly secular. Yet the Islamist fringe in society is clearly growing; a politicization of Islam is taking place in Azerbaijan, showing that the country is not an exception in the Muslim world. The reasons, character, implications, and prospects of this phenomenon – for Azerbaijan, the Caucasus, and the West – nevertheless remain to be explored. This paper aspires to take a step in this direction. To do so, it will begin by an overview of the development of Islam in Azerbaijan. Then, it will move to study in greater detail the internal societal currents in Azerbaijan that have a bearing upon the politicization of Islam. It will then move to examine the external influences upon political Islam in the country, to subsequently study some of the most relevant Islamic groups and movements in the country. Attention will then be turned to state policy toward political Islam, before concluding with recommendations for both the Azerbaijani and western governments.

# The Development of Islam in Azerbaijan

Very shortly after the emergence of Islam, Azerbaijan became incorporated into the rapidly expanding Arab empire.<sup>1</sup> Already in 639 AD, present-day southern Azerbaijan was invaded by Arab armies, which mainly operated out of nearby present-day northern Iraq. In 641, the Arabs took Ardebil, the main city of Azerbaijan at the time. Wars between the Arabs and the Sassanids in the following decade eventually led to the elimination of the Sassanid empire in 651. Yet already in 643, an Arab army had campaigned across northern Azerbaijan along the Caspian sea, reaching and taking the strategic city of Derbent – presently in Dagestan, but historically part of Azerbaijan with a remaining Azerbaijani population. Here, the Arabs came into contact with the Khazar khanate, which posed the largest military resistance to the Arabs yet. Arab control over Azerbaijan was gradually established, and by the 730s, the Arabs had defeated the Khazars, making them undisputed rulers of Azerbaijan.

## The Islamization of Azerbaijan

Arab rule did not immediately mean the Islamization of the population. The early Arab rulers were tolerant of both main religions of the time –the Monophysite Christianity of the Caucasian Albanian church, and Zoroastrianism. Islam at the time was still a mainly Arab affair, and the Arabs had not yet fully accustomed to non-Arab Muslims. The liberation of Muslims from taxation also implied a vested interest in retaining control over non-Muslim populations. Meanwhile, tensions mounted in the Muslim world, leading in the second half of the seventh century to the split between the Sunni and Shi'a wings of Islam, which was followed by several

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, Baku: Zaman, 2004.

additional splits. By the middle of the eighth century, the Central Asia-influenced Abbasid dynasty was established in place of the Umayyads, which made Islam truly cosmopolitan.<sup>2</sup> This led to a more rapid expansion of Islamic belief in the areas ruled by the Arabs, including present-day Iran and Azerbaijan. The spread of Islam did not necessarily mean the conversion of the population into orthodox Islamic belief. Quite to the contrary, in many areas Islamic ideals were added to, or combined with pre-Islamic, mainly Zoroastrian beliefs, creating a syncretistic mix that orthodox Muslims found and still do find appalling. Yet syncretism had been particularly strong in the area of present-day Azerbaijan, given the multitude of cultural influences upon this geographic crossroads. Indeed, syncretism of Zoroastrian, Christian, and Shamanistic practices had evolved in Azerbaijan over the centuries, and especially to the rural population, the emergence of Islam only added one additional component to this mix of beliefs. This penchant towards syncretism and mysticism also explains why most of Azerbaijan gradually came to adopt the Shi'a version of Islam, since it was considerably more tolerant to mysticism. A prominent example of syncretism was the Khurrami movement that emerged in present-day southern Azerbaijan, which combined elements of Shi'a and Zoroastrian creed. Under the legendary leader Babek, the Khurramis revolted in the first half of the ninth century, briefly establishing control over most of present-day Azerbaijan and parts of Iran before being crushed. Babek remains a highly revered historical figure in southern Azerbaijan to this day, but his defeat also meant a much harsher attitude to Zoroastrianism by the Sunni Muslim rulers.

Over the following centuries, various forms of Islamic thought flourished in Azerbaijan, yet the dominant creed remained the Sunni creed that was shared by both the Abbasids and the Seljuk Turkic state that spread into the Islamic world from the North. Mystical Sufi sects of Islam also strengthened during this period, and their less orthodox beliefs found fertile ground among the traditional syncretism of Azerbaijan. In particular, Sufi orders were strong among the Turkic tribes that gradually began to cross into and settle in Azerbaijan, gradually turkifying the country and its population.

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<sup>2</sup> See M. A. Shaban, *The 'Abbasid Revolution*, Cambridge, 1970.

The Mongol invasions formed a significant interlude, and led to a significant reversal of the fortunes of the Muslims. Indeed, Muslims were particularly hard hit by the Buddhist and Shamanist Mongol hordes, which allied with Christian peoples subjugated by the Muslims, including the Armenians and Georgians. The Mongol Il-Khan state even set up Tabriz as its capital, and gradually was Islamicized after its ruler, Gazan Khan, accepted Islam in the late thirteenth century and began spreading it with the proverbial zealousness of a convert. During the Il-Khan period, it was the Shafi'i *Madhab* or school of jurisprudence of Sunni Islam that dominated Azerbaijan.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the Il-khans, who made Azerbaijan a center of their state, the Azerbaijani lands often remained crossroads and backwaters to larger empires whose control was fluid and shifting in strength. This allowed competition for local power by native as well as non-native princes and vassals. Native principalities developed, most significantly the Shirvanshahs of Baku. The Shirvanshahs developed a remarkable capability of surviving, allying themselves most often with the victorious empires that projected their influence into Azerbaijan. Hence though ‘resilience and adaptability’, they were able to survive both the destruction of the Mongol and Timurid invasions.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the Turkic element in Azerbaijan was further strengthened by migrations during the Mongol onslaught, the subsequent Timurid invasions, and the ensuing domination of the Turkmen Qara-qoyunlu and Aq-qoyunlu dynasties. This period was significant for the spread of influence of Sufi orders in the population.

### **The Safavid Dynasty and the Primacy of Shi'ism**

One of these Sufi orders was the Safaviya, created in the late thirteenth century. By the fifteenth century, Turkic tribes had taken control of the order, increasing its Shi'a character and turning it into what Yunusov calls a ‘military brotherhood of Turkish nomads’, not entirely dissimilar to the

<sup>3</sup> Yunusov, 63.

<sup>4</sup> Audrey Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1992, 4.

European Knights.<sup>5</sup> Under the leadership of Ismail Khatai, the movement took power in Tabriz, establishing the Safavid dynasty. This was similar to developments across Asia, where Turkic dynasties played a central role in the building of statehood and empire, dominating India, the Middle East, Asia Minor and parts of Europe for the better part of the second Millennium CE. Yet the Safavids differed from Ottomans, Mamluks Ghaznavids and Moghuls by being a dynasty locally rooted in the Ardebil region. This dynasty emerged as the leading element building the Iranian state in the early sixteenth century, and making Shi'a Islam the state religion of Iran. Established in 1501, the Safavid dynasty fought to evict the Ottoman rule that had imposed on the region.

The Azerbaijani Turkish vernacular remained the court language of the early Safavid rulers. During this period, the Azerbaijani Turkish language developed into a literary language in a form close to the present day, a fact shown by the remarkable works of the time including the prose and poetry of Muhammad Fuzuli. From its Turkic origins, the Safavid dynasty nevertheless became more Persian. In 1592, the Safavid court moved to Isfahan, bringing Iran's capital into Persian rather than Azeri Turkish areas. After an Afghan invasion in 1722, the Safavids were eventually replaced by the Turkic Qajar dynasty. The gradual weakening of central power meant increased independence for the Khanates of both northern and southern Azerbaijan. For Azerbaijan, the long tenure of the Safavids cemented the integration into the Persian world of both northern and southern Azerbaijan, while giving its people the distinction of being the only Turkic people that is predominantly Shi'a – a fact that, as Shaffer observes, “contributed to the formation of their distinctive and common Azerbaijani identity”.<sup>6</sup> That said, the northernmost Azerbaijani Turkish areas – those in the foothills to the Caucasus mountains bordering staunchly Sunni Dagestan – remained true to the Sunni creed. Indeed, Sunni resentment grew in the late Safavid era, and erupted into rebellion just as the Afghan attacks began. Hence Sunni armies from Dagestan and northern Azerbaijan moved south on Ganja and

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<sup>5</sup> Yunusov, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, 19–20.

Shamakha amidst sectarian violence. This allowed Russian and Ottoman armies to briefly enter northern Azerbaijan, until Iranian control was re-established. The Sunni-Shi'a divide at this time was a dominant dividing line, politically more important than the divisions separating Muslims of either sect from Christians or Jews. The interlude of Nadir shah, reigning between the Safavids and Qajars, was somewhat successful in bridging the divisions between Shi'a and Sunnis. No further civil wars between Shi'a and Sunnis have since been recorded in Azerbaijan. The increasing weakness of the Iranian and Ottoman empires allowed Azerbaijani Khanates a substantial amount of independence. Khanates in the north, such as Quba and Derbent, were officially Sunni, while the southern ones were Shi'a. This nevertheless did not play a major political role.

### Russian Conquest, the Secular Intelligentsia, and Soviet Atheism

In the early nineteenth century, the weakness of the Islamic empires had allowed Russia to step into the South Caucasus. Hence following Georgia's annexation in 1801, the lands comprising present-day Azerbaijan and Armenia were incorporated into the Russian empire as a result of two wars between Russia and Iran. By 1828, the Araxes river was firmly established as the border between the Russian South Caucasus and Iran, and this border remains to this day. Russian colonization gradually isolated northern Azerbaijan from the rest of the Islamic world. Russian rule, followed by policies of russification and Christianization, gradually marginalized the *Ulema* of Azerbaijan. Russia initiated the policy used by the Soviet Union of co-opting Muslim clergy and ensuring a pliant Islamic leadership that helped Russia control the Muslim population. Periodic attempts of popular leaders to instigate rebellion in the name of Islam did happen, inspired by the resistance of the Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus under the leadership of Imam Shamil. These petered out after Shamil's surrender in 1859, which enabled Russia to secure almost total control over the territory and the clergy of the Caucasus.

The rapid industrialization following the oil boom of the 1870s greatly affected Baku. It grew into the undisputed capital of the region, rivaling Tiflis where Russian administration of the South Caucasus was centered. Yet

it also changed greatly in ethnic and religious composition. The influx of Armenians and Russians gradually made Baku a cosmopolitan more than a Muslim city, while the influx of laborers from Iran increased the Shi'a element in an area where Sunnism had been strong.

The intelligentsia that developed in Azerbaijan was very much affected by this, and in general by European ideas transferred through Russia. It is notable that the intelligentsia that developed was almost exclusively secular in nature. Even if some thinkers played with ideas of pan-Islamism, this was mainly as a political project, and in any case the intelligentsia never included representatives of the *Ulema*. This gave the emerging national movement a strong secular angle. A key element in debates among the early intelligentsia was the issue of education and the reform of Muslim schooling, hitherto mainly focused on boys and consisting of religious education as well as limited instruction by rote in writing, reading, and basic mathematics. Azerbaijani intellectuals joined the reform movement originating in Tatarstan called the *Jadid* movement, literally meaning “New method”, an agenda for the modernization of Muslim education that discouraged learning by rote and introduced new methods of learning and new subjects, including foreign languages.<sup>7</sup> Jadidism made it possible for the Azerbaijani intelligentsia to combine their allegiances to Islam, Turkic ethnic bonds, and progressiveness as identified by Europe. Hence Turkist thinker Ali Huseynzade launched the slogan of “Turkify, Islamize, and Europeanize”, unifying three concepts that could otherwise seem at odds.<sup>8</sup> This slogan was adopted by the leading ideologist of Pan-Turkism, Ziya Gökalp, in his *Principles of Turkism*.<sup>9</sup> As a whole, the particular exposure of Azerbaijani thinkers to European thought helped them to play an important role in the intellectual debate of both Iran and Turkey in the early twentieth century, and strengthened progressive elements there. It is also notable that the very division of Azerbaijanis between Sunni and Shi'a factions made Islamism

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<sup>7</sup> See Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Ziya Gökalp, *Türkçülükün Esasları*, 1923; in English as *Principles of Turkism*, Leiden, 1968.

less appealing to the intelligentsia as a cornerstone of identity. Instead, secularism and ethnic identity seemed to them a tool to bridge this divide and unify the nation.

The Soviet experience naturally strengthened secularism in Azerbaijan. More than that, official and aggressive atheism dealt a hard blow to religion in general and Islam in particular. Although Communists in the first half of the 1920s emphasized the similarities of religious law and Communism in order to consolidate power, this soon gave way to militant atheism, enforced from the late 1920s to the second world war. Mosques were razed, religious education outlawed, and aggressive efforts for the emancipation of women were implemented. Pressures on Islam were somewhat eased during the second world war, but resumed following the Soviet victory. By the beginning of the Brezhnev era, when central controls began to gradually be eased, Islam had been significantly damaged as a social force in Azerbaijan. Cultural Islam was certainly still present, as religious holidays were observed. Religious pilgrimages also survived, and the banning of the *Hajj* only meant that the reverence of local saints or *pirs* increased in importance.<sup>10</sup> In the Soviet period, moreover, the ethnic and religious composition of Azerbaijan changed significantly. If the terror under Stalin's henchman Mir Jafar Bagirov was an all-out assault on Azerbaijani culture, this was reversed under the subsequent Communist rulers. Under Imam Mustafyev and Vali Akhundov, the official status of the Azerbaijani language was strengthened, the economic autonomy of the republic was promoted, and the migration of ethnic Azeris to Baku was encouraged, transforming the city from a multi-ethnic to a truly Azerbaijani city.<sup>11</sup> Heydar Aliyev only built on these tendencies during his long tenure as Azerbaijan's strongman, permitting the development of a national intelligentsia that had practically been physically annihilated under Bagirov, and turning a blind eye to (and therefore indirectly encouraging) the emergence of nationalist sentiment.

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<sup>10</sup> Yunusov, p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks*, 164-69; Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren*, 66-67; Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan*, 175-77.

## Sunni and Shi'a Islam Today

At independence, religion in Azerbaijan was hence deeply affected by seventy years of Soviet atheism and an additional century of Russian colonization. This is visible not least in the divergence of social practices between Azerbaijanis from the republic, and Azerbaijanis from Iran. Attitudes to alcohol, pork, and the emancipation of women are far less liberal among Iranian Azerbaijanis than among those of the republic. Officially, about 90 percent of Azerbaijan's population is nominally Muslim. But being a "Muslim" for the majority of Azerbaijanis had more of a cultural and ethnic connotations than religious ones.

One important element of this has been the practical eradication for large parts of the population of the Shi'a-Sunni divide. It is widely known that Azerbaijan is by majority Shi'a, with a large Sunni minority. Hence most of southern and Central Azerbaijan is Shi'a, whereas the north is predominantly Sunni. Figures differ, with the most credible figures indicating that 65-70 percent of the Muslim population is Shi'a, while 30-35 percent are Sunni. Yet this reference should in no way be compared with the Shia/Sunni ratio for Iraq, where it is an accurate description of religious divisions in Iraqi society. This would be utterly misleading in the case of Azerbaijan. Many in Azerbaijan, especially the generation that was brought up during the Soviet Union, are not even aware of the basic differences between Shi'a and Sunni Islam.

Even more surprisingly to observers of more strongly Islamic countries, many Azerbaijanis have difficulties identifying themselves with either of the branches of Islam. For instance, a non-representative interview-based survey conducted within the framework of this project among 30 randomly selected ordinary citizens of the Ter-Ter region showed that a full third of the respondents said that they do not know which branch of Islam they belong. An additional 17 percent said that it does not matter for them. Hence half of the respondents either did not know or did not care about their affiliation with Shi'a or Sunni Islam. Only 30 percent of the respondents said that they practice the Shi'a creed, while 20 percent said that they practice the Sunni creed. A similar survey in the refugee camps of Barda and Agdam, including 60 persons of various age groups, showed that 50 percent of respondents

considered themselves Shi'a, 25 percent considered themselves Sunni, and 25 either did not know or said it did not matter to them.

Hence, references to Azerbaijan being 70 percent Shi'a and 30 percent Sunni, or to a sectarian division in the population, should be treated cautiously. Nonetheless, the younger generation of Azerbaijanis increasingly does understand the difference between the two schools of Islam.

## Societal Currents and the Rise of Islam

In the past several years, the popularity of Islam has clearly been on the rise. This is the consensus indicated by various local and international surveys, experts in the field of religion, but also a trend that is ubiquitous visually and anecdotally in Azerbaijani society. Almost all of the experts in the field of Islam interviewed agreed that Islam is visibly rising in Azerbaijan.<sup>12</sup>

A 2001 study led by Tair Faradov concluded that “33,7 percent [of a representative sample] have changed their views in the direction of increasing the extent of religiosity, whereas 8,7 percent have indicated that ‘they never believed before, but have become believers now’”.<sup>13</sup> The same survey found that over 60 percent of the surveyed do not fulfill religious commandments. Only 16 percent of Azerbaijanis perform the Namaz (prayer), while 27 percent observe the fast during Ramadan. In addition almost two thirds of Azerbaijanis found that society’s knowledge of Islam was unsatisfactory. All these examples indicate a religious revival in the context of a post-Soviet society recovering from state-imposed atheism.

A comparative survey conducted by the local polling firm PULS-S in 2003-2005 came to conclusion that the “Islamic model of state-building and public life is drawing more interest, and the number of supporters of Azerbaijan’s strengthened relations with the Islamic nations is also rising.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, a survey conducted by the Baku-based independent research center FAR Center, showed that almost a quarter of the randomly selected 1,200 respondents favor Islamic governance in the form of Shari'a. Another 29 percent welcomed the application of Shari'a norms in some aspects of their

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<sup>12</sup> Interviews with Nariman Gasimoglu, Sevda Ismaylova, Jafar Jafarov-all activists of the civil society sector.

<sup>13</sup> Tair Faradov, *Religiosity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Peculiarities, Dynamics, and Tendencies – A Sociological Analysis*, Baku, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Zerkalo, March 3, 2006

daily life, such as family life. Another Baku-based think tank, the Foundation for Azerbaijani Studies, came to a similar conclusion after its own survey, though its result were limited to the more conservative southern parts of the country. “Nearly 37 percent of the surveyed population in the south of Azerbaijan [near the Iranian border] favored Shari'a governance.”<sup>15</sup> To what extent the surveyed had any knowledge of what Shari'a means in practice was not apparent from the surveys.<sup>16</sup>

Several key factors have contributed to the rise of Islam in Azerbaijan in the post-Soviet period. Some of these factors play a more important role than others, and some have a longer history than others. Yet together, in a complex manner, they contribute to the gradual rise of political Islam in the country. The following sections will analyze these factors in an estimated sequence of importance.

### **Return to Traditional Values**

The most obvious reason for increased Islamic sentiment is that it is no longer actively counteracted by the state, while the collapse of communism has engendered a search for identity in which religion plays a natural role. As noted by Sevda Ismaylova, chairperson of the young women's camp in Lenkoran, “Islam is rising because during Soviet times, religious practice was not permitted, and now after independence was obtained, people feel free to exercise their religious rights and freedoms.”<sup>17</sup> The well-known expert in religious affairs Nariman Gasimoglu agreed, noting that the “reason for the rise of Islam in Azerbaijan is the downfall of the atheist ideology after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the aspirations by the local people for the restoration of their lost values, including religious ones.”<sup>18</sup> The deputy imam of Ganja’s largest mosque made the same argument, though from a different

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Nasib Nasibli, Chairman of the think-tank.

<sup>16</sup> As such, the relatively high proportion of respondents favoring Shari'a should not give excessive cause for alarm – it should come as no surprise that many Muslims, when asked in general terms if they think religious edicts should be the basis for individual and societal life, answer in the affirmative.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Sevda Ismaylova, March 19, 2006

<sup>18</sup> interview with Nariman Gasimoglu, expert in the field of religion, March 17, 2006

perspective: “Praise be to God, many young people have managed to liberate their souls from the devil and found their path to God.”<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, obtaining religious freedom, being able to go to the mosque without fear, and wanting to return to traditional values and roots are arguably the main reasons why Islam has been rising in Azerbaijan. Increasing numbers of people have started praying, fasting, making the Hajj pilgrimage and attending mosques simply because they reconnect with their Islamic heritage. In other words, Azerbaijani society is simply returning to a normal level of religiosity as compared with the unnatural condition during Soviet rule, developing into a secular country with a significant number of believers, comparable to the United States or Turkey. This category of people, which constitutes the largest portion of Islam devotees, does not pose a threat to the secular regime in the country; indeed, in this sense, the processes taking place in Azerbaijan are similar to those in Armenia or Georgia, or Russia of Eastern Europe for that matter, where spiritual revivals have been recorded since the collapse of Communism. One could even argue that the religious revival in Azerbaijan has been somewhat delayed compared with its neighbors.

A related factor is the identity crisis and changes in social mores that have been affecting Azerbaijan. On the one hand, independence meant the liberation of Azerbaijan from Russia’s dominance, which was also important for identity formation. Hence given the limited nature of past statehood and nationhood, Azerbaijanis were in a sense left groping for an identity, determining what exactly it meant to be a citizen of the post-Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. Being Azerbaijani was mainly defined in negative terms, being neither Persian, nor Russian, nor even exactly a Turk. More specifically, there was no clear precedent to establish what role religion would have in Azerbaijani identity, aside from being a cultural heritage. In this sense, Azerbaijan’s close links to both Turkey and Iran were a complicating factor: Socially and linguistically, Azerbaijan resembled secular Turkey, and indeed emulated it. Yet historically and through bonds with the

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with huddam Meshedi Tair Abbas Ali oglu, deputy imam of Ganja’s largest Shah Abbas mosque, March 16, 2006

much larger ethnic Azeri population of Iran, Azerbaijan was also tied with Iran, which had rejected secularism and promoted a theocratic state. An overwhelming majority of Azerbaijanis rejected and still do reject this form of statehood, but its existence was bound to affect the country.

Independence also meant swapping the rather conservative and insulated Soviet society for western-style consumerism. This implied an influx of audiovisual information and values from the west, including Turkey, that promoted modern lifestyles that Azerbaijan was ill-prepared for. Stark generational gaps began to appear, especially in the larger cities, with youth culture developing social mores, not least in the sexual sphere that are incomprehensible to the older generation. Through television, these values gradually affected the entire country. But western culture did not fill the identity vacuum; as is the case with all rapid shifts in societal norms, it also created a conservative backlash, which in the Azerbaijani context rapidly took on a religious character. Hence Islamic values emerged also as a reaction to the perceived excesses of the west, which large tracts of society did not see as fitting to the way of life of Azerbaijan. This is an important issue, which the progressive and modern surface of Baku life often prevents foreigners from observing. As Mark Elliot's excellent guidebook to Azerbaijan notes, visitors should not be fooled by the short skirts worn by local young girls: most still have a nine o'clock curfew to make, lest they upset traditional family structures.<sup>20</sup> Traditional Islamic concepts such as *namus*, or a concept of honor that centers on female chastity, are still strong in Azerbaijani society, including in seemingly cosmopolitan Baku.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Disappointment with the West**

A larger set of issues of a more political nature is related to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict itself generated a large humanitarian crisis, and led to a widespread feeling of humiliation in Azerbaijani society. As the conflict has not been resolved, this has led to rapidly growing levels of frustration and belligerence in society. From the

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Elliot, *Azerbaijan with Georgia*, Trailblazer publications, various editions.

<sup>21</sup> Farideh Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*, London: Routledge, 2002.

Azerbaijani perspective, the disinterest of the west in the plight of Azerbaijani refugees, and the failure of the west to uphold principles of international law have contributed to disillusionment with the west. As will be discussed below, the U.S. sanctions on Azerbaijan, which remained on the books for a decade in spite of Azerbaijan being the country whose territory was occupied, further exacerbated this disillusionment with the west as an honest broker.

### *The Karabakh conflict and failed negotiations*

The deadlock in the peace process and the failure of recent peace talks between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Presidents in Paris and Bucharest in Spring 2006 have further increased the frustration and skepticism in the Azerbaijani public as well as elite that the conflict can be solved peacefully. For over a decade, Azerbaijan has sought to walk the path of negotiations to redress what the population compactly perceives as an injustice inflicted on it in the early 1990s. This process has led to repeated hopes and repeated failures, generating growing disillusionment with negotiations.

Clearly, Azerbaijan has its share of the blame for the failure of the talks. For very long, Azerbaijan stated its readiness to give the Karabakh Armenians the 'highest degree of self-rule and autonomy', claiming that it would be 'less than independence but more than autonomy'.<sup>22</sup> But Baku's stance remained on an abstract level, as there was a marked inability or unwillingness to articulate what was actually meant by this formula. This in turn led the Armenian side to doubt the good faith of the Azerbaijani leadership's proposition.<sup>23</sup> In the early years of the negotiations, this had to do very much with a lack of experienced diplomats. At other times, the Azerbaijani negotiating position has shown a tendency to waver on its positions,

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<sup>22</sup> Personal communication to the author from Vafa Gulizade, Azerbaijani presidential advisor, Ankara, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Larry Minear and Neil MacFarlane quote a 'leading foreign ministry official' in Stepanakert as follows: "There are many different levels of autonomy, the highest being independence. Azerbaijan had to decide which one it was talking about. Was it Bosnia, Tatarstan, or what? The problem is that they are unwilling to concretize their proposal." S. Neil MacFarlane and Larry Minear, *Humanitarian Action and Politics: the Case of Nagorno-Karabakh*, Providence, RI: T. J. Watson Institute for International Studies Occasional Paper no. 25, 1997, p. 88. Also conversations with Tofiq Zulfgarov, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister, Baku, October 1998; Armen Baibourtian, deputy foreign minister of Armenia, Yerevan, October 1998.

seemingly to extract additional concessions. Azerbaijan's insistence on the phased solution was for long a potential impediment to a resolution. But from the perspective of the Azerbaijani government and population, these factors were dwarfed by the Armenian government's unwillingness to seriously consider even deep-reaching concessions from the Azerbaijani side. This has gradually convinced Azerbaijan that the Armenian side was not interested in a solution, that Kocharyan was stalling for time, taking part in negotiations mainly in order to extract maximum concessions from the Azerbaijani side.

Following the failure of the 2006 Rambouillet talks, President Ilham Aliyev's reaction indicated that he had drawn this conclusion: In a lecture to the second congress of World Azerbaijanis on March 16, 2006, Aliyev stated the thinking that had not yet been uttered:

For twelve years, Azerbaijan has lived under a cease-fire regime, but no peace has been achieved. Peace talks go on. But for how long? Azerbaijan's patience is running out. This situation cannot go on for ever. We are interested in the peace talks, but if we see that Armenia's involvement is a mocking of negotiations, and that Yerevan is not honestly involved but seeks to appease the international community, then we will leave the negotiations.<sup>24</sup>

The speech indicates that Rambouillet had confirmed Aliyev's suspicions that the Kocharyan government was not interested in a deal, but merely engaging in talks for the sake of not alienating the international community. To Aliyev, this implied that taking part in the talks would be playing into Kocharyan's stalling policies.

In this, the situation shows some similarities with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process: at Camp David in July 2000, Ehud Barak had offered Yasser Arafat more than he probably could have delivered only to be rebuffed, leading Israel to conclude that Arafat was not interested in peace at all, but in

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<sup>24</sup> Pervane Sultanova, "Ilham Əliyev: "Azərbaycanın qüdrətli dövlətə çevrilməsinə çalışmalıyıq" 525ci Qazet, 17 March 2006. Author's translation from Azerbaijani.

extracting maximum concessions.<sup>25</sup> This feeling was especially clear in the Azerbaijani government after Aliyev in Fall 2002 offered to end the Azerbaijani economic embargo on Armenia, its main bargaining chip, without demanding either the return of all seven occupied provinces or of Karabakh itself as a precondition, but demanding the return of the four southern occupied territories. The Azerbaijani leadership at this point felt that it had repeatedly gone out of its way to achieve a solution. Aliyev's entourage in 2006 drew the same conclusion as the Israeli leadership did after Camp David.

These factors are increasing the war mood in Azerbaijani society by the day. A survey by the PULS-S local polling agency in 2003-2005 revealed that few people believed the conflict would be solved in 2006. By contrast, most people thought either that the status quo would remain or that military activities would resume.<sup>26</sup> This is not automatically leading to Islamic radicalism, but it does provide a feeling of frustration and humiliation that the Islamic radical groups can exploit. If one adds to this the role of the West as perceived in Azerbaijan, however, the link to Islamic radicalism is clearer.

### *Section 907*

The Karabakh conflict itself failed to generate Islamic militancy in Azerbaijan. Religion never became an issue in the conflict; indeed, the spiritual leaders of both Azerbaijan and Armenia were instead periodically trying to calm tensions, though unsuccessfully. Likewise, in spite of Iranian attempts to spread religious radicalism among the forcibly displaced people from the occupied territories, this never grew into a discernible radical Islamic movement. The government's efforts to exert control over the refugee population and the labor migration of working-age men may have contributed to this.

That said, the Karabakh war has contributed in more indirect ways to strengthening Islamic movements in Azerbaijan. To begin with, the conflict

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<sup>25</sup> A document on Barak's thinking on the issue is Benny Morris, "Camp David and After: An Exchange – An Interview with Ehud Barak", *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 49 no 10, 13 June 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Zerkalo, March 3, 2006

and the world's reaction to it created a widespread feeling of injustice among the population of Azerbaijan, which created a widening gulf between Azerbaijani society and the west. More than any other country, the image of the United States in Azerbaijan suffered greatly due to the conflict.

U.S. officials regularly state that the U.S. government is doing everything possible to solve the conflict and achieve a "long lasting, just and peaceful solution to the conflict"<sup>27</sup>. The U.S. is indeed the country most active in bringing about a resolution to the conflict, being the most determined element in the OSCE Minsk Group, the trilateral group of diplomats tasked to negotiate the conflict, in efforts to resolve the conflict. Yet from the perspective of the Azerbaijani population, the negotiation process has been deadlocked for a decade, and increasingly, voices are emerging that argue that the status quo only serves the interests of Armenia and foreign powers, who are trying to prevent the outbreak of the war to ensure the smooth export of Azerbaijani oil. In turn, the foreign powers are seen as putting a lid on the conflict, preventing Azerbaijan from achieving the return of occupied territories, and preventing refugees from returning to their homes.

The U.S. is particularly vulnerable to this type of rhetoric for two major reasons. The first is the U.S. sanctions on Azerbaijan as a result of Section 907a of the Freedom Support Act, and the second is the U.S. humanitarian assistance to the separatist territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Section 907a of the Freedom Support Act, passed by U.S. Congress in 1992, prohibited any kind of U.S. direct government assistance to the government of Azerbaijan. This bill was introduced and championed by Democratic Senator John Kerry, later a presidential candidate, whose knowledge of Azerbaijan was non-existent but whose loyalty to Armenian lobbyists from his home state of Massachusetts was absolute. Azerbaijan did not yet have diplomatic representation in Washington at the time of the bill's passing. But it was already on the losing end of the war, ending in the occupation and ethnic cleansing of seven Azerbaijani provinces outside Karabakh itself. Any possible argument that Azerbaijan was an aggressor in the conflict was hence

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<sup>27</sup> Interview of US Ambassador to Azerbaijan Reno Harnish to Azerbaijani media during his field trip to Sheki on March 10, 2006.

made obsolete before the Bill even took effect. Indeed, the gravest humanitarian crisis of the war was clearly in Azerbaijan, and multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions condemned the occupation of Azerbaijani territories and demanded the return of those territories to the legitimate government. In spite of this, Section 907 remained on the books in Congress, preventing the U.S. Government from playing an active role in the region and severely limiting America's interactions with Azerbaijan's official structures. All U.S. administrations – those of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush – denounced section 907 as counter-productive to America's national interests in the region and urged its repeal. Yet no administration was able or willing to muster enough strength in Congress to have it repealed.

In Azerbaijan, section 907 was perceived as a betrayal, serving the interests of the Armenian lobby and punishing the victim in the conflict. All attempts of the Azerbaijani government and its lobbyists in Washington in the 1990s to repeal this prohibition came to a failure, thus further increasing frustration with the United States. The Azerbaijani government tried to ignore section 907 and the direct assistance to Nagorno-Karabakh, instead always highlighting its strategic cooperation with the U.S. and the growing partnership between the two countries. At the same time, in almost all meetings, Azerbaijani officials pushed for the repeal of section 907, thus deeply engraining this problem in the minds of Azerbaijani population.

Section 907 has thus done much harm to U.S. national interests in Azerbaijan and prevented the US government from getting actively involved in the country. It was finally waived, but not repealed, after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Seeing the importance of Azerbaijan in the war against terror, the White House pushed the U.S. Congress to waive section 907 on a year-by-year basis. This removed the practical complications of U.S.-Azerbaijani relations and enabled the U.S. Government to extend military and other forms of assistance to Azerbaijan. But paradoxically, the waiving of section 907 itself generated further frustration in the Azerbaijani public. It was not seen as a friendly gesture on the part of a U.S. government that sought to normalize bilateral relations, but instead as a way to keep Azerbaijan permanently dependent on the U.S.: by being subjected to an

annual decision to extend the waiver to the bill, Azerbaijan was forced to toe the U.S. line, providing America with powerful leverage over the Azerbaijani government. The increase of U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan and the growing USAID programs in the country following the waiver did not mean much to alter the sense of humiliation in Azerbaijan and did not significantly penetrate into the public mind.

#### *U.S. Assistance to Karabakh*

Not only do many Azerbaijanis no longer see the United States as an honest broker and mediator within the OSCE's Minsk group; many also believe that the United States is actively helping the Armenian side in the conflict. U.S. officials in Azerbaijan are constantly asked questions regarding the U.S. government's annual assistance to the separatist regime in Nagorno-Karabakh. Although former U.S. ambassador Reno Harnish repeatedly tried to explain that this was done for humanitarian purposes, few in the country find this argument credible. One example occurred during a meeting between Ambassador Harnish and alumni of U.S. Department of State educational programs in February 2006. As this question emerged, several representatives of this otherwise pro-American forum stated that the U.S. government's assistance to Nagorno-Karabakh carries a political, not humanitarian nature. The Azerbaijani media constantly covers this issue, which is seriously damaging to the image of the U.S. in the wider public.

These two factors – section 907 and U.S. assistance to Karabakh – are crucially important because they contribute to the image of the U.S. that radical Islamic groups are seeking to emphasize: an America that favors Christian Armenia over Muslim Azerbaijan; which is only interested in Azerbaijan's oil but is not ready to give Azerbaijan support in return; and an America that is not interested in solving the Karabakh conflict but which keeps sanctions on the book to prevent Azerbaijan from straying too far from Washington's policies. Given increasing frustration with the Karabakh situation, this plays into the hands of radical Islamic and anti-American forces.

## The U.S. War in Iraq

As noted above, Azerbaijan is one of two Muslim countries to contribute troops to the Iraq operation. These 150 troops are an important symbolic contribution, which is regularly acknowledged by the U.S. Government, most recently during President Aliyev's visit in the White House in April 2006. Nevertheless, as in many other countries contributing troops, the popular views of the war have turned increasingly negative.

The Azerbaijani media discusses the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan practically on a daily basis, with TV stations covering news from Iraq and showing images of destruction, explosions and violence. These images penetrate into the minds of ordinary Azerbaijanis, who increasingly believe that the U.S. is fighting a war in Iraq not so much to prevent terrorism, but to punish Muslims and to acquire Iraqi oil. Importantly, the war in Afghanistan did not produce similar antagonism and anger among Azerbaijanis, because it was widely understood after September 11 as a war of necessity. Most Azerbaijanis believed that the U.S. had a moral right to fight terrorists in Afghanistan. But the prolonged war in Iraq and the daily sufferings of ordinary citizens there, particularly in holy Shi'a sites that are important to many Azerbaijanis, further damaged America's image in Azerbaijan. Indeed, the Shi'a majority in Azerbaijan is a specific factor to the country as concerns reactions to the war in Iraq.

The majority of Azerbaijanis, while not taking their anger to the streets, condemn the U.S. war in Iraq and in private conversations blame U.S. policies there for the sufferings of ordinary Muslims. The fact that the explosions in Iraqi cities are caused by Iraqi terrorists is not widely considered, since the entire war is understood as caused by the United States. Obviously, such sentiments are strongest among Islamic communities. For example, Meshedi Tair Abbas Ali oglu, deputy Imam of the largest mosque in Ganja, put it as follows:

Don't you see that America is pressuring Muslims everywhere and killing innocent people around the world? America is the biggest evil. It

should be erased from the face of the earth. Everyone in the mosque is cursing America.<sup>28</sup>

It should also be noted that many Azerbaijanis oppose the government's decision to send troops to Iraq and do not want to see Azerbaijan side with "invaders" from U.S. and U.K. there. Since so few Muslim countries have sent troops to Iraq, many in the country believe that Azerbaijan's presence there spoils Azerbaijan's relations with the Islamic world and brings shame on Azerbaijan<sup>29</sup>. Occasionally, there are calls by Azerbaijani politicians, NGO activists and religious representatives to withdraw troops from Iraq.

### **Corruption, Semi-Authoritarianism, and the Decay of the Secular Political Opposition**

Another factor that supports the growth of political Islam is public frustration with poverty, unemployment, corruption, and limited avenues for political participation. These ills have become systemic in their proportions, and continue to plague Azerbaijan. Poverty and unemployment continue to remain major problems for the Azerbaijani population, particularly in rural areas. Official statistics by the Ministry of Economic Development show that 42 percent of the country's population lived in poverty in 2004. Although Azerbaijan's economy is booming, growing presently at the rate of 26 percent annually, the high levels of corruption and bureaucracy generate skepticism in the citizenry that things might change radically. That said, recent economic reforms conducted by President Ilham Aliyev have shown a certain awareness of the need to address these problems. Aliyev's gradual reforms and his replacement of 'old guard' officials widely thought to be corrupt with younger and more professional forces have rejuvenated hope among the population in improved economic welfare. Aliyev now promises rapid reductions in the poverty rate in the country, showing statistics that 300,000 jobs have been created in the past three years, and a host of positive economic indicators. These factors have all contributed to boosting the popularity of the president and instilling hope for the future in the otherwise

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with huddam Meshedi Tair Abbas Ali oglu, deputy imam of Ganja's largest Shah Abbas mosque, March 2006.

<sup>29</sup> See eg. an article in the opposition newspaper *Yeni Musavat*, 16 February 2006.

disillusioned population. This is in itself a cause for hope, since it would reduce the recruitment pool for Islamic radicalism, but it also raises the stakes involved in the distribution of Azerbaijan's economic wealth. If somewhat adequately distributed, economic growth will help stabilize the country. But if the public perception of endemic corruption and mismanagement does not disappear, skewed distribution of economic growth would risk to turn into a destabilizing force: relative rather than absolute deprivation is a most powerful force for change and resistance.

While it is too early to judge if recent reforms have led to results, surveys have highlighted these problems. For instance, a survey conducted by the local polling firm PULS-S with financial support from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Open Society Foundation revealed that although the majority of Azerbaijan's population believe that the country is developing in the right direction and that their income is rising, still 50 percent of the respondents stated that they were barely surviving.<sup>30</sup>

An important element in this regard concerns the shifts in the Azerbaijani political system. The political opposition, as noted previously, has remained staunchly secular, and a hallmark of Azerbaijani politics has been the consensus on secularism among major political actors. This has also meant that the ideological span in the country's politics is rather small. All major political forces advocate or pay lip service to a pro-western, liberal democratic state system based on a market economy. Whether in terms of Karabakh, foreign policy or domestic issues, the argument is more about who can achieve the same goals in the best fashion and with least corruption and mismanagement. Yet the past two elections – the presidential election of 2003 and the parliamentary elections of 2005 – have contributed to a general malaise in the opposition. The opposition failed to overcome public suspicion related to the failure of the present opposition forces during their time of government in 1992-93. Most damaging in this regard was their failure to put forward a joint candidate in the 2003 elections, and the extended bickering and manipulation among the opposition leaders. In both 2003 and 2005, the opposition suffered from lacking a concrete political agenda, and from a

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<sup>30</sup> Zerkalo, March 3, 2006

distinct tendency toward top-down intra-party structures, and a lack of intra-party openness. These problems have of course plagued the governing party to an even larger extent, but have been more damaging to the opposition. The party leaders have stayed the same for a decade or more, resisting the rise of younger political figures, leading to increasing fragmentation rather than unification. The two last elections also showed the inability of the opposition forces to challenge the ruling government, and their failure to gather crowds at remotely the scale of the Georgian or Ukrainian revolutions. This has had two major consequences: first, it risks pushing the mainstream secular opposition parties into irrelevance, generating fear that they would increasingly be replaced by religious parties. Secondly, the perceived lack of western support for the opposition has contributed to substantial frustration with the west among the opposition followers, risking to push oppositional figures toward radical Islamic movements.

Local analysts now raise the question whether the decline of the traditional opposition will result in the eventual collapse and disappearance of the present opposition parties, and if so what will replace them. The opposition leaders have made this process worse by again falling out against one another after the elections. This, in turn, opens up new opportunities for radical movements to recruit protest voters and address their concerns. The pro-Western and secular opposition has failed to provide any tangible results in the past 13 years and this creates a solid base for anti-western and Islamic forces to step into politics.

The opposition parties have understood their slipping in the public mind, and have not shied away from incorporating religious figures or religious slogans in their political programs. For example, the social democratic party of Ayaz Mutalibov has long been aligned with the Islamic party of Azerbaijan, which was part of the YeS bloc in the 2005 elections. Likewise, the popular but controversial Shi'a preacher Ilgar Ibrahimoglu appeared alongside the main opposition Azadliq bloc in the post-election demonstrations. Individual campaigns have included Islamic elements, as suggested by the example of Rauf Arifoglu, deputy chairman of secular Musavat opposition party and editor-in-chief of the most popular opposition daily newspaper, *Yeni Musavat*. Arifoglu used religious messages during his campaign, running from the

highly Islamic Nardaran region on the Apsheron peninsula outside Baku, indicating a readiness to adapt political slogans to the winds blowing in the electorate. In the aftermath of the 2005 elections, some opposition leaders have started talking openly about shifting their messages towards Islam. For instance, Panah Huseyn, the head of election headquarters of the Azadliq bloc, said that “Azerbaijani opposition should not exclude the possibility of incorporating some Islamic messages in its platforms.”<sup>31</sup> Other opposition activists have made similar comments and the opposition press is full of daily articles on the possibility of “green revolution” in the future. While this could be understood as a way of blackmailing the West and using the specter of an Islamic revolution should the West not support the opposition, most Azerbaijan watchers agree that the frustration of the opposition is real. In this context, it should be recalled that Azerbaijan does not have a historical experience comparable to Turkey’s Ataturk, who drew a strong and clear line in the sand between politics and religion. While Ataturk is widely respected in Azerbaijan, his mark on the Azerbaijani political system is less distinct, and the prohibition of religious elements in politics are less strongly engrained, let alone upheld by a strong institution such as the Turkish military and judiciary institutions.

Activists of political parties, NGOs and youth movements put substantial blame on the west for the failure of democratic progress in Azerbaijan. They believe that the primary reason why democracy is failing in Azerbaijan, as they see it, while it is triumphing in Georgia and Ukraine is because of the West, primarily the United States, and its interests in the country’s oil. The repeated reports of widespread fraud in the election process and crackdowns on the opposition parties and demonstrations did elicit western condemnation, but not anywhere near the level anticipated and expected by the opposition. Indeed, the support of the western states and organizations that had bankrolled the popular youth movements that lay the basis for revolution in Georgia and Ukraine was not present in Azerbaijan in 2005. This was to a large extent related to a western disappointment with the fractures and lack of political programs on the part of the opposition, but this

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<sup>31</sup> Yeni Musavat, 28 November 2006.

is clearly not the way it is perceived by the activists and sympathizers of the opposition, who are a substantial political force in the country. Indeed, the success of the opposition in Georgia and Ukraine and the overthrow of the ruling regimes in those countries fueled the Azerbaijani opposition's frustration with the West, because of its belief that the U.S. actively helped the opposition movements there and pressured the authorities to concede electoral defeat. This is explained in their view primarily by two facts: both Georgia and Ukraine are Christian countries, and they have no oil. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is a Muslim country with oil and gas reserves and thus maintaining stability, status quo and an authoritarian regime, which is easier to deal with, is perceived by the opposition and a part of the general public to be in the U.S. national interest.

All efforts of the US officials to show that US is committed to democracy in Azerbaijan, and that it spends millions of dollars on democracy-related programs fall on deaf ears, especially given the polarization of politics in the country. One Azerbaijani national working for an American democracy-building NGO called those programs "only face-saving efforts, masks. In reality, the U.S. wants to build Egyptian-style governance, because it is easier to deal with one dictator than with strong and popular democratic regimes."

The recent wave of democratization efforts in the Middle East by the Bush Administration and the statements by senior U.S. policy-makers regarding the importance of building strategic partnerships with democracies and not authoritarian regimes as a more reliable long-term strategy, brought some hopes to the Azerbaijani opposition. Yet after the 2005 Parliamentary elections, these hopes failed completely. The inflated hopes for the U.S. to come to the rescue of the Azerbaijani opposition resulted in two major heartbreaks. The bigger the heartbreak, the larger the reaction afterwards. "We have always put our hopes to the West and they have betrayed us. We must use all means against them now," said Sardar Jalaloglu, deputy chairman of the Democratic Party after the elections.<sup>32</sup>

The malaise of the secular opposition will have different consequences depending on how it adapts to its defeat and how the government handles the

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<sup>32</sup> www.day.az, November 25

large inflow of oil money. It should be recalled that the quotes and statements above reflect the view of the opposition parties themselves, and the extent to which it is shared by the wider public is debatable. Indeed, president Aliyev continues to have public approval ratings comparable to any western head of state. Yet the disillusionment of the opposition and its supporters, and signs that oppositional forces may be tempted to turn to Islamic radicalism, are disturbing for the future political development of the country.

### **Growing Anti-Americanism**

Similarly, the recent scandal of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad further damaged the image of the West in the eyes of Azerbaijanis. Even the most secular and moderate persons in the country condemn these actions and have little excuses left to defend western policies. Although this had nothing directly to do with America, the generally growing gap between the Azerbaijani public and the West does affect perceptions of the U.S.

On February 9, 2006, several hundred Muslim activists organized an unauthorized, apparently spontaneous rally in the center of Baku, protesting against the publication of the cartoons. The police was unprepared for this rally and could only stop it at the last minute, when the protestors had already approached the French embassy in downtown Baku. It is noteworthy that the police forces, unlike the case when facing traditional opposition demonstrations, decided not to stop the Islamic protestors with force, instead only negotiating with them and urging them to stop their actions. Yet two days later, another attempt by Islamists to stage a rally in downtown Baku did not end peacefully, as the police used force to disperse the crowd.

These developments combined have led to the U.S. gradually losing the image of being an honest, just and democratic country that it once had in the eyes of the Azerbaijani public. As a result of this disappointment with the West, fewer Azerbaijanis see America as a symbol or goal towards which they should strive to develop, which was the case in the early 1990s. Now they increasingly believe that America and the West in general are rich places that are good to live in, but in terms of ideology and values, fewer Azerbaijanis are striving to become part of the West or to emulate the West.

A survey conducted by the authors of this report among 70 randomly selected refugee and internally displaced persons in southwestern Azerbaijan (Barda and Agdam regions) shows that the general refugee and IDP population, and particularly the IDP youth, is very disappointed with the West. When asked “what do you think about the United States?” only 23 percent of respondents thought positively of America. 63 percent viewed the U.S. negatively, or as a democratic country that works only for its own interests. Interestingly enough, a similar survey conducted in the neighboring town of Ter-Ter among the general population revealed very different figures: 43 percent assessed the U.S. negatively, while 57 percent had a positive opinion of the U.S. This means that the popularity of the U.S. among ordinary citizens is considerably higher than among the IDP population. Similarly, a survey conducted by local polling firm PULS-S found out that U.S., together with Russia and Iran, holds a “high place among non-friendly countries” for Azerbaijanis.<sup>33</sup> A survey conducted by the International Republican Institute found that only 48 percent of the respondents support Azerbaijan’s integration with the West.<sup>34</sup> However, it should be noted that other surveys have shown much stronger support for NATO membership, for example.

Clearly, the fact that a majority of residents in a rural area of Azerbaijan view the U.S. positively should be noted, even though this survey was far from representative. It indicates that the U.S. has not lost all its goodwill in Azerbaijan, which is significant given the travails of section 907, U.S. assistance to Karabakh, Iraq, and other factors such as external Islamic influence, discussed in the next chapter. Such levels of approval would be found in few western European countries today, where even Russia and China, among world powers, are occasionally given higher ratings than the U.S. among the general public. The fact of the matter is that the image of the U.S. in Azerbaijan is rapidly deteriorating as a result of the various factors described above. This is particularly notable among the refugee population, where the American assistance to Karabakh and section 907 are likely to have had the largest negative impact. These populations are hence at particular

<sup>33</sup> Zerkalo, March 3, 2006

<sup>34</sup> See [www.iri.org.az](http://www.iri.org.az) The survey was conducted in July 2005, long before the cartoons on the prophet Mohammad were published, creating outrage across the Muslim world.

risk of being affected by radical Islamic movements. Most of all, this shows that Azerbaijan has not yet developed levels of anti-Americanism as other U.S. allies such as Turkey. There is still time for the U.S. to restore its image, but unless the U.S. acts on this, it risks losing Azerbaijan as a country where both the government and public back America and view America in a positive light.

## **External Influences**

The domestic elements discussed above are important elements of the Islamic revival that is taking place in the country. Yet they contribute mainly to explaining the revival of Islamic sentiment in society. The politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan, in turn, takes a base in the larger societal currents discussed. However, this politicization is intimately related to factors external to Azerbaijani society, and in particular, the influence of religious movements from abroad, specifically politicized Islamic movements from Iran, the Arab world, and Turkey. This influence takes several shapes, which are all testimony to the greater interconnection across boundaries made possible by processes of globalization. At the most basic level, Islamic movements in Azerbaijan are influenced by world events and by the ideological influence of foreign Islamic movements. Secondly and more directly, an increasing number of emerging Azerbaijani religious figures have received training in core parts of the Islamic world. Third, foreign Islamic movements and states sponsor and actively proselytize political Islam in Azerbaijan. Finally, some militant groups have used the territory of Azerbaijan for their actions, without necessarily taking root of acquiring a local following.

### **Iranian Influence**

Since the independence of Azerbaijan, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been active in promoting its religious ideology in the country. When in 1992 the Popular Front came to power in Azerbaijan, Tehran felt threatened by the increasing nationalist rhetoric of the Elçibey government. Tehran viewed Azeri nationalism as a potential threat to its territorial integrity, considering the existence of about twenty-five million ethnic Azeris living in Iran. Tehran was also believed to support Armenia

against Azerbaijan in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh region, in spite of the Islamic bond between Azerbaijan and Iran. Consequently, relations between Baku and Tehran remained tense even after the late President Heydar Aliyev came to power in 1993.

Iran's religious activities in Azerbaijan were initially conducted openly, and concentrated on the more conservative southern regions of Azerbaijan that border Iran; the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic bordering Iran and isolated from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenian territory; and several villages on the Apsheron peninsula where Shi'a Islam is traditionally influential. Tehran has also been active in proselytizing in the refugee and IDP camps that were scattered around Azerbaijan as a result of the Karabakh war. For religious propaganda, it used Iranian *mullahs* and sponsored pro-Iranian mosques both in the southern regions, and in villages of Baku such as Nardaran.

In the late 1990s, President Aliyev banned and expelled Iranian *mullahs* who were preaching in Azerbaijani mosques. This, however, did not stop Iranian religious activity in Azerbaijan, but resulted in a change of tactics. Today, Tehran uses Azerbaijani *mullahs* who are sympathetic to the Iranian regime and often trained in Iran, and promotes its agenda through cultural and social organizations. These organizations sponsor big feasts primarily for the poor section of the population during certain religious days such as the anniversary of martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein.

In the past, Iran also bankrolled the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, which is believed to have strong links to Tehran. Moreover, it supported other Iran-connected groups of a more militant character, such as Jeypullah and Hizbulah. In 2000, the Azerbaijani government arrested and sentenced to different terms in prison several members of the Jeypullah radical group, which was allegedly involved in the assassination of famous Azerbaijani scholar Ziya Bunyatov.

The southern regions of Azerbaijan, the IDP camps, and the Apsheron peninsula remain a stronghold of Iranian activity. According to the State Committee for Work with Religious Structures "in every village of Masalli, Lankaran and Jalilabad regions there is at least one mosque and one religious

community. Only in Masalli region the number of functioning mosques exceeds the total number of mosques in Neftchala, Salyan, Saatli and Sabirabad regions.”<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that the southern region is also home to the Talysh and Tat ethnic minorities.

One of the other tools that Iran uses to advance its influence in Azerbaijan is through *madrasas* (religious schools) for young children. These *madrasas* target children who want to learn to read the Qur'an. But aside from teaching children how to read Arabic, these *madrasas* disseminate literature that glorify Iran and its regime. In 2002, the Azerbaijani government shut down 22 of these *madrasas*, which had been operating in the country without proper documentations for over six years.<sup>36</sup>

Tehran or pro-Iranian organizations in Azerbaijan also sponsor students who want to study Shi'a theology in Iran. Although the number of Azerbaijani students who are currently studying in Iran is not known, State Committee Head Rafiq Aliyev during a 2003 trip to Iran met with 200 Azerbaijani students who were studying in the city of Qum.<sup>37</sup> These students were funded by various religious centers and organizations in Azerbaijan.

Since 2001, religious matters on the governmental level between Azerbaijan and Iran are handled by the State Committee for Work with Religious Structures on the Azerbaijani side, and Iran's Organization of Culture and Islamic Relations. In Iran, the religious and cultural activities are generally overseen by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei who uses so-called “cultural bureaus” to conduct his own foreign policy independently from official Iranian diplomatic channels. The Islamic Propaganda Organization (*sazeman-e tablighat-e eslam*), the Hajj and Welfare Organization, and the

<sup>35</sup> This information is from the Azerbaijani State Committee for Work with Religious Structures website, available online at [http://www.addk.net/eng/articles/situation\\_e.html](http://www.addk.net/eng/articles/situation_e.html)

<sup>36</sup> From the interview with Rafiq Aliyev, ANS TV, January 21, 2002

<sup>37</sup> This information is from the Azerbaijani State Committee for Work with Religious Structures website, available online at <http://www.addk.net/eng/news/news002.html>

Society for Reconciliation among Islamic Sects (*majma'-e jahani-ye baraye teqrīb-e bain-e mazahib-e eslām*) are also a part of Khamenei's network.<sup>38</sup>

If left unaddressed, the Iranian influence in Azerbaijan's southern provinces is likely to strengthen and could potentially provide Tehran with substantial political leverage over Baku.

The Ramadan holiday incident that took place in 2005 is a visible example of increasing Iranian influence in Azerbaijan. In 2005, Azerbaijan officially celebrated the holiday ending the fasting month of Ramadan on November 3, as did with practically all other Muslim countries around the world. Iran, however, declared that the holiday would in fact be on November 4, and the Iranian population fasted for another day. Accordingly, the Shi'a residents of the southern regions of Azerbaijan celebrated the holiday on November 4, and not on the 3 as did the rest of Azerbaijan. This clearly shows the practical influence of Iranian state-controlled clergy on Azerbaijan.

Iranian activity is nevertheless not confined to these regions. Surveys conducted in the framework of this project IDP camps but also in Ganja and the Ter-Ter region not far from the Karabakh cease-fire line, revealed Iran as one of the foreign countries promoting Islam in Azerbaijan according to the interviewees.

Iran is likely to continue its religious activities in Azerbaijan by sponsoring cultural and social events and supporting pro-Iranian Azerbaijani *mullahs*. As the economic welfare of Azerbaijanis improves and the last IDP camps are dismantled, Iran's ability to attract poor and alienated Azerbaijani citizens could very well diminish. However, Tehran's activity will continue to flourish in more conservative areas such as villages around Baku and the southern regions of Azerbaijan. Iran will also remain as a leading country for students and scholars who want to study Shi'a theology and religious education.

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<sup>38</sup> For discussion on the different factions in the Iranian political elites see Eva Rakel, "Paradigms of Iranian Policy in Central Eurasia and Beyond," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, Vol. 2, Issue 3-4.

It is also notable to what degree the political relations between Azerbaijan and Iran affect the Iranian religious activity. Hence in 2003, the Iranian “Sahar” Television network, which can be watched in the southern areas of Azerbaijan, campaigned for opposition candidate Isa Gambar, including after the official campaign had ended. After President Ilham Aliyev sought a rapprochement with Tehran, proselytizing decreased, and in the 2005 parliamentary elections an Iranian delegation went out of its way to support the ruling party. If Iran used to provide significant assistance to mosques across Azerbaijan, this seems to have decreased somewhat. As an official in a Ganja mosque put it, “They gave us carpets, books, praying supplies. They used to visit us a lot, but not lately.”<sup>39</sup> Iranian officials have clearly made the point that refraining from proselytizing activity and support for subversive Islamic groups in Azerbaijan comes at a political price. Indeed, Iran seeks to use this factor to prevent Azerbaijan from developing too close relations with Washington. Should American influence be increased, Iran could easily again open the spigot of support for various political movements that it has at its disposal.

### **Arab/Middle Eastern Influence**

If Iranian-sponsored activity has been present, it has been relatively manageable for the government. On the other hand, Arab and Middle Eastern religious activities in Azerbaijan are considered to be potentially the most dangerous. Since 1991, wealthy Arab countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have funded mostly *Salafi* religious groups and foundations in Azerbaijan. The increase and decrease in the Arab/Middle Eastern religious activities in Azerbaijan over time has also been linked to the war in Chechnya. Most Arab and Middle Eastern fighters that made their way to Chechnya did so by using Azerbaijan as a transit country for reaching the North Caucasus.

The *Salafi/Wahhabi* Islamic ideology, which is often described by western scholars and experts as *Salafism* or *Wahhabism*, is a mixture of teachings of

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with huddam Meshedi Tair Abbas Ali oglu, deputy imam of Ganja’s largest Shah Abbas mosque.

the radical Arab theologist Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-1792) and the strictest *Hanbali* school of Sunni Islam. The ideology of Al-Wahhab and his followers stands out by its extremely narrow definition of monotheism, prohibiting the veneration of saints, any form of mysticism, and even the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad. It is heavily anti-Shi'a, but also suspicious of the traditional *Mazhabs* or schools of jurisprudence. Al-Wahhab's famous work is a book titled the *Kitab Al Tawhid* (The Book of Unity), in which he attempts to "reform" Islam. Nineteenth century scholars describe Al-Wahhab as follows: "He claimed to be a Hanbali, but his thinking was such that only he alone was a Muslim, and everyone else was a polytheist. Under this guise, he said that killing the Ahl as-Sunnah [the followers of other Sunni schools of Islam] was permissible."<sup>40</sup>

The Salafi/Wahhabi doctrine first became popular when this ideology turned into the official doctrine of Saudi Arabia. It further spread by the Arab *Mujahideen* fighters during the Soviets war in Afghanistan. Many Arabs, particularly those who reside in Saudi Arabia and other Muslims whose Islamic education came from Saudi Arabian instructors, regard Al-Wahhab's teachings as an important part of Islamic scholarship. However, a great number of traditional Muslim scholars consider Abd-al-Wahhab's interpretations of the Qu'ran and *Hadith* outside of the mainstream of Islamic thought.

Since Salafism/Wahhabism is the official Islamic doctrine of Saudi Arabia, that country is today the main source of the exportation this ideology, which has been made possible mainly by the oil wealth of that country since the 1970s. Many wealthy Saudis, Kuwaitis, and natives of other Gulf states have been donating and promoting the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam around the world.

The Salafi/Wahhabi propaganda in Azerbaijan are concentrated primarily in the northern Sunni areas of Azerbaijan as well as the capital city. There are two mosques in Baku, (the *Lezgi Mosque* in the Old City and the *Abu Bakr*

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<sup>40</sup> In Muhammad Amin ibn Abidin's (d. 1836) work *Hashiya radd al- Mukhtar* (vol. 3, p. 309). See reference online at <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/aloobs.htm>.

Mosque) that are known for the Salafi/Wahhabi activities. Among the two mosques, *Abu Bakr* remains the strongest in terms of the number of visitors and the quality of Islamic service. The Abu Bakr mosque was built in 1997 by the Azerbaijani branch of a Kuwaiti society, Revival of Islamic Heritage. The Imam of the Abu Bakr mosque, Gamet Suleymanov, is a popular young preacher who was educated in Saudi Arabia. He has a strong background in Islamic jurisprudence and is known for his rhetoric ability and his tempting Friday sermons. The Abu Bakr community is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

The Salafi ideology was brought to Azerbaijan either by individuals or groups from the Middle East, or by Azerbaijanis trained in the Arab world such as Suleymanov. Yet the communities are very much local, and few foreigners can be seen at the Abu Bakr mosque. The degree to which the funding for the Salafi groups and their proselytizing activities comes from abroad is unclear, as is the case in many other countries given the opaque nature of the groups. Yet it is obvious that the Salafi groups possess, as they do elsewhere, significant funding that is unlikely to come from Azerbaijani sources. The exact origins and channels for the funding of Salafi groups remain only partially known.

More organized and discernible Islamic groups with foreign origin or links are also active in Azerbaijan. The level of activity of Al-Qaeda in the country was discovered in connection with the bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi in 1998. An hour before the attack, a fax claiming responsibility for the bombings was sent to a London cell from a phone connection in Baku.<sup>41</sup>

Following these events, the government woke up to the threat of foreign radical Islamic movements. Several members of the Egyptian Gama-al-Islami movement, closely connected with Al Qaeda and led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, were arrested in Azerbaijan and extradited to Egypt. Even before 9/11, the government had found it necessary to crack down on the radical

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<sup>41</sup> See eg. U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, "U.S. Vs. Usama Bin Laden", May 2, 2001, S(7) 98 cr. 1023, p. 5440.

*Jeyshaullah* movement, which had apparent support from Iran and connections with Hizbullah and plotted subversive actions in the country. The crackdown intensified in 2002. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has officially named Hizb-ut-Tahrir a terrorist organization because their activities have been deemed to be directed against the State system and the sovereignty of Azerbaijan. Several young men, believed to belong to this organization, were arrested.<sup>42</sup>

After the capture of Al Qaeda leader Abu Zubaydah following September 11, 2001, details of a poison attack on European cities was uncovered with links to the Caucasus – most prominently the Pankisi valley of Georgia, bordering the North Caucasus. An Al Qaeda operative named Abu Atiya, who was thought to be a veteran of deceased terrorist leader Al-Zarqawi's training camp in Herat, was apprehended in Baku and turned over to the CIA.<sup>43</sup> Simultaneous proximity to the North Caucasus, the Middle East, Afghanistan and Europe hence contributed to making the Caucasus attractive to transnational terrorists. Being the only Muslim country in the South Caucasus and also having its largest metropolis with wide-ranging air connections to both Europe and the Middle East, Azerbaijan is particularly vulnerable

### Turkish Influence

Compared with the Arab/Middle Eastern activities, the influence of Turkish Islam is less radical and less aggressive. The main reason for this is the way the religious message is delivered. The Turkish activities are aimed at a more educated layer of Azerbaijani society, and Turkish Islamic movements – whether supported by the state or self-funded – are based on a considerably more moderate interpretation of Sunni Islam. Unlike Salafi propaganda, Turkish Islam is not assertive and populist, and therefore less appealing to predominantly poor and less-educated masses in the country.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Nariman Gasimoglu.

<sup>43</sup> David S. Cloud, "Long In U.S. Sights, A Young Terrorist Builds Grim Résumé On Journey to Iraq, Zarqawi Forged Ties With al Qaeda, Attracted Own Followers; An Amputation in Baghdad", *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 February 2004.

Turkish religious activities in Azerbaijan are carried out primarily through two channels: the governmental and the non-governmental. In both cases, these activities tend to be accommodating toward the state and to follow Azerbaijani laws and requirements.

The governmental activities are conducted under the supervision of the *Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi* (Directorate of Religious Affairs under the Government of Turkey). These activities involve building mosques, which the ministry coordinates with Azerbaijan's State Committee for Work with Religious Structures, and operating a theology faculty at the Baku State University. There are several Turkish mosques in Baku and other major cities of Azerbaijan. These mosques have Turkish imams and the Friday sermons are delivered in both Azerbaijani and Turkish.

Turkish Islam is based on the more moderate *Hanafi* school of Sunni Islam which has been further transformed under a secular Turkish state, the emphases in sermons are put on moral, social and economic issues. Hence, as in Turkey, Turkish imams in Azerbaijan tend to avoid discussions on controversial and political topics during their Friday speeches. Instead they talk about general moral and ethical obligations of Muslims. They disapprove any sort of violence and call for order and moderation. The majority of the audience of Turkish mosques consists of studying or working Turks in Azerbaijan, but also young and well-educated Azerbaijanis.

There are also official scholarships for Azerbaijani students who want to study theology in Turkey. These scholarships are provided by the *Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi*. In the last several years, however, the number of religious exchange programs between Azerbaijan and Turkey and the number of Azerbaijani students who went to study in Turkey on the scholarships given by the *Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi* have declined. While in 1998-1999 academic year there were 37 Azerbaijani students attending higher religious education institutions in Turkey, this number was only 4 in 2003-2004 academic year.<sup>44</sup>

Turkish non-governmental organizations and private educational institutions are the second channel for promoting Turkish Islam in Azerbaijan. The

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<sup>44</sup> These numbers are from Turkiye Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi website.

major non-governmental movement in Azerbaijan is Nur (Light) or Gulen movement also known as *Nurcular*. The movement was founded in Turkey in the beginning of the twentieth century by a Muslim scholar Said Nursi (1873-1960), also known as *Bediuzzaman* (Wonder of the Age). His major work, a collection of fourteen books, is called *Risale-i Nur* that consists of contemporary interpretations of Qur'an, in which Nursi tackles a wide range of issues including the basic of faith and the purpose of life, the importance of science in knowing God, and guidelines for becoming "the perfect man" (*kamil insan*).

Since the death of Nursi, the movement's major branch has been led by Fethullah Gulen (born in 1941), another Turkish scholar who has since further modernized the movement. A strong believer in science's role in modern life, Gulen has placed more emphasis on scientific education and has encouraged his followers to open modern Turkish schools around the world.

Scholars in the field describe the Gulen movement as "the 'middle way' of absolute balance-balance between materialism and spiritualism, between rationalism and mysticism, between worldliness and excessive asceticism, between this world and the next – and inclusive of the ways of all the previous prophets."<sup>45</sup> Gulen is also known for his advocacy of tolerance and interfaith dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims. He has met with the leaders of Christian and Jewish religious communities in Turkey as well as Pope John Paul II in 1998.<sup>46</sup>

Nursi/Gulen philosophy is rooted in Sunni (*Hanefi*) Islam, but also includes Sufi ideas. Unlike traditional Sufis, however, both Nursi and Gulen believe that a person does not need a religious guide – a precondition for traditional Sufis – and could seek spiritual self-perfection without a religious guide. In other words, the Gulen movement could be characterized as representing

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<sup>45</sup> From the review by George W. Gawrych of *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement* by Hakan Yavuz and John Esposito (eds.), *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 46, No. 3 Summer 2004

<sup>46</sup> More on Gulen and his movement visit <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/>

*post-modern Sufism* that focuses on improving individual's moral and religious beliefs and avoids "explicit Islamic propaganda."<sup>47</sup>

The Gulen movement's educational activities in Azerbaijan are led by Çag Öğretim işletmeleri A.Ş., a private Turkish company that runs a network of Turkish high schools and one university. Currently, there are 10 high schools, one elementary school, one gymnasium, 10 university preparation schools, and one university (Qafqaz University).<sup>48</sup> All these schools follow the western (Turkish) and secular educational curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan. The primary language used for teaching is English, besides Azerbaijani and Turkish.

The Qafqaz University, which was established in 1993, has been one of the leading private institutions of higher education in Azerbaijan. In 2001, the university was granted an "experimental status" by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan for its successful curriculum, which is based on Turkish and western program of studies.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Turkish high schools in Azerbaijan are known for their achievements in the field of science. Students that want to enroll at Turkish high schools (starting from the sixth grade level) have to pass a competitive test, and if accepted, have to pay an annual tuition fee that ranges from \$1500 to \$3000. Thus, most of the enrolled students at these schools are either from the middle or the upper class families.

Officially, no religious course is taught at the Turkish schools, as Azerbaijan's educational curriculum does not allow teaching religious classes at public and private schools. The only allowed course, *Morality/Spirituality*, deals with moral and ethical issues rather than religion. Although by the time of their graduation most of the students remain unobservant, the majority of them nonetheless become acquainted with the basic knowledge about Islam thanks to informal conversations and discussions with their teachers and peers. These discussions and the learned religious knowledge are derived

<sup>47</sup> Lester R. Kurtz, "Gulen's Paradox: Combining Commitment and Tolerance," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 95, No. 3, p. 379

<sup>48</sup> For more information visit <http://www.cag.edu.az/>

<sup>49</sup> For more information visit <http://qafqaz.edu.az/>

from the teaching of Nursi and Gulen described above. Most of the students continue their education at the Azerbaijani universities, as well as universities in Turkey, Europe and the United States.

In general, Turkish religious activities in Azerbaijan concentrate on major cities like Baku, Ganja and Sumgait, but also in other northern and central regions like Gabala, Oguz, Goychay, Agdash, Shaki and Guba. Turkish Islam is not considered a security threat in Azerbaijan and often viewed as a counter-balance to more radical *Salafi/Wahhabi* Islam promoted by the Arab/Middle Eastern countries. For example, the late president of Azerbaijan, Heidar Aliyev had encouraged Turkish activities in the northern regions like Gusar, hoping that Turkish activities would curb increasing *Salafi* influence in this region imported from Russia's Dagestan Republic. Gusar region of Azerbaijan is home to a largest Sunni minority in the country, Lezgiz, and is directly bordering Dagestan, where the *Salafi* movement has taken root since the First Chechen War. But because of the assertive nature of *Salafi* propaganda and strong links between residents of northern regions of Azerbaijan and Dagestan, Turkish Islam has so far failed to become a counter weight against the more radical *Salafi* streams.

## **Islamic Groups and Forces in Azerbaijan**

Numerous Islamic groups exist in Azerbaijan. Few overtly radical organizations have been created, however. Only the mysterious Jeyshaullah movement around the millennium shift is a possible example of home-grown militant movement ready to take up arms against the state. The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan is the only organized political movement based on an Islamic platform, but its role is limited and its influence weak. Instead, Islamic communities in Azerbaijan have organized themselves primarily as communities centered around individual mosques and religious leaders. This is the case at both the national scale and the local level. In this section, the two most prominent examples of Baku-based religious communities will be discussed: the Salafi Abu Bakr mosque and the Shi'a Juma mosque community. Both are based on the charismatic leadership of a preacher. Aside from these, Azerbaijan has official Islamic bodies, primarily the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the South Caucasus, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **The Abu Bakr Mosque**

Increasing numbers of people started flocking to the Abu Bakr mosque by mid-2001, which had developed into a center of Islamic fervor with Salafi undertones in the city.<sup>50</sup> The Mosque was closed down in late 2001 and later re-opened. The visitors of Abu Bakr mosque can be roughly divided into two

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<sup>50</sup> This report uses the term *Salafi* rather than the more popular *Wahhabi* term to refer to the revivalist Sunni Islamic movements that seek to return to the pure Islam practiced by the early generations of Muslims. The term *Salafi* or *Muwahiddun* (unitarians) is what followers of the ideology of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, an eighteenth-century cleric in Saudi Arabia who sought to purge Islam of what he considered idolatry or polytheism, themselves use for the movement. Wahhab himself based his teachings on the Hanbali theologian Ibn Taimiya, a purist scholar of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

types. The first category consists of young, educated and affluent Azerbaijani Muslims who like to attend the Friday sermons at this mosque. These young Muslims are less interested in the Salafi propaganda, but rather come to perform the Friday prayers, and are attracted by the Imam's sermons. The second category is made up of the dedicated and more religious members, who differ from the rest of the participants by their facial looks and outfits. They grow long beards and often wear trousers that are cut up the ankle, in typically Salafi style. There is also a strong sense of community among the members of the second group.

There are no exact numbers of Salafis in Azerbaijan, but some reports have placed their numbers between 7,000 and 15,000. Since 2002, Azerbaijan's security services have successfully penetrated most of the Arab/Middle Eastern radical networks in the country and have closely monitored their activities. As of today, the Salafis activists have not been involved in major terrorist activities (except the 2005 shootout between security forces and alleged Salafi followers in Novkhana neighborhood of Baku), but instead have concentrated on the religious propaganda. In fact, the number of young, poor and uneducated Azerbaijanis that attend the religious services in the Abu Bakr mosque has almost tripled in the last three years. This is primarily due to the continued problems of corruption, political inequality and social injustice in Azerbaijani society in recent years. And because the Salafi sermons are populist and mostly deal with condemning these injustices and inequalities in society, they attract a large number of young people. It should be noted that one reason that the government has not acted against the Abu Bakr mosque is precisely that Suleymanov refrains from involvement in political debate. Suleymanov does not use anti-government rhetoric in his speeches, but continuously assaults Western values. Yet the lack of political messages has disappointed some radical-minded members of the Abu Bakr community. An interviewed young man who regularly prays at the Abu Bakr Mosque said that some members who wanted to take a more radical stance towards the authorities, and were stating that only revolution can change things in real, were disappointed with the Abu Bakr Mosque and left. Apparently, they call themselves "Havarish."

Salafi currents are spreading not only in Baku, but also in the northern regions of the country, in the proximity to Dagestan and Chechnya. In Quba, Khachmaz and other towns in the northern parts of the country, the increase of Salafi believers is noticeable, as they are easily recognized by their short pants and long beards. The northern Sunni regions of Azerbaijan are ethnically diverse, with many residents having relatives in Dagestan. For many years, the more conservative families in northern Azerbaijani regions like Qusar, who desired to give religious education to their children, have been sending their children to Salafi-operated *madrasas* in Dagestan. For some time, Turkish Islam has been encouraged in these regions as an alternative source of religious education, but it failed to match the Salafi influence.

Of late, Salafi groups are also spreading in other parts of the country. In Ganja, the deputy Imam of the city's main mosque said "the number of Wahhabis is rapidly increasing. Especially, they are attracting our youth. They have lots of money."<sup>51</sup> Thanks to aggressive propaganda methods, the Salafi influence is likely to continue to increase. Although the increasing influence of Salafis raises concern on the part of the authorities, it is their activities in the northern Sunni parts of Azerbaijan that are the most volatile. Salafi teaching is very intolerant of Shi'a Islam as well as of folk Islam, or native traditional practices such as visiting holy shrines. Shi'a Muslims and followers of folk Islam in Azerbaijan are considered as heretical by Salafis. There has already been an incident in the northern Quba region, where Salafi followers burned down a holy shrine – an action that was later heavily condemned by the local residents. Since this particular incident, no major incidents have been reported. Nonetheless, in Dagestan the clashes and disputes between traditional Sunnis and Salafis have increased in recent years. This could potentially spread into and affect Azerbaijan's northern regions as well.

The Salafi community continue to exist as unregistered radical Islamic groups. They do not express political views openly, and hence do not often

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with huddam Meshedi Tair Abbas Ali oglu, deputy imam of Ganja's largest Shah Abbas mosque

face action by the authorities. On one instance, a group of radical Salafis raided the offices of Space TV channel to protest a TV program about Wahhabism, which they perceived to be inaccurate. The group demanded a meeting with the anchor of the program and only after the intervention of the police forces did they leave.

The state has had an ambivalent attitude to the Salafis. In March 2006, Azerbaijani media reported that one of the prisoners at Guantanamo was an ethnic Azerbaijani by the name of Polad Safarov. He reportedly used to work as Bin Laden's translator and was recruited from the Abu Bakr mosque. However, Gamet Suleymanov told media that he had never met Polad Safarov. Yet, Rafiq Aliyev, the chair of the State Committee for Religious Institutions, argued that the Abu Bakr mosque was engaged in the recruitment of young men and sending them to Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and other places.<sup>54</sup> such individuals had already been arrested, though lately such cases had decreased. "The Abu Bakr Mosque is promoting Wahhabism," concluded Aliyev.<sup>52</sup> The government struggles against Salafis, when it does, only by forceful means and does little to prevent the spread of Salafi ideas at the educational level. On July 12-13, in the Novkhani village of Baku, security forces of the Ministry of National Security raided a house, killing "two armed Wahhabis" and arresting six others. Later it was reported that some 30 more "followers of Wahhabism" were also arrested. Similarly, a week prior to that the Ministry of National Security refuted reports that its operatives arrested 11 Wahhabis in Baku mosques.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Juma Mosque Community**

The Juma Mosque and its Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, have become in the past several years the forefront of unofficial Shi'a movements in Azerbaijan. Ibrahimoglu has been called the "Muqtada al-Sadr of Azerbaijan", reflecting the similarities between two young, radical Shi'a clerics able to capture the public mind.

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<sup>52</sup> Yeni Musavat Newspaper, March 11, 2006

<sup>53</sup> Day.az News Site, July 14, 2005

Having studied in Iran for several years, Ibrahimoglu returned to Azerbaijan and became the Imam of the Cuma mosque, located in the old city in central Baku. His passionate speeches and anti-governmental rhetoric have attracted a large number of followers in a short period. Ibrahimoglu interestingly also spent time in Poland, studying human rights and democracy. It is the combination of Islamic roots and modern democratic rhetoric that make Ibrahimoglu different from other mullahs, and which allow him to target young Azerbaijanis with secular minds.

For the authorities, Ibrahimoglu posed not only the threat of a regular oppositionist, but was very specific because he was also the threat of a religious official entering politics and using religion for this purpose. This could have formed a dangerous precedent of the politicization of religion in Azerbaijan, and threatened the secular political system. Thus, the ensuing crackdown on Ibrahimoglu and his Juma community was unavoidable. Following the Presidential elections of October 2003, Ibrahimoglu was arrested in December of the same year and charged with using religious avenues to cross the border into politics and also for his participation in the opposition's post-election violent demonstrations, which resulted in clashes with law enforcement bodies. After being held for four months in pre-trial detention, Ibrahimoglu was sentenced to a five-year suspended sentence. His followers were evicted from the Juma mosque under the excuse that the Mosque is not officially registered as a religious community in Azerbaijan, and that the actual building of the Mosque is an ancient architectural building, which was supposedly in need of urgent repair work. At the moment, Ibrahimoglu is not permitted to travel outside Azerbaijan and the Juma Mosque is closed for repair works.

Ibrahimoglu now calls himself a Human Rights Activists and together with his organization DEVAMM (Center for Protection of Religious Freedoms), actively lobbies for the rights of Azerbaijani women to be permitted to take passport photos wearing Islamic headdress. Ibrahimoglu was also in the forefront of the protests related to the prophet Mohammad cartoons. He organized public discussions of the cartoon crisis at the International Press Club and openly condemned the Western world for inter-faith hostility.

Ibrahimoglu has also capitalized upon the growing discontent with the war in Iraq. In a roundtable discussion, Ibrahimoglu bashed at the West, blaming the West for the explosions in Iraq's holy cities. He also castigated the Azerbaijani authorities for keeping silent on the matter, and demanded that Azerbaijani peacekeeping forces in Iraq should be pulled out.

It should be noted that Ilgar Ibrahimoglu and his followers are more radical in their slogans and actions than the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan. For example, Ibrahimoglu after the November 2005 parliamentary elections told a public rally that "We are not going to tolerate the Shah's regime!".<sup>54</sup> Given his Iranian education, this could be interpreted as a call for a repetition of the 1979 revolution in Iran.

Yet, both the Islamic party and the Juma Mosque community stage street rallies in coordination and agreement with authorities, and do not organize prohibited actions. For instance, on March 4, 2006, Ibrahimoglu and DEVAMM asked the Baku Mayor's office for permission to stage a street rally regarding the recent pressures on Islam, the humiliation of the Prophet Mohammed, and the terror acts in Iraq. When the Mayor's office refused to issue a permission, Ibrahimoglu tried to sue the Mayor's office, but the attempt failed. Nevertheless, Ibrahimoglu stated that he would make another request and at the same time continue to fight for the freedom of assembly in Azerbaijan.

Ibrahimoglu was also one of the few Islamic leaders to condemn the publication of cartoon on Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary that appeared in the Baku-based but hitherto unknown *Yeni Habar* newspaper. Ibrahimoglu referred to these cartoons as "an insult to religious beliefs and a provocation aimed at stirring up hostility between religions." Ibrahimoglu also said that the Juma Mosque will consider suing the newspaper in the court and urged the Azerbaijani public to express strong protests against the newspaper.<sup>55</sup> This fits well in the context of Ibrahimoglu's attempts to build a solid relationship also with western embassies on his democracy platform. He is

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<sup>54</sup> Turan, 26 November 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Turan News Agency, 14 February, 2006.

known to have close ties with Norwegian Ambassador Steinar Gil and former U.S. Ambassador Reno Harnish.

Ibrahimoglu is also the uncompromising fighter against Azerbaijan's participation in the war in Iraq. "Three years ago, the issue was about fighting Saddam, but today this issue has disappeared. Those forces, which entered Iraq in the name of democracy and human rights, are far away from these values themselves. That is why Azerbaijani army should not be among these forces which have a negative image. Why can't Azerbaijan withdraw its forces, if Poland and Ukraine did so. We must all demand that Azerbaijan pulls back its forces from Iraq."<sup>56</sup>

### **The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan**

Islamic Party of Azerbaijan is a small, leftist party. Its peak of activity was in the mid-1990s, when supported by Iranian finances, the party attempted to play an active role in domestic politics. A first crackdown was undertaken when the party sought to establish its political positions and acquire paramilitary forces in 1995-96.<sup>57</sup> Following the Islamic riots in the village of Nardaran outside Baku, the power base of the party in 2002, its chairman, Haci Alikram Aliyev, was arrested and the party's registration was revoked.

Since then, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan does not pose a substantial threat to the government and is not the main driver of the radical forces. The party has been part of the left-wing "Pro-Azerbaijani Forces" alliance since 2000, together with the Social Democratic Party, which supports the former pro-Moscow President of Azerbaijan Ayaz Mutallibov (who is currently in exile in Moscow since 1992). The alliance split in 2005. The Islamic party is not registered with the Ministry of Justice, and thus can not participate in elections. Several attempts to stage protest rallies in front of the Ministry of Justice because of the registration problem were either not permitted or did not produce any results.

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<sup>56</sup> Yeni Musavat, 16 February, 2006.

<sup>57</sup> Igor Rotar, "Islamic Fundamentalism in Azerbaijan: Myth or Reality?", *Jamestown Prism*, vol. 6 no. 8, 31 August 2000.

The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan regularly participates in opposition protest rallies and roundtable discussions in the capital city. It has a weak regional network of branches outside Baku. Nevertheless, the party sticks to a strongly anti-Semitic ideology. The present party chair, Hajiaga Nuriyev, regularly makes anti-western speeches, and used the cartoon crisis to seek the boycott of western goods.

At the same time, the party itself is facing some internal problems. Some of its members, especially the heads of the regional branches in Khachmaz, Devechi, Siyazen, Ter-Ter, Hajigabul regions, refuse to recognize the authority of the chairman Hajiaga Nuri and blame him for the “stagnant situation and uncertain direction in which the party is moving.” They accuse the chairman for creating an environment in which the party finds itself isolated, without international links, and only dedicated to the ambitions of the chairman. Press reports suggest the party congress may consider the demands for the resignation of the chairman.<sup>58</sup> Hence the Islamic Party could split into rivaling groups.

### **Jeyshullah**

The Jeyshullah group was a terrorist Salafi group in Azerbaijan. It was mainly active in the late 1990s, reportedly responsible for several murders and an attack against the Hare Krishna society’s Baku headquarters. In spite of being Salafi in orientation, the group according to Azerbaijani authorities had clear contacts with Iran, and may have been related to a group with the same name that was briefly active in Turkey in the mid-1990s. Jeyshullah is thought to have planned to bomb the U.S. Embassy in Baku. The group’s leaders were apprehended and sentenced in 2000.<sup>59</sup> Little more is known about the group’s origins and finances.

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<sup>58</sup> Yeni Musavat, March 16, 2006

<sup>59</sup> “Azeri God’s Army Cult Members to Stand Trial for Murder”, BBC Monitoring Central Asia, 25 July 2000.

## The State's Relationship to Religion

Religious issues in general and political Islam in particular have not been issues dominating the agenda of the Azerbaijani government. As stated above, all major political forces are committed to secularism and are based if anything on a nationalist agenda. That said, religious issues have in recent years acquired higher prominence, as indicated by two main changes. First, a State Committee for Work with Religious Institutions was created in 2001; and secondly, the Ministry of National Security has repeatedly stated publicly that the issue of radical Islamic organizations it now its primary concern. Yet while the state has realized the importance of managing the issue of religious organizations, it has not succeeded in approaching the issue strategically. The most obvious example of this is the diarchy that has emerged between two state institutions tasked with regulating religious affairs – the State Committee and the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the South Caucasus – and the direct conflict between these state institutions. Likewise, the question of religious education remains to be dealt with.

### The Spiritual Board of Muslims of the South Caucasus

As a secular state, Azerbaijan has been careful in keeping religion and religion-related issues out of the State's agenda. Since Soviet times, religious activities in Azerbaijan were administered by the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Caucasus, headed by *Sheikh ul-Islam* Haji Allahshukur Pashazade, who has led the board since the late 1980s. Officially known as the Spiritual Leader of Muslims of the South Caucasus, Allahshukur Pashazade controls a network of Shia mosques and shrines in Azerbaijan and oversees the activities of imams and *akhunds* (religious clergy) in these mosques. He buys their loyalty through control over the unaccounted donations and gifts made by visitors to these mosques. Although Pashazade is mistrusted by many in Azerbaijan, his strong clergy network gives him enough leverage to play an

important role in the religious life of the country. It is also notable that Pashazade, himself from the southern parts of Azerbaijan, mainly staffs the Board with cronies from the Shi'a and predominantly Talysh South.

Pashazadeh is a ruling regime loyalist since Communist times, and has never threatened the secular government. It is widely believed that he was a KGB agent during Soviet times – which was typical for Soviet state sponsored religious institutions – and hence he ensures that official Islamic structures do not interfere with politics. But the flipside of the coin is the unpopularity of the institution. As in other Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, the former Soviet clerics are generally discredited, seen as government stooges without religious legitimacy. Pashazade is no exception, and the matter is made worse by consistent rumors of his personal drinking and womanizing. His Board is considered as a corrupt institution, whose mullahs are uneducated and do not promote Islam well. One of the best descriptions of the problem paradoxically came from Communist Party chairman Ramiz Akhmedov, who stated that

Radical Islam is growing because of the primitive, nineteenth century approach of the officially registered Muslim clergy, who alienate believers and impel them to seek pure Islam. Some of these persons opt for Shi'a Islam, some for Sunni Islam and some for a third alternative. Supporters of radical Islam then seek to take advantage of young believers' interest in studying the fundamentals of Islam. And supplying such knowledge has become a major industry with religious literature being freely available both in Baku and elsewhere, written in contemporary Azerbaijani and printed in both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets.<sup>60</sup>

Pashazadeh and the Spiritual Board are hence unpopular. This is primarily the case with the segment of population that understand Islamic norms better than the mainstream population and want to study Islam at a deeper level, that is mainly young persons. But this unpopularity is valid also in the general public. The FAR Center's sociological study shows that only 13,5 percent of Azerbaijanis stated that there was a religious leader whom they

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<sup>60</sup> Zerkalo, August 4, 2005

respected – almost two thirds answered in the negative. Only four percent expressed trust for the Sheikh ul-Islam.

Pashazade is by no means uncontested: his main rivals are Haji Sabir, the rector of the Islamic University in Baku, and theologian Vasim Mammadaliyev - both of whom are believed to aspire to Pashazade's position of *Sheikh-ul Islam*.

The Spiritual Board has one additional defect: it only has authority over Muslim groups, and de facto only over official religious structures – hence in practice, it has little authority over the Juma or Abu Bakr mosques, let alone over the proselytism of evangelical Christian groups.

### **The State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations**

Responding to this situation, the Azerbaijani government in 2001 established a secular institution, *the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations*, in an attempt to more effectively monitor and regulate religious activity in the country. The committee, chaired by well-known scholar Rafiq Aliyev, is responsible for oversight and registration of religious structures (i.e. mosques, churches), religious groups and non-governmental religious organizations and their activities in Azerbaijan. Once installed, the State Committee immediately started the re-registration process of nearly 2,000 mosques, churches and other religious communities and organizations. As of early 2006, 341 religious organizations had been registered by the committee and 29 of them are groups with non-Islamic affiliation.<sup>61</sup> In January 2002, Rafiq Aliyev stated that there were 406 registered religious structures in Azerbaijan, while the number of unregistered structures that were in service reached roughly 2000.<sup>62</sup>

A number of legal provisions and amendments enabled government to regulate religious groups, such as the requirement to register religious organizations, including individual congregations of a denomination, by the State Committee on Religious Institutions. Besides, Islamic organizations

<sup>61</sup> Day.az, February 16, 2006. See <http://www.day.az/news/society/41826.html>

<sup>62</sup> ANS TV, January 21, 2002

and mosques must receive a letter of approval from the Caucasian Muslims Supreme Board in order to be registered.

State Committee on Religious Institutions has broad powers in the area of control of the publication and distribution of the religious literature, monitoring of the importation and dissemination of the religious literature, and has the power to suspend the activities of religious groups violating the law.

The relations between the newly created State Committee and the Spiritual Board have been very hostile from the beginning. This rivalry partly derives from competition for the supremacy of the decision-making process in the field of religion; but also partly from the personal rivalries of Rafiq Aliyev and Pashazadeh, as well as from Aliyev's attempts to impose new restrictions and rules on mullahs, especially financial transparency in the mosques.

In 2001, for example, a scandal broke out in Parliament, when discussions came up about licensing mullahs. The proposition was put forward by the State Committee, but deputies in parliament close to Pashazadeh strongly condemned it and called it "counter to Azerbaijani values and traditions".

In 2005, the two men were again at odds. Pashazadeh has been unhappy about the decision by the State Committee on Religious Institutions to register more than 150 religious organizations and mosques in the regions without consulting with the Spiritual Board, which Pashazadeh claims is a violation of the law on Religious Freedom. Most of these newly registered entities do not even belong to official Islam and are shrines that people regularly visit. Pashazadeh claims that this is done in an effort to weaken Islam and to promote folk religion and inter-faith conflicts. "This is also done with the goal to acquire revenues from such shrines," read the press release of the Spiritual Board.<sup>63</sup> Particularly, the registration of "Sheikh Zahid" shrine in Lenkoran without coordination with the Spiritual Board caused a lawsuit in Baku's Sabail court, with the Board suing the State Committee.<sup>64</sup> Rafiq Aliyev, in turn, stated that "the Board is responsible for Islam only and this

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<sup>63</sup> Echo Newspaper, March 14, 2006

<sup>64</sup> Day.az News Site

particular place is not related to Islam, because people come to visit the grave of an individual person."

Aliyev has also accused the Spiritual Board of spending illegal and radical literature in the country, imported from abroad. Pashazade responded by stating that all the imported religious literature is aimed for third countries and only transit Azerbaijan.

*The Spiritual Board and the State Committee* hence quarrel over the right of oversight and seem to have little influence in stopping the spread of radicalism in some layers of the Azerbaijani society. This is primarily due to the fact that both structures' agendas are not to guide or direct the preachers and messages delivered by them, but just to oversee and register religious organizations and check for their proper documentations along with collecting unaccounted donations of their visitors. This fact reveals a vacuum in Azerbaijan's governing structures in which the religion is considered to be a phenomenon outside of the scope of the State. Consequently, the State does not have the right mechanism to tackle occasionally emerging issues associated with religion.

### **The Ministry of National Security**

The rivalry between these two institutions in fact creates chaos in the field of religious supervision in the country, and weakens the state's regulation of various religious institutions. At the moment, state control over the most acute issues related to religious affairs has by necessity been moved to a third body: the Ministry of National Security. The Ministry conducts surveillance of Mosques and religious organizations, and raids houses where radical and hidden Islamic groups assemble for meetings. The pressures on the mosques force some radical groups to meet secretly in private homes. Breaking into houses by law enforcement bodies with the aim of fighting Islamic radicalism was also noted by Asma Jahangir, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion of the UN Human Rights Commission during a March 2006 visit to Baku. Yet in the past few years, the Ministry has regularly arrested militants of various radical groups, indicating an ability to infiltrate and control the groups that are proliferating in the country. Indeed, Azerbaijan's record in counter-terrorism has been repeatedly praised by its

western partners. This struggle has according to government officials become and increasing priority. By early 2006, Minister of National Security Eldar Mahmudov publicly stated as follows:

Religious extremist groups threaten the national security of Azerbaijan and the struggle against them is the priority of the special services. Today we are facing more and more cases of terrorist attempts by religious-extremist groups, with the aim of overthrowing the secular-democratic regime of Azerbaijan and withdraw the country's participation in anti-terrorist coalition. As a method for this, they often choose foreign banks, offices, embassies and other strategic targets. Our experience shows that the basis for such extremist groups are young men, usually poorly educated from poor segments of the society or students-theologists at the age of 20-25. The most difficult task is to prevent the attraction of young people into such groups and networks. The worst news of the year for us was the information about Al-Qaeda trying to recruit young Azerbaijani women into their network.<sup>65</sup>

The most significant efforts of the Ministry of National Security, and most arrests carried out recently, have been directed at fighting Wahhabi groups, especially given the fear of Al Qaeda connections spreading in the country.

### **Education Policies**

A major problem is the sphere of education. The Ministry of Education is one of the least reformed agencies in the Azerbaijani government, and remains plagued by high-level corruption. This is a general problem, but its lack of efficiency is also visible in the field of religion. Presently, there is no religious education in Azerbaijani schools, nor is there a modern humanities curriculum. In other words, the educational system lacks modern education in the humanities and social sciences, including the history of various religions in Azerbaijan and the country's status as a secular state.

Education in the humanities, including understanding of religious history and the tenets of religion, is a crucial issue. This is particularly important given the surge of spiritual interest in society and the conflict among state institutions regulating religious issues. The seventy years of atheism have left a void in the Azerbaijani population's relationship with religion. The fact

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<sup>65</sup> Day.az News site, March 17, 2006

that so many Azerbaijanis are unable to tell the difference between Shi'a and Sunni Islam is alarming, and exacerbated by the incompetence of official religious structures, because it leaves the playing field open to foreign, radical Islamic groups that are often well-versed in religious propaganda, possess substantial resources, and are motivated to conquer new souls. Hence as the young generation is unable to receive proper and balanced information on what Islam stands for, they are particularly exposed to radical proselytizing.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study leads to a series of conclusions regarding the prospects of religious radicalism in Azerbaijan, its reasons, and the role of the state and external forces.

### **Radicalism: Not Yet Prominent**

Islam is clearly on the rise in Azerbaijan, as a result of a multitude of factors. The post-Communist identity vacuum and the search for spiritual guidance is the perhaps main reason. It is in turn compounded by disaffection with western consumerism, and a general disappointment with western values as a result of what is perceived as western double standards towards Azerbaijan, primarily over the Karabakh conflict but also as a result of the wider religious or civilizational tensions in world politics. Azerbaijan's continued problems with corruption, mismanagement, and limited avenues for political participation all contribute to this. Yet it is also clear that external influences play a very strong role in the spread of Islam in the country, and especially as regards politicized Islamic movements, be they Shi'a or Sunni. Islamic forces from Iran, the Middle East, Dagestan, and Turkey are all factors in this.

Their proselytism has increased significantly in the past several years, and are contributing to the rapid spread of non-traditional Islamic movements in the country, some of which are linked to illiberal political movements with an anti-secular and anti-western agenda. These have not yet formed political movements in Azerbaijan that can challenge or even affect the present form of government. Yet the trend presently witnessed in Azerbaijan indicates this could develop over time, depending on regional as well as domestic developments and in the absence of a coordinated state policy on religious issues.

## The Lack of A Coordinated State Policy

The Azerbaijani state is ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed by a religious revival with external influences, because the lack of a coordinated policy to deal with religious issues in general, and with political Islam in particular, is striking. Several of the key elements of this problem are summarized below.

### *No legitimate and functioning oversight*

The diarchy in religious structures and the ill-defined division of competences between the State Committee and the Spiritual Board is perhaps the most central problem at present. The Spiritual Board is religious in nature, nominally having religious authority as indicated by the title of its Head as Sheikh ul-Islam. Yet it is an inherited institution from the Soviet era, which has a history of acting as a tool of the political leadership, and therefore lacks legitimacy among the population in general, and among believers in particular. At the same time, the Board has become the *de facto* lobby organization of a group with vested interests in power, influence, and economic assets. It is therefore unable to exercise authority of religious structures in the country. The founding of the State Committee implied the creation of a secular institution for the supervision of religious issues. This was a step in the right direction, implying secular state oversight over religious affairs. Yet being a secular institution, the State Committee has no religious authority per se, being a mechanism of regulation of religious affairs. This unclear division of labor created a conflict between the two institutions. Yet even had this not been the case, Azerbaijan lacks an institution that guides or directs preachers and the messages delivered by them. An example of such an institution is the Turkish State Directorate for Religious Affairs, which supervises and controls mosques operating on Turkish territory, and is represented at cabinet level in the government.

The creation of such an institution has numerous potential pitfalls, as it could be construed as a continuation of the Soviet-type system of spiritual directorates. Any such institution would therefore need to maintain some autonomy vis-à-vis the government, while fulfilling the purpose of disseminating moderate Islamic values and traditions.

### *The Hierarchical Nature of Shi'a Islam*

Unlike the decentralized and diffused authority of Sunni Islam, Shi'a Islam is highly hierarchical. In principle, there is a religious chain of command, with the Grand Ayatollahs and Ayatollahs on top; followed by the rank of Hojatoleslam. Sheikh-ul Islam Pashazade is a Hojatoleslam, and hence has an Iranian Ayatollah, whose religious decrees he technically has to follow. Since no Azerbaijani Ayatollah will emerge any time soon, the Azerbaijanis Shi'a Muslims will primarily rely on Iranian clerics for religious *fatwas* (decrees). Given the structure of Shi'a Islam, it is impossible for Azerbaijan to itself appoint an Ayatollah. As Ayatollahs are elected by consensus and normally in the religious centers of Qom and Isfahan in Iran or Najaf and Kerbala in Iraq, it is unlikely that a moderate Azerbaijani Ayatollah would emerge anytime soon. Hence Azerbaijan is stuck with the dilemma of either having a spiritual leader who is manageable but without legitimacy, such as Pashazade, or acquiring in his place a leader with religious legitimacy but trained in Iran or Iraq. Clearly, this is a difficult dilemma, to which no easy solution can be found. Again, the Turkish experience in the 1920s is instructive: having been the seat of the Caliphate, the Turkish Republic abolished this institution and instead created a state-appointed religious figure that served to promote moderate Islam with respect for secularism. Azerbaijan could in due time find ways to reform the Spiritual Board in this way, though a prerequisite is the existence of a clergy with both religious legitimacy and respect for secularism – something that is absent today.

### *Education and the Vulnerability of Youth*

A major problem in Azerbaijan is the paradox that the absence of a modern education curriculum covering humanities and religion is aiding radicalism, by exposing youth to the propaganda of radical groups. The majority of population does not have a way of receiving solid education on the tenets of traditional religion, nor of the meaning of secularism. This makes the young generation vulnerable to radical religious propaganda in unsupervised and uncontrolled mosques and religious communities around the country. It is therefore imperative that the Azerbaijani state find a way to balance the secular nature of the system and the oversight activity over religious institutions in the country. This links directly to general issues of reform of

the educational system, with a particular aim to develop teaching of the humanities and social sciences, including religious issues. This would aim to teach not only the history, traditions, and tenets of Islam, but a history of religions and religious ideas more broadly, including introducing the concept of secularism in a modern manner. This would enable the state to contribute to forming the understanding of religious issues in the young generation, while indirectly focusing on promoting secularism and understanding of the moderate and ecumenical tradition within Islam. This is all the more called for given the existence of both Shi'a and Sunni communities in the country, and would help the state in a sense to inoculate the youth against the radical messages spread by increasingly active radical groups. If the youth would have a basic understanding of the main philosophies and principles of religions, of Islam in particular, and of the logic of secularism, their interest in radical propaganda would likely diminish.

Aside from basic education in state schools, Azerbaijan also lacks theological educational institutions of a caliber that would enable the state to train clerics at home under supervised forms that prevent the inclusion of radical ideologies and interpretations of Islam. It is indicative that the two most prominent radical preachers in the country, Gamet Suleymanov and Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, received their training in Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively. The screening and follow-up of religious students that go abroad for education is hence also necessary.

Practically, the development of religious education could be undertaken as a joint venture involving the State Committee, the Spiritual Board, and the Ministry of Education. This could then focus both on the basic religious education in schools, and on the development of religious higher education. In all likelihood, it will nevertheless only be possible to achieve this aim if a reformed Ministry of Education takes the lead in the process, making it an even more important priority to focus western attention on the Ministry of Education.

### **Western and U.S. Policies**

As this study has made clear, the policies pursued by the West, and in particular the United States, have an important bearing on the radicalization of Islam in Azerbaijan. Some of these, such as the war in Iraq, are clearly

beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, two issues of specific relevance to Azerbaijan play an important role: section 907 and U.S. assistance to Nagorno-Karabakh. As discussed earlier, the presence of sanctions against Azerbaijan on the books in U.S. legislation and the U.S assistance to the unrecognized government of a territory considered part of Azerbaijan by international law could very easily have alienated the Azerbaijani population from the U.S. to a much higher degree than has happened. Indeed, Azerbaijan is among the countries in both the Middle East and Europe where the population seems to hold the U.S. in comparatively high regard. Yet the U.S. is gradually seeing its image erode, and there are comparatively easy ways to address this.

First is the abrogation of section 907. As this study has shown, the yearly waiver to the legislation makes Azerbaijanis feel blackmailed and in a position of dependence, while it moreover ensures that the issue returns like clockwork on the agenda when its renewal comes up. It is hence an issue of considerable symbolic importance to abrogate section 907 of the Freedom Support Act unconditionally and permanently. This would do much to promote the image of the U.S. as a friendly country with no ulterior motives.

Secondly, the issue of U.S. assistance to Nagorno-Karabakh should be reassessed. This includes searching ways to implement this assistance in the sectors least objectionable to the Azerbaijani government, which is after all the internationally recognized government of this territory. It also means, irrespective of everything else, doing a much better job at explaining to the Azerbaijani public the humanitarian and political reasons for this assistance and thereby seeking to reduce the damage done to the image of the U.S.

Third, related to the discussion on education above, the West, and the U.S. more specifically, would be well-advised to benefit to redouble efforts in sponsoring educational exchanges for young people from throughout the country at both the high school and university levels. This is a highly cost-effective way of spreading western values. A corollary could be the re-establishment of “American corner” libraries that are well stocked with books in the humanities and history, and also programs to spread knowledge of the English language, without which young Azerbaijanis are stuck in a blind alley.