

Islamic Revival in Azerbaijan

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IN RECENT YEARS, THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF PREDOMINANTLY MUSLIM societies that were once part of the Soviet Union has attracted increasing attention from international scholars. This is particularly so in light of contemporary Islamic revivalism. New scholarship has determined that many assumptions about Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus have been wrong. For instance, an increasing number of scholars have come to the conclusion that in these societies Islam was far from subsumed or displaced during the Soviet era by atheism and other communist ideals as [was once assumed]. Instead, it continued to thrive in “underground mosques,” in much the same way as Christianity endured in communist-controlled Europe. Furthermore, new research indicates that the Islamic revivals currently underway in some post-Soviet countries, to a greater extent than previously appreciated, have been driven by dynamics internal to these societies, rather than having been largely or exclusively generated “from the outside” by Islamic missionary movements emanating from such countries as Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Turkey.¹ This new scholarship helps us to think more accurately about the Islamic revivals in Central Asia, the Northern Caucasus, and even the Volga Basin. It is not so clear, however, that it applies to the unique case of Azerbaijan. Instead, the Islamic revival in Azerbaijan can be thought of not as a return or re-assertion of a previously suppressed religion, but as an adaptation to a new religion that has been imported largely—if not entirely—from the outside.

Despite their similar histories under Russian rule dating back to the tsars, a number of factors distinguish Azerbaijan’s religious life from that of other former Soviet Muslim-majority countries. In particular, as one scholar has put it, Azerbaijan is distinguished “from the rest of the former USSR by the fact that it is the most secu-

larized Muslim country.”² The Azeri secular tradition is in fact indigenous to the country. In this respect, it doesn’t have a counterpart in other former Soviet Muslim countries whose own traditions of secularism, which are today being significantly challenged by the Islamic revival, were imposed on them from the outside during the Soviet era.

Perhaps the most important factor that distinguishes Azerbaijan from the societies of Central Asia is the dominance of Shiism. Shiism has shaped Azeri society’s intellectual development, including its secular tradition, and has distinguished it from other former Soviet Muslim countries in a variety of important ways. For example, the modernist Jadidi reform movement had a long-lasting impact on the predominantly Sunni Muslim societies of the Volga Basin and Central Asia. However, Shiism limited Jadidism’s influence among Azeris. Because of Shiism’s less restrictive approach to *ijtihad* (independent interpretation), Azeri society found little use or appeal in the Jadidists’ “new methods” of Quranic interpretation.

For these reasons, the Jadidist “enlightenment movement” that swept through Central Asia and the Volga Basin during the early twentieth century had only a minimal impact on Azeri intellectual life. In fact, the Azeri intelligentsia’s ideas about modernization in the years preceding the Bolshevik takeover in 1920 demanded far more radical change and societal transformation than anything that the Sunni Jadidi scholars had proposed. Not bound by the precedents of the *ijtihad* discussions, these Azeri thinkers were highly successful in promoting secularism and an anti-clerical agenda that minimized Shiism’s political influence.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Azerbaijan’s secular intelligentsia had defeated the clerical establishment. This took place after a long-fought struggle for leadership, when the intelligentsia managed to place itself in the forefront of Azeri society. Within this emergent society, the Azeri clerical establishment gradually lost out to the secularizing ideology of Turkish nationalism. As this became the dominant political ideology, ordinary people’s attachments to Islam began to fade. Jeyhun Hajibeyli, a prominent member of the pre-Bolshevik Azeri intelligentsia, observed that while ordinary Azeris continued to identify themselves as Muslim believers and viewed Islam as an important element of their identity, they were not especially observant of *sharia*.³

All of these factors became more visible after the tsarist monarchy’s collapse, when the Muslim world’s first parliamentary democracy was established in Azerbaijan (1918-1920). During this period, Islamic political ideologies had some influence, but they never grew powerful enough to become a dominant political force. As such, the modernist Islamist Ittikhad party conceded parliamentary leadership to a coalition of nationalists and liberals, which was united in its support of adopting secular courts and in its rejection of forming a government on the basis

of *sharia*.⁴ This stands in contrast to the Sunni societies of the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia, where *sharia* courts continued to function until the late 1920s.

Furthermore, unlike in Central Asia, Azeri nationalist leaders introduced a series of bold reforms intended to minimize the political influence of the powerful Muslim Spiritual Boards that had been established throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 1870s by tsarist Russia. In Azerbaijan, these reforms included forcibly combining the previously separate Sunni and Shia boards. This helped to subordinate the shaping of religious doctrine to national political authorities, and to lessen the influence of foreign religious authorities and their propaganda over Azeri Islam. The leadership of these boards frequently protested their treatment by the nationalist government, but with little effect.⁵ Partly as a consequence of the pre-Bolshevik intelligentsia's successful efforts to neutralize religious propaganda, mainstream Azeris to this day have little knowledge of or connection to the age-old Sunni-Shiite rivalry, and still view the simple public pronunciation of the words "Shia" and "Sunni" as impolite.

All of these realities encouraged the Bolshevik Party, after Sovietization occurred in the 1920s, to design a special policy toward Islam in Azerbaijan. Differing from their policy in other Muslim regions of the Soviet State, the Bolsheviks aggressively imposed restrictive measures on Islam in Azerbaijan almost immediately after seizing power.⁶ In the Bolshevik view, the pre-existence of a secular Azeri state, combined with the Azeri intelligentsia's anticlerical proclivities, produced an environment that seemed exceptionally conducive for promoting the anti-Islamic communist agenda.

How Successful Were the Soviets?

THE LATE FRENCH SCHOLAR ALEXANDRE BENNINGSEN, FAMOUS FOR HIS STUDIES of Islam in the Soviet Union, once confessed how perplexed he was by the fact that the total volume of anti-Islamic literature in Azerbaijan lagged far behind that of Uzbekistan, Tatarstan, or neighboring Dagestan. While this observation could plausibly suggest the overwhelming success of Soviet anti-religious policies, Benningsen reached a different conclusion. He argued that the paucity of anti-religious publications in Azerbaijan suggested that the Azeri intelligentsia, unlike that of other Soviet Muslim societies, was unwilling to collaborate with Soviet anti-religious propaganda.⁷

One of the first targets of Soviet anti-Islam strategy in Azerbaijan in the 1920s was the Shiite holiday of Ashura. Internal Soviet documents described their campaign against Ashura as part of the "global fight against the religious drug."⁸ However,

they introduced this campaign to the Azeri public intending “to get rid of superstition and fanaticism for the sake of purity of the Muslim religion.”⁹ This campaign never met the Bolsheviks’ expectations, and during a 1937 local Communist Party gathering, the Stalinist ruler of Azerbaijan, Mir-Djafar Bagirov, acknowledged the existence of a “confusing reality” in Azeri religious life: before the Bolshevik takeover in 1920, students of Azeri state schools never participated in Ashura commemorations. In fact, the students viewed the ceremonies as shameful and backward. However, under Soviet-implemented anti-religious state policy, those students actively participated in Ashura commemorations.¹⁰

Indeed, in many ways, the Azeri intelligentsia’s efforts at secularizing society before the Bolshevik takeover had a more profound impact on Azerbaijan than did the militantly atheist policies of the Soviets. For this reason, the Soviets, after trying to repress the pre-Bolshevik Azeri intellectual legacy, eventually tried to revive it. But this effort didn’t produce the desired results, and in fact created far more instances of what Stalinists would have described as “confusing realities.” For example, in Soviet secondary schools, the works of the pre-revolutionary playwright Sultan Majid Ganizade were taught and praised as examples of Azeri atheism. Little did the Bolsheviks know, however, that Ganizade was a leader of the pan-Islamist Ittikhadi-Islam movement (1917-1920) prior to the Bolshevik Revolution.

For the mainstream intellectuals of pre-Bolshevik Azerbaijan, anti-clericalism had never meant or developed into atheism. These intellectuals had, in fact, never explicitly proclaimed their intention to suppress Islam as a religion, culture, or national identity. And since the intellectuals didn’t seem to be promoters of an anti-Islamic agenda to the wider public, this contributed to their success in secularizing Azeri society. This was true because most of the leading intellectuals of the time had received both a basic Islamic education at local religious schools (*madrasas* and *mektebs*) as well as a secular, Western education in Russian and European universities. By harshly criticizing clerics, they were eventually able to reduce the latter’s influence on mainstream society. In so doing, the intelligentsia also emerged as both a representative and an interpreter of Islam, and managed to reduce the role of religion as the unchallenged authority in Azeri society.

It is important to note that the intelligentsia had no obligations to the government and, in many cases, vociferously opposed the encroachment of Russian imperial power. This contributed even more to the trust they enjoyed among the population. Moreover, they voluntarily and continually re-created and implemented their own agenda. Not surprisingly, the “cult of intelligentsia” had long-lasting effects, despite its position of relative compromise during the Soviet rule.

During the Soviet era, however, this independence was lost, as intellectual culture was forced to become avowedly atheistic, and the intelligentsia was transformed into

a key pillar of the *nomenklatura*. Within a generation's time, the Azeri scholars' lack of skill in religious matters rendered them useless in the dissemination of atheistic propaganda. This inability to intervene in religious matters created major problems for Azeri society during the religious awakening that occurred prior to the socialist regime. Soviet atheistic education, which had almost completely eliminated religious knowledge, was not able to destroy the country's deeply-embedded Muslim identity.

From time to time this Islamic identity would give rise to what the Soviet media described as "mysterious appearances," or outbursts of Shia religiosity amongst the larger population. The first wave of these incidents shook Azerbaijan in the beginning of the 1930s, when dozens of religious uprisings took place as news of the appearance of Shia imams—believed to have been in hiding—spread throughout the country. More recently, in 1983—only a few years after the Iranian Revolution—reports spread that the shadows of Shia imams had been sighted in Baku. For several days, thousands of people thronged Sovetski Street hoping to observe this miracle. Perhaps the most popular mysterious happening during Soviet rule was the appearance of Mir Mohsun Aga during WWII. Azeri society was electrified by rumors about this man with physical disabilities; he allegedly was the descendant of the Prophet Mohammad, and was able to cure incurable diseases. To this very day, Mir Mohsun Aga's grave on the outskirts of Baku attracts tens of thousands pilgrims every year.

During Soviet rule circumcision, Shia funeral ceremonies (*ihsan*), and so-called graveyard clerics (*qebiristanliq mollasi*) continued unabated nationwide, and even increased as Soviet influence began to fade. Mosque attendance, especially during Ashura, had been increasing considerably since the late 1970s. Meanwhile, alcohol consumption and celebrations during the Muxarram month of the Muslim calendar have continued to drop significantly, even in modernized urban areas such as Baku. Finally, Shaykh Allahshukur Pashazade, the head of the Spiritual Board of Transcaucasian Muslims (*Zaqafqaziya Müsəlmanlarının Ruhani İdarəsi*)—the official Soviet Islamic religious institution for the Caucasus region—became instantly famous in January 1990 as a resistance hero when Soviet troops marched into Baku to suppress mass street protests.

The subsequent collapse of the USSR opened the way for the revival of various identities that had been marginalized during communist rule. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the vast majority of Azeris lacked even the most elementary understanding of Islamic practice, including such basics as the Ramadan fast or daily prayers. At the same time, however, average Azeris continued to identify themselves as Muslims and insisted that they believed in God. And yet, despite the public revival of Islam after the USSR's demise, Islam was not the most powerful identity in Azerbaijan, nor was it especially politically influential. Indeed, at first, the country as a whole was more attracted to pan-Turkic nationalist ideals. The dominance of secular

pan-Turkism over Islamism in Azeri society presented a range of obstacles to the revival of Shiism, which the Soviets had succeeded in stigmatizing as a subversive teaching of “Persian design.” These attitudes slowed the pace of Islamic revival in Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, there was also a visible rivalry between Turkism and re-emerging Islamist trends after the Soviet collapse.

The Stillborn Revival

DURING SOVIET RULE, A LARGE PORTION OF THE AZERI POPULATION RETAINED deep linkages to their Shia origins. This explains in part why Shiism showed active signs of revival in the late 1980s. But there was simultaneously a powerful anti-clerical tradition in Shiite Azerbaijan, thanks in part to the legacy of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. This deepened during the Soviet era and remained embedded in popular consciousness. For one thing, Azeri clerics were unable to provide basic Islamic knowledge to the public, since Shiite clerical traditions had been completely interrupted by the Soviet regime. As a result, the secular Azeri population regarded Shia clerics with great suspicion, seeing them as sources of untruth, or at best, of ignorance. As a result, after the Soviet Union’s fall, the official clerical establishment (represented by the Muslim Spiritual Board and its leader Pashazade) found itself unable to gain widespread authority and support. This prevented Azeri Shia clerics from assuming a leadership role in the post-USSR Islamic revival. It also considerably hindered the efforts of radical Iranian outreach in the early 1990s.

Pashazade and the established clerical class were publicly accused of collaborating with the Soviet regime. These accusations emanated most strongly not from secular elites, but from a new crop of independent Islamist preachers and emerging religious organizations. Pashazade himself was labeled a “colonel of the KGB” by one of the most popular of these new religious activists, Haji Abdul. Pashazade’s authority also was challenged by one of his own deputies, the charismatic and popular Haji Sabir (who today is president of Baku Islamic University).

Eager to regain the public’s trust, Pashazade tried to establish better relations with these independent preachers and organizations, and occasionally made pronouncements in support of what he believed to be the more popular aspects of the Islamist agenda. For example, he announced a proposal to replace the Cyrillic alphabet with Arabic.¹¹ But these kinds of initiatives, in fact, only further worsened Pashazade’s image in the public’s eye, thanks mainly to the rising Azeri pan-Turkic movement and its charismatic leader, Abulfaz Elçibay, who became president in 1992.

An outspoken opponent of Iran, President Elçibay regarded Azeri Shia clerics with deep suspicion and as potential agents of the Iranian regime. Elçibay’s commitments

to Turkism and regional nepotism inspired him to replace Pashazade, although he was ultimately dissuaded of this course by Speaker of Parliament Isa Gambar.¹² Pashazade's reputation improved slightly during Heydar Aliyev's presidency (1993-2003). However, allegations of Pashazade's support for ethnic separatism in Azerbaijan's south did little to remove the Azeri government's suspicions of him.

In an effort to offset his declining influence in Azerbaijan, Pashazade sought international support, with some success. By gaining the confidence of the popular Chechen separatist Dzhokhar Dudayev, Pashazade was able to position himself as a leading promoter of the latter's so-called Caucasus Confederation. In 1992, Pashazade renamed the Spiritual Board of Transcaucasian Muslims as the Caucasus Muslims' Board, and attempted to establish himself as the leading religious authority over the northern areas of the Caucasus region.¹³

After Russian President Vladimir Putin's crackdowns on the Chechen Republic in 1999 and 2000, Pashazade's relations with the Russian authorities paradoxically improved. In 2001, Pashazade felt growing pressure on his position from the leadership of the Azeri Republic's newly-established State Committee for Work with Religious Communities. In this crucial situation, Pashazade again sought outside help and was well-received by both Putin and Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze. He also threatened to move the Muslim Board's headquarters to Tbilisi because of continuing governmental pressures, and even suggested that he had obtained Georgian permission to do so.

Pashazade's internal political position improved somewhat after Heydar Aliyev's son Ilham assumed the presidency in 2003. However, this did not enlarge his religious influence over Azerbaijan's growing number of independent religious communities. These communities continued to challenge Pashazade's religious legitimacy, and they were soon joined by larger segments of the Azeri public.

The waning influence of established scholars in Azerbaijan is indicative of the general crisis and disputed nature of religious authority and knowledge that has developed in the post-Soviet era. Islamic knowledge remains in increasingly high demand, and every book title with the mere mention of the word "Islam" has been a bestseller. For a time, however, the general public preferred to obtain knowledge about Islam from Western or Russian orientalist scholars such as Henry Masse or Yulian Krachkovskiy, rather than from the writings of Azeri clerics whose books appeared toward the end of the 1980s. Moreover, since mainstream secular society did not trust the clerical establishment, the intelligentsia rushed to fill the gap. Well-known orientalists like Vasim Mamedaliyev, Nariman Gasimoglu, and Rafiq Aiyev, relying on their knowledge of Arabic to translate the Quran and other major religious texts into Azeri, became the first widely-accepted and trusted instructors in basic Islam, and their works became very popular overnight.

The so-called “Repentance” or “Tawba” movement, founded in 1989 by former prisoners under the leadership of the aforementioned Haji Abdul, became contemporary Azerbaijan’s first homegrown independent religious organization. A number of similar organizations sprang up in a very short period of time. However, while Tawba received widespread national attention, its influence remained limited and confined to certain locales. This was due in part to the highly secular education that many of these organizations’ preachers lacked, and which made it difficult for them to increase their influence beyond their communities.

Imported Islam

THE INABILITY OF BOTH ESTABLISHMENT SHIA CLERICS AND HOMEGROWN independent preachers to provide satisfactory information on Islam further encouraged the public to look elsewhere for Islamic knowledge. After Azerbaijan became independent in 1991, foreign religious organizations and preachers poured into the country from the outside. This effectively brought to an end the era in which homegrown Azeri movements and factors played the dominant role in the Islamic revival. Since that time, groups that have been largely inspired and funded from abroad have dominated the revivalist movement in Azerbaijan, and independent religious communities have grown much more rapidly than official government-sponsored mosques.¹⁴

Iran became especially influential in Azeri religious life. Once Iranian clerics appeared on the scene, Azerbaijan’s establishment clerics and homegrown independent Shia preachers and intellectuals found it increasingly difficult to compete with them. In many ways, the Iranians simply outsmarted the Azeris, employing their greater religious knowledge alongside their firm determination to promote their political agenda and attract a growing number of followers. Before long, Azeri Muslims began to cooperate with their foreign counterparts. Some, like the soon-to-be head of the Azeri Islamic Party, Haji Alikram, eagerly embraced Iran’s brand of political Islam. In a shocking turn of events, even Pashazade ultimately tried to persuade Shias to accept the political (*velayat-e-faqih*, or the “rule of the jurisprudent”) and the spiritual (*marja-al-taqlid*, or “source of emulation”) leadership of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

By 1992, the Iranian hold on Azeri religious life had begun to strengthen. Dozens of Iranian preachers and organizations were actively engaged in religious preaching in Azerbaijan and more than 150 *madrasas* were established in different parts of the country. While some of these schools were influenced by the Iranian government, not all were Khomeinist: some of them were established independently by promi-

nent *marjas*, including some of whom were openly (like Ayatollah Ruhani) or tacitly (like late Ayatollah Tebrizi) opposed to the principle Khomeinist principle of *velayat-e-faqih*. Not all Azeri Shia preachers found common cause with the Iranians. Facing the risk of losing their hitherto unchallenged authority in loyal communities, some of them made rather unique decisions. For example, the notorious Haji Alesker, who was operating in Amiradjan on the outskirts of Baku, declared himself a prophet (*rasulallah*). That decision, as it turned out, cost Aleskar most of his supporters.¹⁵

Despite the Iranians' initial success at spreading their religious teachings within certain Azeri communities, their political agenda, and in particular the Khomeinist concept of *velayat-e-faqih*, resonated poorly amongst the Azeri public at large. Adoption of Khomeinism meant accepting the political superiority and/or rule of Iranian religious leaders. It also meant reopening the Shia-Sunni disputes, and both of these propositions were widely unpopular amongst ordinary Azeris. This contributed to a general public mistrust of Iran.

Secular Kemalism's influence amongst the Azeri people obstructed Iranian political propaganda. The discourse of Iranian *mullahs* was, to say the least, unattractive to the secularly-educated population. As an alternative, Elçibay's pan-Turkic Popular Front government invited official Turkish religious organizations to promote their version of Islam in Azerbaijan. The government also implemented the country's first state law on religious freedom.

The Azeri government's promotion of official Turkish Islamic institutions under the supervision of Turkey's own Ministry of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) also proved unsuccessful. Most scandalously, official Turkish Sunni clerics, such as the former religious attaché Abdukadir Sezgin, launched a thinly-veiled criticism of Shiism that was categorically rejected by the Azeri public. Sezgin had published an introductory textbook about Islam, very sharply criticizing some basic Shia traditions and beliefs. This inflamed many Azeris—not because of the criticism of Shiism *per se*, but because of the implicit distinction drawn by Sezgin between Sunni and Shia.

The promoters of other versions of Islam that had no direct connection to the state performed more impressively. For example, in the Absheron peninsula, one of the main strongholds of Shiism in Azerbaijan, a large number of followers of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Iraq did not accept the Khomeinist concept of *velayat-e-faqih*.

Having learned from its previous failures promoting revolutionary Shiism in Azerbaijan, Iran began to correct its methods in the mid-1990s. The most successful innovation was the promotion of Grand Ayatollah Fazil Lenkerani as the primary *marja-al-taqlid* in southern Azerbaijan's Shia stronghold. In spite of his loyalty to the leadership of Iran, Lenkerani was not viewed as a promoter of official political aspirations. His strong reputation as a great scholar and the fact that his ancestors were

from southern Azerbaijan also played a significant role in his growing popularity. He soon became virtually the only spiritual leader of Shias in that part of Azerbaijan.

Non-official Turkish movements also made some impressive inroads into Azeri society. These included the Naqshbandi Sufi order of the Mahmud Hudai Foundation, as well as Fathullah Gulen's version of Nur. (Nur was an educational movement whose stated purpose was the breeding of a new generation of pious Muslims.¹⁶) With considerable experience in proselytizing in their secular native Turkey, Gulen's followers have had significant success winning converts and gaining influence, especially in larger cities where the bonds of tradition are weaker than in rural areas. Thanks to the efforts of these Turkish religious organizations, several thousand young urban Azeris of Shia origin began adopting Sunnism in the mid-1990s. By contrast, conversions among Azerbaijan's Sunni minority to Shiism have been negligible so far.

Another source of conversions to Sunnism was an assortment of Salafi preachers from the Gulf States that first appeared in 1993. By 1994, fifteen Arabic charities had opened branches in different parts of the country. These charities were officially invited to provide urgently-needed humanitarian aid to refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh war. However, Salafism gained a foothold in the traditionally Sunni north, particularly among ethnic minorities, as well as in such big cities as Baku and Sumgait.¹⁷ The rate of Salafism's spread within these communities is striking, especially since Salafism was largely unheard of within Azerbaijan twenty years ago.¹⁸ However, the Salafists' attempt to extend their activities into traditionally Shia regions has failed.

Unlike Turkish groups that relied on religious propaganda, the achievements of foreign Salafis and Shias have been primarily due to the success of several brilliant preachers. Among them the most prominent Shia was the Iranian cultural attaché Hoccatulislam Ahmedi Odjag Nedjat. The most successful Salafist was Shaykh Salem Zakharna, the Jordanian head of the Azeri Branch of the Kuwaiti Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage.

The growing influence of these foreign Islamist influences—and the fear of losing control over the situation—forced the government to take a number of steps in the mid-1990s to reduce the dependence of Azeri believers on outside figures. First, Azeri law enforcement agencies began to expel Iranian preachers from the country. Then, in 1996, leaders of the pro-Iranian Islamic Party were linked to Tehran and convicted of espionage.¹⁹ Nedjat was forced to stop his Friday sermons in the historical Juma Mosque of Baku, and the Salafi preacher Zakharna had to flee the country. During this period, the only religious movements that were not subjected to the pressures of law enforcement and increasing scrutiny were those of Turkish origin.

The most important policy the government implemented was an amendment to

the law on religious freedom prohibiting relations that subordinated Azeris to foreign Muslim religious organizations. This new amendment also demanded that Azeri Muslim groups only submit to the spiritual authority of the Caucasus Muslim Spiritual Board and its leadership. While adopting this amendment was a natural response to growing anxieties about security issues, its implementation was almost impossible. In order to be accepted as the leader of any single Shia community, a cleric was required to belong to the Shia hierarchy and to possess the appropriate religious title of *marja-al-taqlid* or at least local *mujtahid*. The Spiritual Board's incumbent Pashazade possessed none of these qualifications. Furthermore, demanding that Sunni communities accept a Shia cleric as their spiritual leader was even less likely to be successful.

Despite the government's crackdown on certain foreign preachers, the growth of foreign influence on Azeri religious life has not slowed down. In 1997, the first Azeri students who had gone abroad for religious education after independence returned and successfully replaced the foreign preachers. Since the early 1990s, thousands of Azeris have obtained religious educations at various kinds in *madrasas* and universities in Iran, Turkey, the Middle East, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Dagestan. The most impressive achievements have been gained by a graduate of Medina University, Haji Gamat, who became the unofficial leader of Azeri Salafis. Gamat transformed the Abu-Bakr Mosque in downtown Baku into the largest gathering place for Muslim believers in the city.²⁰ Equally significant was Haji Ilgar—a graduate of Iran's Qazvin International University—who successfully replaced the Iranian cleric Odjag Nedjat as a preacher in the historical Juma Mosque of Baku.

In 2001, the government attempted to gain more leverage over Azeri religious life by establishing the State Committee for Work with Religious Communities and appointing the Soviet-trained scholar Rafig Aliyev as its head.²¹ One of the first measures taken by the committee was to impose regulations on the pursuit of religious education abroad, a move which effectively closed down all official exchange programs with foreign religious institutions.²² But this too has had little impact on the situation, as only a handful of Azeri students who travel abroad for religious education do so using official channels.

Thus, since the end of the 1990s, the pace of Azerbaijan's re-Islamization has increased significantly. The State Committee has been largely ineffective at reining in these trends or in making any significant changes to the religious life of the country. During his time as the committee's head, Rafig Aliyev became best known for a bitter and ultimately unsuccessful five-year public rivalry with Pashazade. In 2006 he was sacked by President Aliyev, who in turn granted Pashazade strong support.

The Shia Renaissance

ESPECIALLY SINCE THE END OF THE 1990S, SUNNI ISLAM, AND PARTICULARLY Salafism, has continued to make inroads in the minority communities of north Azerbaijan and in urban centers. Out of fear of losing the competition with Sunnis for the hearts and minds of Azeri youth, Shia leaders have tried to compensate by becoming ideologically involved in Azeri political life and activism. Though this tactic has clashed with the long-standing Azeri tradition of viewing religious propaganda with disdain, it has so far proved to be a successful tactic as far as Shia leaders are concerned.

In 2001 and 2002, the first mass Shia protests erupted in Baku's suburban Nardaran village, historically a Shia stronghold, and gained notoriety after independence as the primary place near Baku where Azeri believers accepted Khamenei's authority. Although the protesters didn't make any expressly religious demands, and although the main reasons for the protests were poor social conditions and high unemployment rates, religious slogans and Shiism's role as a politically unifying force were evident. Only after nine months of mediation by Pashazade did the protests end.

During the 2003 presidential elections, some Shia religious organizations registered their support for oppositional political groups. In December 2003, the pro-Khomeinist Haji Ilgar of Baku's Juma Mosque was arrested. While released from prison several months later, this arrest weakened Ilgar's position as the leader of Shia politics in Baku. Ilgar's Juma Mosque was replaced by the Meshedi Dadash Mosque. Under the leadership of Haji Shahin, former leader of the Khomeinist youth movement Ikmal, the mosque became the unofficial center of the Shia community.²³ However, the arrest of Ilgar and the forced disbursement of his following increased his stature as a religious figure in the eyes of a variety of activist groups.

While Azerbaijan's Shia communities have become increasingly activist, organizing protests to demonstrate their discontent with a wide range of domestic and foreign political issues, Sunnis have actually continued to shun unwanted publicity. This is in part because the Sunnis appear to be chastened by the rising belligerence of Shiite activists. The state-controlled media has published a range of anti-Sunni propaganda, and leading Shia clerics, including Pashazade and his former rival Haji Ilgar, have lent their voices.²⁴ Pashazade identified both the Salafi and Nur movements as extremely radical, and called for restrictions on their activities. Haji Ilgar held off on attacking Nur, although he criticized the Wahhabi movement by arguing that the "success of this radical group" in Azerbaijan was only possible because the government imposed restrictions on the "right" Islamic propaganda. (Ilgar later retreated from this rhetoric, as it appears to have damaged his reputation as a religious-freedom activist.)

In fact, since the early 2000s, Shiism—and Islam as a whole—has become an increasingly powerful force in Azeri public life. Several prominent secular opposition activists began to shift their rhetoric in favor of political Islam following the 2003 presidential elections. Some of them, like Panah Husseyn, the former prime minister of Elçibay's government, started publicly endorsing the importance of applying Islamic principles to politics. Religion's growing influence was also on display in the 2005 parliamentary elections. For the first time in recent Azeri political history, all the major secular oppositional parties made special televised appeals to Muslim voters.

The growing number of those participating in the Hajj (the pilgrimage to holy sites in Mecca) during the last few years also clearly indicates the increase of Islam's influence on Azeri society. Almost completely restricted during the Soviet era, the pilgrimage was resumed in 1991 when only 200 pilgrims went to Mecca. In 1996 this number rose to 800, and then fluctuated for the next several years between 800 and 1000. Only a portion of these pilgrims were actually Azeri citizens, however; the Caucasus Muslim Board sold vacancies not filled by Azeris to Iranians and Muslims from the northern Caucasus. This situation has dramatically shifted since 2003, when the number of Azeris wishing to participate began to rise significantly. Four thousand applicants were turned down in 2006; by 2007, nearly 5700 Azeris participated.

Since the 2007 death of the revered Grand Ayatollah Fazil Lenkorani, a number of new dynamics have shaped Azeri Shiite religious life. Many of Lenkorani's followers have been leaning toward the spiritual leadership of hardliners like the Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirasi (a Khomeini appointee to Iran's Supreme Religious Council [*Majlis-e-Khobregan*]). Meanwhile, Khamenei has already become the most-followed *marja-al-taqlid* among young Azeri Shias. Interestingly, the once-shunned Iranian preacher Odjag Nedjat also has resumed his Friday sermons in Baku. Officially, he presides over religious service for Iranians living in Baku, but in fact the largest portion of his audience is Azeri. Nedjat has also managed to increase his influence amongst Azeris living in nearby Georgia and in Russia (particularly Moscow). In fact, during the last two or three years, Shiite leaders—thanks to their increasing political activism—have managed successfully to reverse the decline of Shiism amongst Azeri youth, and Shiism appears to be enjoying a renaissance.

An Uncertain Moment

THE REVIVAL OF ISLAM AMONG THE YOUNGER GENERATION DURING THE LAST several years has triggered a major government crackdown. Since the last quarter of 2006, many religious TV and radio shows, mosque-run Quranic teaching courses, and several religious book stores have been shut down. Both Shia and Sunni litera-

ture are subject to seizure. In some northern Sunni regions police have launched a “hunt on beards,” and have forcibly shaved off the beards of believers. There were also attempts to impose restrictions on the number of daily prayers in regional mosques and on the proclamation of the *Azan*, or call to prayer, from loudspeakers in Baku. Surprisingly, the Sunni Nur and Salafi communities, who in the past have been loyal and quiescent to the ruling elite, have now become primary targets of the government. After a terrorist attack on August 17, 2008, on the Abu Bakr mosque (which, according to government sources, was committed by a rival Salafi group), the government officially closed the mosque during the subsequent investigation and didn’t reopen it during Ramadan. Police forces have further restricted access to other Sunni mosques during Ramadan by allowing worshippers to gather only inside the mosques, prohibiting prayers in the outside yard area.

These strict governmental measures have created an environment of fear in Azerbaijan that has, to some extent, retarded the growth of the Islamic revival. But it should be taken into account that, in recent history, Islamic revival in Azerbaijan has witnessed several periods of stagnation or even backsliding. These phases didn’t last long, and in their aftermath interest in Islam reemerged stronger than ever.

Taken together, the Islamic revival in Azerbaijan should be seen largely as the adaptation of Azeri society to a new religion rather than as a return to older, more secularized Azeri religious traditions. There is no doubt that the Islamic movements that have been most successful in independent Azerbaijan since the collapse of USSR—Salafism, Nur, and Khomeinist Shiism—are relatively new to the Azeri environment. Yet despite the accomplishments of these foreign Islamic movements and the striking pace of their spread in Azerbaijan, they still have had a relatively small impact on Azeri society compared to other Muslim societies elsewhere. The secular characteristics of Azeri society remain very strong and continue to dominate public life. The general population appreciates the Islamic aspect of their identity but does not yet seem prepared to give up on their secular achievements, or on the promise of a secular future. At the same time, there can be little doubt that Azerbaijan’s re-Islamization is far from finished.

NOTES

1. Sebastian Peyrouse. “The Rise of Political Islam in Soviet Central Asia,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 5, 2007, pp. 40-54.
2. Bayram Balci, “Le Renouveau Islamique en Azerbaïdjan entre Dynamiques Internes et Influences Externes,” *Les Etudes du CERI*, no. 138, October 2007, p. 2.

3. Dj.Hadjibeyli, *Izbrannoye*. Baku, 1993, p. 84.
4. Only northern Sunnis in the Zakatala region managed to preserve *sharia* courts after the appeal of the Local National Committee to the Central Government. Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv, *Azerbaydjanskoy Respubliki*, Fond 894, Opis 2, *Yedinitsa Khraneniya* 9, list 37; Fond 894; Opis 1, *Yedinitsa Khraneniya* 19, list 15.
5. R. Huseynli. *Azerbaycan Ruhaniliyi*. (Baki: "Kur" Neshriyyati, 2002), p.131-139.
6. Alexandre A. Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
7. Benningsen et H. Carrere D'encausse, "La literature Anti-Religieuse dans les Republique Sovietiques Musulmanes," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 1958, p. 77.
8. Gosudardtvenniy Arkhiv, "Politicheskikh Partiy i Obshestvennikh Dvijeniyy Azerbaydjanskoy Respubliki," Fond 1, opis 235, *Yedinitsa Khraneniya* 146, list 525.
9. Gosudardtvenniy Arkhiv Politicheskikh Partiy i Obshestvennikh Dvijeniyy Azerbaydjanskoy Respubliki fond 1, opis 74, *yedinitsa khraneniya* 180, list 25.
10. Gosudardtvenniy Arkhiv Politicheskikh Partiy i Obshestvennikh Dvijeniyy Azerbaydjanskoy Respubliki fond 1, opis 74, *yedinitsa khraneniya* 465, list 162-217.
11. Newspaper "Islam" (Official Media outlet of the Muslim Board), December 20th , 1990.
12. Interview with Isa Gambar, June 2002.
13. Once, when the low-profile *Azeri Etimad* newspaper published a humiliating caricature of Pashazade, a Dagestani Shia cleric threatened to punish the chief editor. Today, this newspaper is one of Pashazade's most trusted media outlets.
14. "Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State," Report of the International Crisis Group—Europe Report no. 191, March 25, 2008, http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/europe/caucasus/191_azerbaijan_independent_islam_and_the_state.pdf
15. Raoul Motika. *Islamskiye Seti v Azerbaidjane 90-x godov*. "Mir, Progress, Prava Cheloveka," Publikatsiya Muzeya i obshetvennogo centra imeni Andreyax Saxarova. Vipusk 4, Azerbaidjan I Rossiya: Obshetstva i Gosudarstva, May 2001, http://www.sakharov-center.ru/publications/azrus/az_010.html.
16. The Nur ("light") movement was founded by Said Nursi (also known as Bediuzzaman), a Turkish thinker of Kurdish background. Nur is generally considered one of the most important Islamic reformist currents to have appeared in Turkey in the past century.
17. Salafism became very popular among the Russian-speaking, well-educated, more modernized Azeri youth of Baku.
18. "Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State," Report of the International Crisis Group—Europe Report no. 191, March 25, 2008.
19. Quite popular in the beginning of the 1990s, the Islamic Party was transformed into a small and marginalized group after the disclosure of the pro-Iranian agenda of its leadership.
20. In one of his recent interviews given to an Azeri web resource, Gamat Suleymanov estimated that every Friday seven to eight thousand believers pray in his mosque, and that this number exceeds twelve thousand during annual holiday prayers. See <http://www.day.az/news/society/57685.html>
21. After 9/11, the government began expelling almost all the Arabic charity organizations from Azerbaijan.
22. "Interview with the Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Communities," *Azeri Newspaper*, «525-ci q-zet», August 16, 2003.
23. Since 1992 Haji Shahin led the active religious youth organization "Ikmal," whose official registration was cancelled in 2001 by a court decision after an appeal by the Ministry of Justice.

24. HYPERLINK “<http://azerbaijan.news.az/index.php?Lng=aze&Pid=17470>”
<http://azerbaijan.news.az/index.php?Lng=aze&Pid=17470>
http://juma-az.org/articles.php?item_id=20071102024209129&sec_id=1
<http://www.azadses.org/Article/2007/11/16/20071116132231550.html>