

IS AZERBAIJAN BECOMING A HUB OF RADICAL ISLAM?

In this article, the author attempts to explain the leading factors behind growing Islamic influence in Azerbaijan. She describes social, political and economic problems as main triggers of Islam gaining stronghold across the country. The author argues that as a result of continued problems such as corruption, poverty, and semi-authoritarian government combined with disillusionment with the West and support of various religious sects from countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the rise of fundamental Islam has been inevitable.

Arzu Geybullayeva*

* The author is Analyst of the European Stability Initiative (ESI) covering Azerbaijan.

On the outside, Azerbaijan, an ex-Soviet Republic appears to be a rather remarkable example of progressive and secular Islamic state. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early '90s, the newly formed Azerbaijani government immediately proclaimed itself a secular nation. The main inspiration was the secular ideology adopted from Turkey as a result of accession to power of the Azerbaijani Popular Front led by Abulfaz Elchibey. It was during Elchibey's short lived presidency between 1992 and 1993 in which he pursued a Turkey-leaning stance that the notion of secularism began to gain a stronghold. During this period Turkey moved swiftly to fill the religious and ideological vacuum left by Russia. Elchibey's positive attitude towards Turkey not only strengthened economic and political ties with the country, but also played an important role in adopting the Turkish model of strong nationalism and secularism.

Yet, over the last few years, Islamic ideology has become visibly pronounced in Azerbaijan. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan embraced a secular ideology from Turkey, its other neighbors such as Iran and the Arab Gulf Countries, were of a different state of mind. For these countries, the independence of Azerbaijan meant an opportunity to spread their religious ideologies and expand their influence.

As a result of such strong foreign influence and growing socio-economic problems, Islamic influences began to slowly spread over the country, challenging the current government. This paper will argue that due to several internal and external factors, Azerbaijan has found itself under the growing influence of Islam and especially radical Islam. Following analysis of these dynamics, an overview of existing Islamic schools of thought and their influence over Azerbaijani society with a few conclusive remarks will be provided.

What Went Wrong?

The rise of radical Islamic groups in Azerbaijan over the last few years is no doubt an outcome of a number of internal and external factors. While continued problems with corruption, poverty, and semi-authoritarian government contributed to the rise of Islamic activity domestically, disillusionment with the West and support for radical Islamic groups from countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Russian North Caucasus fuelled the rise of fundamental Islam.

Internal Factors

Frustration with the autocratic rule of one family and its clan members and its ability to monopolize all spheres of economic activity in Azerbaijan has been among the most prominent factors contributing to the growing influence of Islam. Topped with the fact that a vast amount of oil money is spent on useless projects such as Olympic-standard sports stadiums in remote areas of the country or investment into the 'booming' construction sector (40 percent increase in 2007)¹ has only increased resentment towards the government. Eldar Mamazov, a former advisor to late President Heydar Aliyev, agrees that this growing anger with the authorities creates fertile ground for the emergence of radical Islam in Azerbaijan. "It

¹ Author's interview with Azer Mehdiyev and Rovshen Agayev from the Support for the Economic Initiatives on 10 November 2007.

is because of the authoritarian regime. The government presses democracy, it presses the opposition. There is now a big gap in Azerbaijan and political Islam is trying to fill it.”²

Poverty has been another factor fuelling the rise of Islam. Especially over the last few years Azerbaijan has witnessed increasing levels of poverty with growing income inequality. Poverty, coupled with a lack of democratic reforms has fuelled the popularity of Islam. According to the UN Human Development Report 2004, 49.6 percent of the population lives below poverty line in Azerbaijan. 17 percent of the total population (1.3 million) lives in extreme poverty with monthly consumption below 15 dollars per capita per month.³ While walking down the streets of Baku, looking at its high end clothing shops, fancy cars streaming on the roads, and numerous restaurants and cafes, one may think that the country is thriving. However once you start talking to the people on the streets, a different reality hits you. The poverty is more apparent especially in the outskirts of Baku, where poverty and unemployment are widespread.

Lack of training of security forces and police in dealing with religious groups has been another important internal factor. Azerbaijani police have been indiscriminately targeting and repressing religious groups. In the Zaqatala region which is a hub of the Salafi movement in Azerbaijan, police have purposely burned and shaved the beards of Salafis and on many occasions beaten and humiliated them. Ilgar Ibrahimoglu who is a *new generation* Muslim teacher and head of the Center for Protection of Freedom of Conscience, an Azeri human rights group, argues that such heavy-handed treatment is counter-productive. “Illegal actions like these are creating fertile soil for the growth of various kinds of ‘extremist’ and ‘radical’ movements.”⁴ Similar remarks have been made by Hadji Gamet Suleymanov; the imam of the Salafi/Wahhabi Abu-Bakr mosque who also believes that such heavy-handed treatment can be counterproductive. According to Suleymanov “...this serves only to fuel radicalization...if you are prosecuted just because you are a believer, this is not right.”⁵

Education has been another problem. Most of the schools in Azerbaijan do not provide moderate religious education on the basics of religion nor is there humanities curriculum. This problem is of great importance since following Azerbaijan’s independence more and more people became interested in the topic of religion, which was heavily restricted during the Soviet rule. It is disturbing that most in the country cannot differentiate between Shi’a and Sunni Islam. For this reason it should not be surprising that people open their doors to the ‘missionaries’ who present themselves as experts on Islam. This in return poses a great danger for the future of the country, as the younger generation is exposed to the radical proselytizing.

On a political level, the incompetence of the opposition parties and their inability to join forces, as was the case during the 2003 presidential elections when opposition parties failed to put forward a joint candidate, has discredited them in the eyes of the general public.

² Luke Allnutt, *Azerbaijan: The Struggle to Shape Islam*,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/11/641B2569-4360-4114-8A89-592C68EC2101.html>, 31 November 2007.

³ World Bank Report, *Azerbaijan-Poverty Reduction Strategy paper and joint IDATIMF staff assessment*” Vol. 1, April 2003, p. 4.

⁴ Leyla Amirova, *Young people increasingly drawn to Islam in Azerbaijan*, Kavkazcenter, <http://old.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2007/08/28/8785.shtml>, 28 August 2007.

⁵ Liz Fueller and Baber Bakir, *Azerbaijan: Why is ‘alternative’ Islam is increasingly gaining strength?*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/8/27518A9F-2AC2-4B1F-8CA4-8F14EA033CA9.html>, 15 August 2007.

External Factors

While internal factors have played a significant role in the rise of Islamic influence, external factors have also been influential. These have been closely associated with the growing disillusionment with the West and in particular the U.S. The main reasons for that has been US sanctions on Azerbaijan as a result of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and U.S. humanitarian assistance to the government of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In 1992, the US Congress, passed section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, prohibiting U.S. direct assistance to the government of Azerbaijan. Despite the fact that the Azerbaijani government tried to ignore this section and highlight its strategic partnership with the U.S., on the local level, this bill was perceived as a betrayal of Azerbaijan. According to the Azerbaijani population, this Section was passed only to punish Azerbaijan. This attitude did not alter following the waiving of the Section 907 after the September 11 attacks and was further perceived as another way to keep Azerbaijan dependent on U.S., rather than a friendly gesture. Furthermore, this has become leverage in the hands of the Islamic activists portraying America as an enemy that favors Christian Armenia to Muslim Azerbaijan and interested in Azerbaijan only because of its oil. The U.S. war in Iraq deepened Azerbaijani frustration with the US-Iraq being predominantly Shi'a, as is Azerbaijan, also played a role in this stance.

Many Azerbaijanis accuse the West (both Europe and the US) of double standards. "The West in its dealings with other countries takes into consideration first and foremost its own national, political and economic interests..." says former State Committee for Religious Affairs Chairman Rafiq Aliyev.⁶ Therefore it is widely thought that the Western interest in Azerbaijan is purely of mercantile nature rather than being in line with its commitment to spread democracy. This has led people in the country to slowly lose trust not only in the pro-western Azerbaijani politicians, but also in the West in general.

The influence of religious movements from abroad has also been effective in strengthening Islamic sentiment in Azerbaijan. Geographically Azerbaijan is surrounded by countries with strong Islamic influence such as theocratic Iran with Shi'a radicalism in the South, Chechen and Dagestani Sunni radicalism in the North and the Arab influence. In addition, Azerbaijan's strategic location between Russia, Turkey, the Middle East, and Central Asia has made it a point of attraction for foreign terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda.

Existing Islamic Schools of Thought

Having explained the leading factors behind the growing Islamic influence in Azerbaijan, it is now time to analyze the existing religious congregations, which have played a significant role in shaping the Islamic ideology of contemporary Azerbaijan.

While the main debate about Islam in Azerbaijan revolves around radical Shi'a Islam imported from Iran and the Salafi/Wahhabi congregation sponsored by the Arab Gulf, there are also several other religious groups battling over presence in the society.

⁶ Ibid.

Saudi Arabia's Salafi/Wahhabi Congregation

Often referred to as Wahhabite, the Wahhabi congregation is a mixture of teachings of the radical Arab theologian Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab and the strictest Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. This trend considers itself as Salafist, a follower of the teaching of the prophet. It is heavily anti-Shi'a and suspicious of the traditional Mazhabs or schools of jurisprudence. It has been sponsored and promoted by the wealthy Saudis, Kuwaitis, and the natives of other Gulf States. Their influence is largely present in the Northern regions of Azerbaijan, especially among Sunni Lezgin minorities. Today this congregation is considered one of the dangerous radical Islamic groups in Azerbaijan.

Recent events have intensified the fear of the presence of this congregation. On October 27th Azerbaijan officials thwarted an Islamic terror plot that was planned by the Wahhabi militants and was aimed at the embassies and other foreign representatives in the capital, Baku. The National Security Ministry (NSM) of Azerbaijan confirmed that the hide-out was discovered in Mastagha, just on the outskirts of Baku, where the weapons stolen from the military by the lieutenant Kamran Asadov were kept. The weapons were found together with other members of the group during a special operation carried out by NSM officers on the night of October 27. As a result of the operation, some group members were detained and stolen weapons confiscated.

There are however, other Salafi followers who do not associate themselves with the radical Wahhabis of the North. These groups of believers gather for Friday prayers at Abu Bakr mosque in Baku and listen to the speeches of Hadji Gamet Suleymanov, the mosque's imam, condemning problems such as poverty, corruption, and social injustice that exist in the country.

Yet, the threat and danger that this school of thought inflicts upon the authorities is unavoidable. Salafi teachings are intolerant of Shi'a Islam, folk Islam, the West, and practices such as visits to holy shrines. Thus, such attitudes and clashes between Salafis and traditional Sunnis could be a serious threat. Moreover, continued suppression of government as part of its efforts to keep a tight control over religion only intensifies religious upheaval.

Iranian Radical Shi'a Islam Congregation

The Iranian influence grew in Azerbaijan at the beginning of '90s. Even before the diplomats of both countries began establishing relations privately sponsored Iranian initiatives were opening madrasas (religious schools) and sending missionaries to the main regions of Azerbaijan. The influence of the missionaries was especially strong in the regions in the south of Azerbaijan, closer to the Iranian border where the population was predominantly Shi'a Muslim. They were also strong in the refugee and IDP camps. And while the authorities consider Salafi congregation most dangerous, there is also fear of the export of this version of political and radical Shi'a Islam from Iran.

Today, radical Shi'a Islam is more popular than ever as a result of effective and tactful methods used by Iranian mullahs. While southern regions of Azerbaijan, the IDP camps, and the Absheron peninsula remain the heart of the Iranian Shi'a Islam, the main stronghold of radical Shi'a Islam in Azerbaijan is the village of Nardaran on the outskirts of Baku. Here you can see Koranic slogans like "Muslims must become the soldiers of Islam and they should defend Islam" or "Red death is better than black life. Allah-u Akbar!"

The Iranian influence continues to grow despite the fact that late President Aliyev banned and expelled Iranian mullahs who were preaching in these regions in the late 1990s. Instead, Iran has changed its tactics. It is using Azerbaijani mullahs (who are trained in Iran and are sympathetic to the Iranian theocratic regime) to promote its ideology.

According to the State Committee for Work with Religious Structures, “in every village of Masalli, Lankaran, and Jalilabad regions [districts] there is at least one mosque and one religious community. Only in Massali regions the number of functioning mosques exceeds the total number of mosques in Neftchala, Salyan, Saatli and Sabirabad districts.”⁷ The district of Lenkaran, only a few kilometers from the Iranian border and situated in the southeast of Azerbaijan has close ties with Iran. Here you could find religious programs broadcasted from Iran in the Azeri language aimed at “northern Azerbaijan” and ideological works from Iran at the local bookshops.

Another tool used by Iran to promote its influence in Azerbaijan is through madrasas (religious schools). In these ‘schools’ aside from learning Arabic and reading the Qur’an, children also read the literature on glorification of Iran and its theocratic regime. While, a big proportion of these schools were shut down by the Azerbaijani government in 2002, there are still madrasas operating in the country. Iran also sponsors students who want to study Shi’a theology in Iran. Such trends have increased after the independence of Azerbaijan and opening of borders.

Azerbaijani Pro-Iranian Shi’a Islam Congregation

This is another religious congregation, which is headed by a young Islam scholar, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu. Ibrahimoglu received his religious education in Qom, Iran and studied human rights in Poland. The difference between this congregation and that of radical Shi’a Islam is that most of its followers are young educated people who have studied philosophy, Western and oriental history and speak several foreign languages. In addition, Ibrahimoglu’s ability to combine Islamic roots and modern democratic rhetoric is what makes him different from the radical Shi’a Islam and allows him to attract the younger generation.

Turkey’s Nurcu Influence

Turkey’s influence in shaping post-Soviet Azeri Islam was due to a combination of popular Islam and Turkic nationalism in the form of the moderate Hanafi school of Islam promoted by the Turkish religious sect, Nur or Nurcular as it was widely known in Azerbaijan. In contrast to other existing religious groups, this Turkish brand of Islam is less radical and aggressive than that of radical Shi’a and Salafi schools. Its main focus has been the general moral and ethical obligations of Muslims rather than political or controversial topics. Its audience has been the educated strata of the Azerbaijan society.

The activities of this branch of Turkish Islam has included building mosques and operating a theology faculty at the Baku State University as well as educational programs, led by Çağ Öğretim İşletmeleri A.Ş., which concentrated on setting up Turkish high schools and

⁷ Azerbaijani State Committee for Work with Religious Structures, http://www.addk.net/eng/articles/situation_e.html.

universities, based on western curriculum and approved by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan.

Other Foreign Islamic Congregations

Religious foundations in Azerbaijan also consist of other groups with foreign origins or links. Following the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi in 1998, as a result of the fax that was sent from Baku via phone connection to a mobile phone in London, the level of activity of Al-Qaeda in the country was discovered.⁸ Serious measures were taken following this incident; members of the Egyptian Gama-al-Islami movement, which had close connections with Al-Qaeda, were arrested in Azerbaijan and extradicated to Egypt. In addition, the radical Jeysullah movement, which had apparent support from Iran and connections with Hizbullah was cracked down upon. Also an Al-Qaeda operative named Abu Atiya, who was thought to be a veteran of deceased terrorist leader Al-Zarqawi was apprehended in Baku and turned over to the CIA.⁹

What are the Future Prospects for Azerbaijan?

Looking at the current situation raises great concern over Azerbaijan's future. Though its economy is booming at 26 percent annual growth, corruption, injustice, and bureaucracy are realities that leave Azerbaijan at a crossroads once again, this time not between the East and the West but between freedom and economic revival on one hand and corruption and poor living conditions on the other. If authorities choose freedom and democracy, then more grounds will also need to be opened for religious practices. Democratization would be a key in putting an end to growing Islamic influence by defusing certain conditions used as incubators of radicalism. Yet if they prefer continued monopolization of politics and economy, the marginalization of some social segments and the growth of radical Islam may be the only alternative.

⁸ U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, "US Vs. Usama Bin Laden" in *Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan*, 2 May 2001, p. 5440.

⁹ David S. Cloud, "Long In US Sights, A Young Terrorist Builds Grim Resume On Journey to Iraq, Zarqawi Forged Ties With Al-Qaeda, Attracted Own Followers; An Amputation in Baghdad", *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 February 2004.