

Azerbaijan: Islam in a post-soviet republic

By Anar Valiyev

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communist ideas paved the way for an Islamic revival in Azerbaijan. Being one of the most secular Muslim republics of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan is facing a dilemma concerning how to address contemporary religious issues. A suppression of religious activities and organizations could lead to internal opposition and radicalization. In contrast, freedom of religious activities could allow the neighboring state of Iran to export an Islamist revolution and encourage the development of a radical brand of local Islamism. The high percentage of poor people, as well as the presence of over 700,000 refugees in the country, create a dangerous breeding ground for radical organizations to recruit members and sympathizers for future struggles.

For centuries, religion was an integral and binding part of public life in Azerbaijan. Since antiquity, almost all wars, reforms, and political processes occurred under the banner of religion. Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam enriched the history of Azerbaijan and have had a huge impact on the formation of the identity of the Azerbaijani nation. Today, Azerbaijan is experiencing a religious revival. Ideological disorientation, the search for national and cultural identity, and the Karabakh conflict with Armenia are three major factors which define the place of Islam in modern Azerbaijan.

About 93.4 percent of Azerbaijan's populations are Muslim, 2.5 percent are Russian Orthodox, 2.3 percent are Armenian Orthodox, and 1.8 percent are classified as "other." [1] Due to the outflow of Russians, the number of adherents to Christianity in Azerbaijan is steadily decreasing. Meanwhile, Islam is experiencing a renaissance. Over the past few years, hundreds of new mosques were built; former places of worship were restored; dozens of religious organizations were registered; new religious schools (madrasas) opened; and many young Azerbaijanis are attending Muslim religious universities in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan.

Islam permeates Azerbaijani social life. It is now common to encounter young people observing the Muslim traditions or young women dressing in accordance to Islamic traditions. Religion is also actively used by political leaders as a means of pursuing their interests. After the fall of the Communist regime, political leaders began to observe Muslim traditions. Heydar Aliyev, then president of Azerbaijan and a former KGB general, was the first Azerbaijani political leader to visit Mecca in 1994. However, more than anything else, this simply demonstrates how Islam is being manipulated by relatively secular politicians.

During the seventy years under Communist rule, the people were prevented from practicing Islamic traditions. However, during the USSR's perestroika era, Azerbaijanis identified themselves more with the Islamic than the Turkic world. For example, Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was a popular symbolic alternative to the Soviet system. His picture was often displayed in people's homes, despite the fact that these individuals were unfamiliar with his ideology and did not sympathize with his worldview. [2]

Indeed, this apparent religious revival remained rather superficial. Polls conducted in 2000 showed that believers constituted 63.4 percent of all respondents, though only 6.7 percent considered themselves "firm believers." In contrast, 10.4 percent pronounced themselves agnostic and 7.1 percent as non-believers. An additional 8.6 percent said they were indifferent. Just 3.8 percent of the respondents categorized themselves as "firm atheists." However, when asked about their observance of the religious commandments, only 17.7 percent of the

"believers" indicated observance of one of the main pillars of Islam: namaz (prayer). Thus, 82.3 percent of the "believers" do not abide by this injunction.[3]

Despite its usefulness for the country's leaders, the revival of Islam in Azerbaijan was nonetheless dangerous for the incumbent rulers. One factor involved was the material deprivation of the population, making them inclined to seek a drastic alternative to the status quo. According to the UN Human Development Report, 49.6 percent of the population lives below the poverty level.[4] Although the Azerbaijani government decreased the poverty level from 61 percent in 1995 to 49.6 percent in 2001, the life of almost half of the population remains in desolate conditions. [5] Seventeen percent of the total population, or 1.3 million, lived in extreme poverty, with monthly consumption below 72,000 Azeri manat (US \$15) per capita per month.[6]

The picture is exacerbated by high numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. The occupation of about 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territories by Armenian forces has resulted in the mass movement of people seeking refuge. By the end of 2002, there were 783,200 refugees and internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan, accounting for approximately one-seventh of the country's total population.[7] The Iranian Hizballah and Saudi missionary organizations are very active in refugee camps, attempting to recruit and to establish future terrorist cells.

Another potential problem is the division of the population between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Due to a lack of statistics, at present it can only be assumed that out of more than 7.6 million Azerbaijanis of Muslim background, a majority of between 65 to 75 percent are connected to Shi'i traditions; the rest consider themselves Sunni. It is important to note that although for the most part, religious knowledge is very poor, the inhabitants of the different regions of the country have preserved aspects of their Shi'a or Sunni heritage. Until 1992, the division of Azerbaijanis between Shi'a or Sunni Islam was nominal. It was even possible to be a member of the Communist Party and be atheist, but to preserve Shi'a or Sunni cultural traditions. In Azerbaijan, Islam, whether Shi'a or Sunni, was considered a culture rather than a religion.[8] Traditionally, Sunni Muslims populate the northern and western part of Azerbaijan, while other sections, including the capital Baku and its suburbs, are home to Shi'a Muslims.

A new element in the picture is the Salafi radical Islamists who are actively seeking to establish their influence. They have had some success, especially among ethnic minorities such as the Avars and Lezgins of northern Azerbaijan. The anti-Shi'a feelings of many Sunni Salafi Islamists could raise the possibility of clashes between the two Islamic streams.

How Islam will develop in Azerbaijan and its influences on society and politics is one of the most important issues the country faces.

Historical background

More than 2,100 years ago, Azerbaijan became the center of Zoroastrianism, whose founder was, according to legend, born in South Azerbaijan (today northern Iran). Until the seventh century, the religion dominated Azerbaijan and played an important role in shaping the worldview and traditions of the Azeri people. The main holiday of Azerbaijan remains Novruz Bayram, which announces the start of spring and now coincides with the Islamic New Year. Zoroastrian traditions can still be found in the country's legends, fairytales, and music.[9]

In the fourth century, Christianity arrived, though some churches date back to an even earlier time.[10] In the seventh century, a Muslim Arab army defeated Persia and conquered South Azerbaijan, which was part of the Persian Sasanid Empire at the time. While Islam treated Christians and Jews with tolerance, it persecuted Zoroastrians as pagans to the point that the religion soon disappeared from Azerbaijan.

After the death of Muhammad, the political struggle in the Arab Caliphate was reflected in Azerbaijan as well, with the division of Islam into Shi'a and Sunni streams. Iranians, in part due to a sense of having a separate history and identity from the Arabs, chose to become

Shi'a. Most Azerbaijanis, feeling closer to the Persians than to the Arabs, followed the same course. When the Safavid Empire was established in the sixteenth century, its founder, Ismail I, declared Shi'ism the official religion and expelled Sunni clerics. There were also political considerations behind these actions. The Azerbaijani state was the rival of the Ottoman Empire, where Sunni Islam was the official religion. In retrospect, Ismail's decision also helped preserve an Azeri identity separate from that of other Turks and the Ottomans.[11]

The Russian conquest of Azerbaijan during the first quarter of nineteenth century changed the situation. The Russian authorities were inclined to eliminate Muslim influence from the Caucasus to make this region Christian, and thus pro-Russian.[12] During the first ten years of Russian rule, 100,000 Azeris were expelled from Erivan, Nakhichevan, Karabakh, and Lori to the neighboring countries and were replaced by Armenians and Russian colonists.

However, the vast and long-term nature of this project led to a change in Russian policy. The new policy aimed to establish Muslim provinces that would be loyal to the Russian empire and would be governed by Russian officials. In 1823, the position of Shaykh al-Islam was established in Tiflis, and Akhund (Minister) Muhammad Ali Huseynzadeh was appointed to this position. In 1872, the Russians created a Shi'a and Sunni spiritual department, which made the religious leaders servants of the government. The creation of two spiritual departments, headed by Mufti for Sunni and Shaykh al-Islam for Shi'a, pursued the aim of strengthening state control over mosques and fueling Sunni-Shi'a differences. By the end of the Czarist Empire, there were 23 Shi'a and 16 Sunni judges in Azerbaijan.[13]

Historically, the proportion of Sunni Muslims in Russian-occupied Azerbaijan was much higher than among the Azeris of Iran. Russian statistics from the 1830s show that the ratio of Shi'a to Sunni was almost even, with the latter having a small edge.[14] The proportion of Sunni, however, declined remarkably. By 1860, figures indicate that Shi'a Twelvers of the Jafari rite held a clear majority of 2:1. The decrease in the proportionate strength of the Sunni element was the result of their immigration to Turkey[15]. The main reason for immigration was the hidden pressure of the Czarist regime on the Sunni. Due to the long-term resistance of Imam Shamil in Northern Caucasus, the Czarist administration feared a Sunni uprising in Azerbaijan.

The Russian revolution and the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) shook the dominant positions of Islam. During the transition era from 1918 to 1920, the founding fathers of the ADR tried to build a modern state geared toward the Western world. The establishment of Bolshevik power in Azerbaijan led to waves of terror in which 48,000 people died. At first, though, the Bolsheviks considered Islam as an ally in the struggle against imperialistic states and even argued that Islam's view of politics and society did not contradict Marxism. While the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia was totally destroyed, Islamic institutions in Azerbaijan cooperated with authorities and were integrated into the state.[16]

The Bolshevik policy toward Islam suddenly changed in 1927. All Shari'a and adat (traditional) courts, which dealt with domestic and religious matters, were liquidated. Mustafa Guliyev, the people's commissar for education of Soviet Azerbaijan, organized the shutting down of the mosques. He stated that in 1929 there were 960 Shi'a and 400 Sunni mosques in the country, but by 1933, only 17--eleven Shi'a, two Sunni, and four mixed (where Shi'a and Sunni Muslims prayed together)--had survived.

During World War II, as the Soviets were attempting to mobilize support among Turkic people--some of whom were rebelling against Soviet rule--this policy of religious persecution was changed slightly. On April 14, 1944, the Spiritual Department of Muslims of the Transcaucasus was restored and headed by a Shi'a with a Sunni-deputy. The authorities began re-opening mosques all over the country.[17]

Out of 100 Muslim religious leaders, only sixteen had received theological training at the Islamic University of Tashkent or the Mir Arab madrasa in Bukhara.[18] Allahshukur Pashazadeh, the future Shaykh al-Islam of the Caucasian Muslims, was among them. Whereas in 1976 there were only sixteen registered mosques and one madrasa in Azerbaijan, by the

end of the Soviet period, there were 200 mosques,, including unregistered places of worship.[19]

Still, the manifestation of Islamic identity--the profession of faith, pilgrimage to Mecca, the month of the Ramadan fast, almsgiving, and the five daily prayers--remained largely non-existent.[20] As an ideology, Islam has been put on the margin of survival during the seventy years of Soviet totalitarianism and atheistic propaganda. The majority of the clergy was arrested, killed, or isolated from the community. At best, they were turned into agents of the Soviet system. This docile clergy created a negative attitude towards spiritual leaders, which is still present today. There were, however, those who continued to act as independent representatives of Islam in Azerbaijan and maintained the continuity of piety and tradition. These included those of seyid (saintly) descent who maintained holy places (pirs).

Islam in the post-soviet era

At the dawn of the democratic movement in Azerbaijan (1988-1991), the clergy joined the struggle for national independence. Yet, while secular nationalists and pious Muslims cooperated, the political parties were concerned with maintaining Islam as a strictly ethical and religious element in social life, one that would not seep into the political arena.

During the rule of the national democrats (1992-1993), the Law on Freedom of Worship was adopted. All property taken by the Soviets from mosques and religious communities was to be returned. The Spiritual Department of Transcaucasus Muslims was separated from the state, and state grants to the department and religious communities were stopped. For the first time in 200 years, the religious figures ceased to receive state salaries and resorted to collecting donations from the public.[21] Though the post-Soviet government feared the growth of an Islamist movement, it granted full freedom of worship in order to maintain believers' support for state building.

Heydar Aliyev's government, which came to power in a 1993 coup, used official religious figures extensively to legitimize its rule. The clergy generally cooperated with this program, in part because they supported Azerbaijani nationalism over political Islamism. The president of the secular state swears fidelity to the constitution and to the Koran; in exchange, the Spiritual Department gives its a stamp of approval and creates propaganda so that government actions are viewed as conforming to Islamic norms. The head of state occasionally visits a mosque, some of which display his picture, and a considerable number of the places allocated by Muslim states for Azerbaijani pilgrims are given to representatives of the government.

The Law on Freedom of Worship itself underwent changes in the Aliyev years. Having encountered a number of unexpected problems, such as Christian missionary activity and Salafi and Iranian propaganda, amendments were introduced to limit missionary activity and to subordinate the independent religious communities to semi-state control. The religious department was also restored to a cabinet level ministry.

Consequently, Islam during Aliyev's government appeared integrated in and subordinate to the state system. Thus, the religious revival did not generally appear to conflict with the hegemony of nationalism and the stability of the regime. New Islamic educational institutions opened, mosques were built, and pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina became possible. Aliyev became the first Azerbaijani leader in modern times to go on Hajj, visited mosques on holidays, and encouraged numerous Islamic conferences.[22]

This process continued throughout the 1990s. However, while encouraging official spiritual leaders and activities, the state--and its supporting clerics--opposed independent preaching. Shaykh Hajji Allahshukur Pashazade, head of the Clerical Management Institution, rejected "self-appointed mullahs" who were uneducated and not connected to his organization.

Yet despite the revival of Islamic traditions in Azerbaijan, public knowledge of Islam still is at a low level. Fortunetellers insist that they are foretelling the future by using the Koran. Many Shi'a claim that the flagellation ritual on the tenth day of Muharram is the most important

ceremony under Muslim law, even though they do not pray or know any of the basic principles of Islam. The most widely celebrated religious holiday remains the non-Muslim Novruz Bayram.

Even such a basic ritual as the funeral service--the ceremony most often connected with Islam in Azerbaijan--is sometimes carried out with errors contradicting Islam. Existing practices or the ignorance of mullahs are simply too deeply entrenched. No one would think, for example, of reciting a sura (line) from the Koran at a wedding. Such an individual would simply be thrown out of the wedding having created a funereal atmosphere or, even worse, might be branded as a Salafi or Wahhabi adherent. Of course, Wahhabi Islam is unlikely to have any success among the predominantly Shi'a Azerbaijanis.

While most Azerbaijanis consider Islam a part of their national identity, any mixing of religion with the political sphere is rejected by the vast majority of the population. Critical to understanding this issue is that the Azerbaijani view of Islam is one of a common national characteristic, inseparable from its Turkic ethnic identity, which no single group can try to monopolize for its own rhetoric. As such, it lends little appeal as a driving or dividing force in the political arena.[23]

One startling point about the shallowness of the Islamic revival in Azerbaijan is that it is probably the only country in the Muslim world where the quota allocated by the government of the Saudi Arabia for a Hajj pilgrimage remains unclaimed. Vacant places are resold to pilgrims from the Chechen Republic and Dagestan. In 1998, the king of Saudi Arabia offered to cover the expenses of 200 Azerbaijani pilgrims. However, there were some ardent atheists among those who accepted and went, and these individuals continued to spread anti-Islamic views after their return.[24]

Another indicator of the unique Azerbaijani view of Islam concerns women's rights. Nayereh Tohidi, a researcher from California State University, describes the attitude of the average Azeri woman towards veiling. "In June 1992, when a delegation of 22 Islamist women headed by Zehra Mostafavi, daughter of Khomeini, visited Baku, Azerbaijan, wrapped in heavy chadors in the heat of summer, they were met with stares and disdainful reactions everywhere they went. On one occasion, a middle-aged Azeri woman asked, 'Do not you feel hot under this heavy black garment in this hot summer?' 'But the fire in hell is much hotter if one fails to follow Allah's orders,'" one of the Iranians replied. Baffled by her response the Azeri woman mumbled, "What a cruel God you have! The Allah that I know is much kinder to women." [25]

However, the points noted above do not necessarily indicate that the situation will forever remain as it is. Some other countries with a relatively high level of secularism or moderate interpretation of Islam have seen a large portion of their people turn in a militant direction. In the so-called "Islamist belt" of the country's southern districts, Iranian preachers have been active. In villages near Baku one can see portraits of Khomeini and Islamic quotes in the windows of houses and on walls. The rallies staged by the Union of Azerbaijani Forces in 2002 became one of the biggest protest actions by the opposition, with many Islamists carrying green banners of Islam and shouting "Allahu Akbar" participating. A couple of years ago, few could take the threat of fundamentalism in Azerbaijan seriously. However, the threat of Islamic fundamentalism now seems imminent.

Islamist radical organizations and parties in Azerbaijan

Due to its strategic geographical position and relative religious vacuum, Azerbaijan has attracted the attention of many religious as well as radical organizations. Weak law-enforcement agencies, a corrupt governmental system, a high percentage of refugees, and wide-spread poverty have brought Islamist radical groups to view Azerbaijan as possessing great potential for a takeover. These radical religious groups have come from three directions:

--The first and strongest "export base" is Iran. Through its affiliated organizations such as Hizballah, the Imam Khomeini Fund, and others, Iran could spread its influence over large parts of Azerbaijan's territory.

--The second, and less influential, group are Turkish non-traditional religious organizations, such as the Nurchular or Fattulachilar.

--Last, but not least, are the Wahhabi or Salafi movements. The adherents of the Salafi Islamists in Azerbaijan are growing faster than any other stream of Islam.

The Islamist Party of Azerbaijan (IPA)

The highest-profile organization in this category is the Islamist Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), which has been very much influenced by Iran. Iranian religious missionaries have been energetic in southern Azerbaijan, as well as in villages around Baku, where the population is predominantly Shi'a Muslim. The IPA was established in November 1991 in the village of Nardaran near Baku. The party was officially registered in 1992. Its leader, Al Akram Hajji, is a trained philologist who, apparently unqualified in his profession, long worked loading trucks and as a food shop clerk.[26]

With a leadership of only semi-literate mullahs boasting no more than a secondary school education, the IPA could not involve members of the educated elite in its ranks. It appealed mainly to rural populations. The party's basic ideology is the belief that only Islam can structure an independent Azerbaijan. According to Hajji, the republic will not be able to extricate itself from crisis until its leaders have accepted Islamic values and concepts of state building.

The IPA preaches an anti-Turkic, anti-Semitic, and anti-American doctrine threaded with conspiracy theories. Considering any form of nationalism as Shirk (i.e., worshipping anything other than Allah, breaking strict Muslim monotheism), it rejects loyalty to a larger Turkic community as anti-Islamic. The main task of Muslim society, according to the party, is to block the spread of American civilization. But the true principal enemy of the Muslim world is a Masonic conspiracy directed by Israel. In a bizarre rapprochement with Russian neo-fascist ideology, the IPA advocates an alliance between Islamists and the Russian Orthodox Church to destroy the "enemies of humanity" at their Tel Aviv headquarters.[27]

Such ideas, propagated in the party's organs Islam Dunyasi (Islamic World) and Islamyn Sesi (Voice of Islam), were not well received elsewhere in Azerbaijan since they conflicted with the country's generally held beliefs. The main influences on the IPA's ideology are in fact external--late Soviet and Iranian ideas. Furthermore, there exists what might be called a crackpot tone to the IPA's propaganda that does not play well in Azerbaijan. It asserts, for instance, that organizations like the UN, UNESCO, and OSCE are being manipulated by Masons and Zionists to make Azerbaijan an American vassal.[28] This rhetoric stirs up antagonism within nationalist groups, because it echoes Iranian attacks on Azerbaijan for cooperating with the United States and Israel. Finally, in 1995, the party's top leadership was accused of a coup attempt and imprisoned.

Hizballah

As early as 1993, the Iranian group Hizballah began working in Azerbaijani refugee camps. By early 1997, newspapers reported that hundreds of young Azerbaijanis had been trained in Iranian Hizballah camps. After their graduation, they were sent back home to proliferate Hizballah's ideas. It is very difficult to analyze the activity of Hizballah in Azerbaijan due to the lack of reliable information. In February 1997, a famous Azerbaijani scholar, the academician Ziya Bunyatov, was assassinated in Baku. The Ministry of National Security (MNS) accused Hizballah of the political assassination. Leaders of Hizballah, according to MNS, accused Bunyatov of being an agent of the Israeli Mossad and of disseminating Zionism in Azerbaijan. Five people were arrested and sentenced to long terms. However, the head of the organization, Taniel Ramazanov, successfully escaped to Iran.

The death of this scholar became a signal for a full-scale attack against all Iranian-affiliated organizations. In the fall of 2001, the MNA arrested six citizens in possession of documents proving their connection with Hizballah. Additionally, a network consisting of thirty people was revealed. During the interrogations, members of Hizballah openly rejected the secular regime of Azerbaijan.

The Committee Imdad Khomeini

Ever since December 1993, Iranian organizations have targeted Azerbaijani displaced persons for extensive propaganda, the Imdad Khomeini committee being one of the main such groups. By 2001, the committee had 415 offices across Azerbaijan. The committee distributed humanitarian aid for free and built new houses and infrastructure while also illegally smuggling radical religious literature from Iran into Azerbaijan.

The Salafi Islamists

Numerous articles and news reports have been published concerning Salafi Islamist activity in Azerbaijan. However, most tend to be antagonistic and superficial. Journalists, the government, and the official Shi'a clergy have all helped create a negative public opinion of Salafi Islamists, tending to present them as either terrorists, heretics, or both. Many Azeris often refer to Salafi Islamists in a derogatory manner and dismiss them as "Wahhabis," sakkalilar (bearded people), or garasakkalilar (black-bearded people). Despite this campaign, the number and influence of Salafi Islamists in Azerbaijan is steadily growing. Salafi ideas are becoming increasingly popular among the younger generation. In Baku alone, which is the ultra-secular capital of Azerbaijan, the number of Salafi Islamists has reportedly reached 15,000.[29]

The first Salafi missionaries arrived in Azerbaijan from the Northern Caucasus in the mid-1990s. The majority of them came from Chechnya and Dagestan, where the Salafi Islamists had some influence primarily due to the Russian-Chechen wars. For a short while, Salafi Islamists made some inroads in Chechnya and were even able to create their own self-ruled area in the Dagestani villages of Karamaxi and Chobanmakhi. However, Salafi Islamists did not stop in Chechnya and Dagestan, and instead, extended their activities into Azerbaijan. Initially, they did not gain wide support among Azeris, as nationalism and pan-Turkism were much more popular than Islam. Moreover, in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, Azeri society was not as deeply impoverished and divided as it is today. In addition, 65 to 70 percent of Azeris are adherents of Shi'a Islam, and hence have little regard for Salafi ideas. The Shi'a Muslims of Azerbaijan-for both historical and cultural reasons-are heavily influenced by Iran, a country whose government is widely regarded as the archrival of the Salafi Islamists. Given Azerbaijan's Shi'a complexion, the religious Sunni of rural northern Azerbaijan form the primary constituency of Salafism in the country.

The second wave of Salafi expansion started with the beginning of the Second Russo-Chechen War in 1999. The Russian military command tried to push Chechen rebels-particularly those of Salafi orientation-out of the Northern Caucasus into the neighboring states of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Thus, some of the 8,000 Chechen refugees who arrived in Azerbaijan in 1999-2000 were persecuted Chechen Salafi Islamists.[30] Meanwhile, missionaries from the Persian Gulf countries dramatically increased their activities in Azerbaijan.

By 2003, 65 new Salafi-controlled mosques had been established in Azerbaijan. One of the largest Salafi mosques in the country is the Abu Bakr mosque. Built in 1997 in Baku by the Azeri branch of the Kuwaiti society Revival of Islamic Heritage, Abu Bakr became one of the most successful mosques in Azerbaijan. While the Shi'a or Sunni mosques are usually able to attract approximately 300 people for Friday prayers, the number of people visiting the Abu Bakr mosque typically reaches 5,000 to 7,000 people.[31] The imam of the Abu Bakr mosque is Gammet Suleymanov, a graduate of the World Islamic University of Medina, a leading center for the study and export of Salafism.

There are essentially three factors driving the expansion of Salafism in Azerbaijan. First, the overwhelming majority of indigenous Salafi Islamists are Sunni Muslims from ethnic minorities. This constituency sees Salafism as a counter-balance to the growing Iranian influence in Azerbaijan.

Second, the rapid polarization and impoverishment of Azeri society has led to a pervasive disillusionment with traditional institutions and modern Western democratic ideas. Salafi Islamists have cleverly tapped into this pool of profound discontent, frequently criticizing the corruption of the government, the decline of morality and traditions, as well as the rise of criminality in the country.

Thirdly, Salafi Islamists tout the universalistic qualities of their ideology, and the fact that it supposedly transcends all Islamist sects and traditions. This is particularly appealing in Azerbaijan where sectarian rivalry between Shi'a and Sunni has been on the rise.

The government of Azerbaijan does not condone Salafism or its adherents. In the mid-1990s, the Azeri government tolerated Salafi Islamists, fearing that intolerance would irritate the rich Persian Gulf states from whom it sought financial aid. From 2001 to 2003, however, the situation changed dramatically, as the Azeri government began to persecute the Salafi Islamists. One of the main reasons for this policy shift was the rapidly increasing number of Salafi mosques. Another reason was the Salafi community's preference for electing their imams themselves rather than allowing the government to appoint them.

However, arguably, the most important reason is the Salafi Islamists' serious opposition to the current autocratic Azeri regime. In their preaching, Salafi Islamists blame the government for a number of failures, ranging from the defeat in the Karabakh conflict with Armenia to the moral decay of society. Alarming for the Azeri establishment, Salafi Islamists do not make a secret of their aspirations to acquire political power in Azerbaijan. In 2001, the Court on Heavy Crimes sentenced twelve Azeris who aspired to fight in Chechnya. During the trial, Suleymanov, the imam of the Abu Bakr mosque (who is often referred to as "emir" rather than "imam" in order to differentiate himself from the Shi'a), was summoned to the court to testify. All the would-be mujahideen had been frequent visitors of the Abu Bakr mosque and were recruited there by Chechen rebels.

Another trial concerning the Pan-Islamist Hizb-ut Tahrir organization also revealed that its members had visited the Abu Bakr mosque. In May 2002, the deputy minister of national security, Tofiq Babayev, stated that a number of Arab countries were interested in spreading radical Wahhabism in Azerbaijan. According to Babayev, over 300 Azeris had been trained in Wahhabi centers in Dagestan. The deputy minister identified three stages in the effort to make Wahhabism a grassroots movement in Azerbaijan. First, there is the spread of Wahhabi literature and the provision of financial assistance to potential activists. The second stage involves the efficient training of the activists, and the final stage deals with the mobilization of active members for acts of terrorism designed to destabilize the state.[32]

By the end of 2001, Azeri authorities launched an unofficial campaign against the Salafi Islamists. Taking into consideration that large groups of Salafi Islamists are Chechens, the authorities attempted to create unfavorable conditions for Chechen refugees. As a result, Aslan Maskhadov, the leader of the Chechen resistance, advised Chechens to leave Azerbaijan. Simultaneously, the authorities started a ruthless campaign against Azeri Salafi Islamists. For a short while, many mosques were shut down and regional police forces were instructed to crush Salafi cells by any means necessary.

Turkish Direction

The Turkish Islamist organization called Nurcular has expanded its network in Azerbaijan as well. This organization has founded several secondary schools in Azerbaijan and has links with some Turkish politicians and companies. The Turkish mass media reported that the Turkish Education Ministry is conducting an investigation, which could result in the closure of many educational institutions both in Turkey and Azerbaijan, because they were set up by followers

of last century's Islamic scholar Said Nursi (1876-1960). Nurcular appeared in Azerbaijan right after the country gained independence. They began by creating a television channel, but lacking a large audience, soon turned their priority to schools. This group, however, is not seen as a subversive threat.

The prospects

As in many other countries, which have adopted the religion, Islam in Azerbaijan has always been unique because of the influence of the particular local history and conditions. For Azeris, the pirs (the tombs of "saints" or people with extraordinary abilities) became places of prayer and worship rather than mosques. For the majority of the population, Islam was considered a tradition rather than a religion. That is why for many Azerbaijanis it seems to be blasphemy or a form of intimidation to return to what foreign Islamists consider to be "pure Islam." It can well be said that in Azerbaijan, Islam does not act as an independent force in society or politics. It is respected, it is used, but it is not obeyed.[33] Most likely, the secular tendencies of materialism and popular culture will prevail.

However, things could change. Elements of today's religious situation in Azerbaijan are similar to those of Iran in the early 1970s: disenchantment with a debauched and corrupted government, concern over a grave economic situation, anger over repression, and disappointment with democracy. If this situation continues, it is clear that religious organizations with ample foreign financing will recruit more followers. After all, even during the Iranian revolution a large portion of the population did not want Islamism but simply united behind an Islamist leadership to overthrow an unpopular government.

As the leader of the opposition Popular Front Party, Ali Karimli, stated in February 2005, due to the restriction of the secular political opposition, Islamists are getting stronger. As Karimli put it, "On Fridays more than three or four thousand people turn up at services in every mosque in a country where I cannot gather fifty people together for a meeting!" In discussing the issues being exploited by Islamists he cited the Karabakh conflict, arguing that though Azerbaijani territory is invaded and there are four UN resolutions supporting this, "because we are Muslim, our rights are not respected." He also pointed out that the Islamists highlight the "extreme poverty and the huge inequality between the average person and the top one or two percent who own everything;" and take advantage of the fact that "no one seems to care" about democracy.[34] These signs, in a country that neighbors Iran, should elicit concern.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of Salafi Islamist ideas among religious and ethnic minorities could create powerful centrifugal forces that will in due course threaten the national unity of Azerbaijan. Contrary to their own propaganda, the Salafi Islamists are exacerbating sectarian tensions in the country. They have already destroyed several Shi'a places of worship, which has created ill feeling. In the very worst-case scenario, serious violence directed toward the majority Shi'a community could provoke some form of Iranian intervention, not least because the Iranians are anxious to curtail Salafi influence in Azerbaijan. But more alarming is the Salafi Islamists' skillful exposure and manipulation of the establishment's incompetence, coupled with the increasing impoverishment of the country, which could make them a powerful political force in the mid-term. This will inevitably lead to a harsh security crackdown, which could, in turn, provoke serious acts of terrorism in the country. Aside from destabilizing the government, the risks to the United States--which has made considerable diplomatic, economic, and security investments in Azerbaijan--are self-evident.

*Anar Valiyev is a Ph.D. candidate in Public Affairs at the University of Louisville in Kentucky. His areas of interest include urban terrorism, public policy of post-Soviet countries, governance, and democracy. The author would like to thank Diana Schwarz for her insightful comments.

Notes

- [1] CIA, The World Factbook <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/aj.html>. Religious affiliation is still nominal in Azerbaijan. In its surveys, the State Statistical Committee does inquire about religious affiliation.
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