

RECONSIDERATIONS

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Azerbaijan: The Hidden Faces of Islam

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Azerbaijan is a quintessential borderland country. Located in the South Caucasus on the great divide between Europe and Asia, and flanked by Russia and Iran, it is no bigger than the state of Maine. Its 8 million mostly Turkic-speaking inhabitants have ancestral memories of the complex religious and ethnic conflicts that have riven their region. Not only is the country on the very boundaries of the Islamic and Christian worlds, but its history is entwined with the two main branches of Islam, the majority Sunnis and the dissenting Shiites. In past confrontations between predominantly Shia Iran and mostly Sunni Ottoman Turkey, Azerbaijan became a battleground, recalling Europe's own wars of religion during the Reformation.

These are not remote matters. As this essay will attempt to explain, 70 years of Communist rule, from 1920 until the Soviet collapse in 1991, did not ameliorate, much less quell, sectarian divisions. Indeed, the Soviet Union's dissolution was heralded in 1988 by an outbreak of violence over Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly ethnic Armenian Christian enclave within Azerbaijan. Moscow was unable to broker a settlement, and as Armenia and Azerbaijan became independent riots escalated into open warfare in 1992–94, claiming 30,000 lives and displacing close to a million mostly Muslim Azeris. Despite a cease-fire, sporadic fighting continues over Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh as outside mediators (the United States, Russia, and France) have failed to put forward mutually acceptable peace terms.

From an American vantage, Azerbaijan's stability is of obvious concern, given its location, its shared Shia faith with Iran, its ethno-linguistic ties with Turkey, and its important role in the global energy economy. Post-9/11, prospects seem more favorable for a pipeline that could carry Caspian oil from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey's Mediterranean port at Ceyhan. But completion of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline is very much hostage to relative tranquility in the South Caucasus, with its competing faiths and contentious ethnic groups. A glance at the past provides a cautionary warning about subsurface tensions among a people who have made an art form of concealment.

When, early in the nineteenth century, Azerbaijani lands north of the Araxes River were seized from Iran by Russia, frontiers were conveniently redrawn to promote the divide-and-rule policies of the new colonial power. Turkic-speaking Muslims in Russian-held Azerbaijan differed from their compatriots remaining in Iran in an essential respect: the comparatively large proportion of Sunnis among them. Russian statistics from the 1830s show that the ratio of Shiites to Sunnis was almost even, with the latter having a small edge.

Thus Sunnis formed a majority in the northern and western regions of Azerbaijan, an area historically influenced by neighboring Daghestan and Chechnya. These were the mountainous citadels of militant and populist Sunnism, as symbolized by Imam Shamil, the redoubtable Islamic warrior who resisted Tsarist armies for three decades

until his surrender in 1859. Shamil's epic struggle found its echoes among the Sunnis of Azerbaijan, inspiring waves of insurgency. Of four local uprisings in the 1830s, three broke out in areas with substantial Sunni populations. The Russians finally put down the most threatening, in 1837, with the crucial assistance of native militias from predominantly Shia districts. Reversing this sectarian split for different purposes, Russia went on to use Shiite volunteers in subsequent wars with predominantly Sunni Ottoman Turkey.¹

All this resulted in population shifts. Census figures from the 1860s show a sharp decline in the Sunni population, meaning that Shiites would henceforth account for approximately two-thirds of the Muslims south of the Caucasus mountain range. This decrease among Sunnis stemmed in good part from their emigration to Turkey, a trickle that turned into a torrent following the final defeat of Shamil.

The troubled Shia-Sunni relationship became a major concern for the Azerbaijani modernizing movement that began to emerge in mid-century. The movement's leading thinker, Mirza Fathali Akhundzade, wrote of the need for an "Islamic Reformation" on the pattern of Protestantism in Europe as a cure for ingrown intolerance and fanaticism. Generally speaking, the modern-minded intelligentsia was inclined toward secularism, not so much because of hostility to Islam but rather as a means of overcoming the sectarian split, a crucial step in the task of building a community of people whose identity then was still expressed as Transcaucasian Muslim, or sometimes Tatar. (Azerbaijan became a name on the map only with a brief interlude of independent statehood, 1918–20, which ended with its conquest by Bolshevik armies.)

The Islamic sectarian split waned only with the 1905–07 Russian Revolution, which in Azerbaijan was marked by large-scale ethnic violence known as the "Tatar-Armenian War." Shiites and Sunnis alike

felt threatened by the Armenian challenge and its effective fighting force, and found in this confrontation a unity that transcended sectarian lines. Tellingly, the emerging native revolutionary movement, in its quest for a unifying appeal, seized on traditional Shiite rites memorializing the martyrdom of Imam Huseyn, killed on the 10th of the month of Muharram 680. No longer the focus for criticism by intellectuals dismayed by mass flagellation, these rites now served political purposes. In 1907, the funeral of a local Social Democrat swelled into a huge demonstration, and among its organizers was a young Bolshevik activist from Georgia, Joseph Stalin. The mass funerals foreshadowed still greater ethnic violence, most immediately a further round of the Baku Armenian-Muslim clashes known as "the March Days of 1918."²

More than anything, the political turbulence of the unfolding twentieth century shaped the fortunes of Islam in Azerbaijan. Following the downfall of the Tsar and the onset of the Russian Civil War, the Musavat (Equality) Party called for the founding of a secular nation-state. Its vision became the hallmark of the first independent Azerbaijani republic, dating from 1918–20, despite the strong opposition of conservative Islamic groups—so much so that one of them, Ittihad (Unity), even welcomed the Soviet conquest of the country.

The Crucial Test for Islam

By every measure, Soviet rule proved the crucial test for Islam in Azerbaijan. Initially, the Bolshevik regime tended to moderation, reflecting the belief that Muslims should reach socialism through their own path since Islamic notions of politics and society did not contradict Marxism. As oppressed victims of European imperialism, Islam also accorded with the Communist vision of the East as the prime mover of world revolution, a view articulated most vociferously by the Tatar Communist intellectual, Mir Sultan Galiyev. For a time, still weak Soviet au-

thorities even cultivated correct relations with the Shia clergy. By the mid-1920s, with the advent of the *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) policy, Moscow opted for what was, in effect, a national contract with the native intelligentsia, formed in the spirit of European enlightenment and secularism. In return for the acceptance of, and cooperation with, Soviet power, Azerbaijanis were given the recognition of national identity—full rights for their own language and culture, a notion that tacitly included Islam as one of its components. In the same spirit, the Azerbaijani Soviet regime, under the leadership of Nariman Narimanov, tried to appear as the spokesman for national aspirations, hence the term “national communism,” referring to the party’s policies of the period.

While facing a people whose primary identity was Islamic, the Soviet regime also drew on the traditions of secularism, as forcefully applied in Kemalist Turkey, then a friendly neighbor of the Soviet Union. Generally, the Soviet rule promoted an Azerbaijani national consciousness as a substitute for identification with the world Islamic community, with its sense of underlying unity across political, ethnic, and linguistic borders, a Soviet tactic decried by some as an application of the old divide-and-rule principle. A striking example, in their eyes, was the alphabet reform of 1926, the first of three Azerbaijan experienced in the twentieth century. This reform, which exchanged the Arabic characters for the Latin at one stroke, broke the continuity of the literary heritage, and excluded Islamic literature from being transliterated, was in fact a step that deepened ethnic divisions among the Muslims of the Soviet Union.

Even though the Soviet view of Islam was inherently tainted by hostility, its degree of intensity varied. At first, the Soviet actions against Islam did not go beyond the measures that could be presented as a part of an overall modernization, such as the expropriation of the *vaqfs*, (charitable foundations), the closing down of Islamic

civil courts and *maktabs* (mosque schools), or the banning of the *shahsey-vahsey*, the processions involving self-flagellation during the Muharram rites. The statements of the sort made by Samad Aghamalioghli, the moving spirit of the alphabet reform, that “Islam degrades human dignity” still sounded exceptional in the first decade of the Soviet rule, but were a harbinger of things to come.

Although some mosques had been closed down in the mid-1920s and the customary laws, *adats*, were banned in 1927, the all-out offensive against Islam only began toward the end of the decade upon the consolidation of Stalin’s personal power. The opening salvo sounded like the old battle cry of the modernizing movement, the campaign for the emancipation of Muslim women. Reinforcing the symbolic act of discarding the veil, Soviet legislation inflicted severe punishment for such practices, rooted in the native traditions, as polygamy, marrying underage women, bridal payment (*kalym*), and abduction, as well as the blood vengeance. A law passed in 1930 qualified the killing of a woman as a counterrevolutionary act punishable by death.³ Soon, in the new political climate, the authorities pretended to respond to orchestrated popular demands by closing down mosques. Their number decreased from almost 1,400 in 1928 to a mere 17 five years later. The Communist Party and government officials deemed guilty of tolerance or insufficient ardor in the struggle against the religion became victims of the purges in the mid-1930s. They were routinely accused of Pan-Islamism, regarded as a reactionary ideology serving the interests of foreign powers with its call for the unity of the Muslim peoples around the world. Islamic clerics, symbolizing the religious obscurantism of the past, were rendered harmless either by terrorization or by acquiring a reputation as police informers. This circumstance kept the faithful from attending prayers in the few mosques that had not been closed. In

general, Azerbaijanis believed they suffered greater repression than their South Caucasian neighbors, Armenia and Georgia, because of their identification with the world of Islam.

A Privatized Religion

What were the long-range effects of this brutal, persistent, and all-pervading campaign against Islam? Outwardly, the visible manifestations of Islamic identity—the observance of the Five Pillars of Islam: profession of faith, the pilgrimage to Mecca, the month of Ramadan fast, almsgiving, and the five daily prayers—came into disuse, except for almsgiving. Likewise, polygamy disappeared entirely, and women’s seclusion ended together with the veil. All the same, Azerbaijani marriages often continued to be arranged, men seldom married outside of the community, while women hardly ever did. Azeris maintained strong kinship loyalties, and for most of the Soviet period seldom migrated to non-Muslim republics, refused to eat pork, and only slowly succumbed to the attractions of alcohol.

As a religion, Islam clearly suffered from the atmosphere of terror. With its rites no longer observed in public, Islam became privatized, confined to the family, the most conservative institution in Azerbaijan. Although women as a group had been the beneficiary of the Soviet secularization drive, having acquired an equality of rights, albeit more formal than real, they now unexpectedly assumed the role of guardians of native traditions, including above all the preservation of Islamic identity.⁴ At the same time, it was often deemed too risky to pass along the tenets of Islam to the young, who grew up unable even to say if their ancestry was Shia or Sunni.

The prevailing adage became “keep religion in your heart,” which was supplemented by another maxim, “say what is required from you and save your freedom of mind.” This echoed an age-old response to religious and political oppression. The So-

viet period witnessed a revival of the tradition of *taqiyya*, apostasy under a threat, in its historic homeland. As a battleground of sectarian struggles, Azerbaijan had long been a hotbed of heresies as local rulers changed religious allegiance, obliging their subjects to follow suit. As if by ingrained impulses of dissimulation, the membership of the Godless Society shot up from a meager 3,000 in 1930, to more than 20 times that number by the next year.

While an instinctive practice of the *taqiyya* in one form or another became a necessity of survival everywhere under the Communist totalitarian rule, nowhere had it deeper roots than in Azerbaijan. Recognizing the art of adaptation through dissimulation helps us to understand the seeming volatility among Azeris, and their skill at sudden reversals while retaining loyalty to their fundamental values. The *taqiyya* heritage, along with the ingrained Shia belief that the only true sovereign is the Invisible Imam, and all other power is usurpation, explains the historically limited Azerbaijani attachment to the institutions of the state, which, more often than not, have been alien rather than homegrown.⁵ Under Soviet rule, years of brutal repression alternated with periods of comparative tolerance, such as the years of the Second World War. Wartime relaxation was the more prudent, given fears that resentful Muslims were more likely than other Soviet citizens to switch over to the German side. Of the forceful anti-Islamic campaigns, the last came during the post-Stalinist period under Nikita Khrushchev—no longer a part of a bloody purge but flowing from a broader policy of hastily assimilating all Soviet citizens to the Russian language and culture. There followed an intensification of the scientific criticism of Islam as a “foreign” religion imposed on the peoples of the South Caucasus by fire and sword. Of the Baku mosques that had survived Stalinism, all but two were closed.

In the late Soviet period, there were in Azerbaijan 54 registered places of “religious

cult,” of which 11 were Shiite and 2 were Sunni mosques, and 4 were mosques where each branch successively performed the *namaz* (prayer). Among 162 persons officially recognized as “religious activists,” Muslim as well as Christian and Jewish, around 100 were mullahs, of whom only 16 had received theological training in the Islam University of Tashkent or the Mir Arab madrasa (college) in Bukhara, a striking contrast to the highly educated theologians in neighboring Iran.⁶

Islamic Revival

Side by side with the structure of “official” Islam, presided over by the Spiritual Board of the Caucasus that had been established during the Second World War, there existed “popular” Islam, especially noticeable in the southern regions, which were known for their higher level of religiosity. Here, prayers were held secretly in private houses and, with time, more and more openly in holy places, the *pirs*. The increase of religiosity was somewhat less pronounced in the northern parts of the country, where historically the Sunnis, often ethnically of non-Azeri minorities, formed a large part of the population. Among the urban intelligentsia, the surreptitious religious activity was regarded with disapproval, as too likely to promote local trends removed from the Islamic mainstream, with an inclination toward fanaticism. Gradually, during the Soviet imperial twilight, signs of religious reawakening not only multiplied but surfaced into the open. According to Soviet sources, during the late 1970s around 1,000 clandestine houses of prayer were in use, and some 300 places of pilgrimage were identifiable. This growth proved the prelude to the public openings of hundreds of mosques in the following decade. Although few agreed on the depth and extent of this reawakening, Soviet surveys indicated that statistically the level of religiosity was highest not only in southern districts, but also around Baku, that is, in the solidly Shia area of the

country, closer to the reverberations of the Iranian Revolution.⁷

For many Azeris, the echoes of that revolution augured a shake-up of the Soviet status quo, and the Islamic revival became intertwined with political change. The “January Days” of 1990 that resulted in hundreds of Azeris being killed or wounded by Soviet troops seeking to quell anti-Armenian riots in Baku, were followed by national mourning in the historic tradition of Shiite funeral rites, 40 days after their deaths. This period of mourning was ordered by the government of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, and the country’s Communist Party. As for the newly emerging noncommunist political force during the transition, the People’s Front of Azerbaijan, its program called for “a new attitude toward the Islamic religion and culture. It is essential that religious beliefs and traditions that are respected by billions of people throughout the world no longer be subjected to the ignorant attacks of the Philistines. The People’s Front supports decisive steps toward the development of understanding and cooperation with the world of Islam.”⁸

As the aftershocks of the Iranian Revolution were reanimating long benumbed religious sentiments, conditions for a full revival came about with the implosion of the Soviet Union. Former Communist dignitaries began to perform pilgrimages to Mecca and to appear at religious festivities, while politicians of all hues courted believers. At the same time, Iranian clerics took part in restoring religious life in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. With money from Tehran, mosques were rebuilt or restored, and future clerics were invited to study in Iran.

The reemerging Iranian-Turkish rivalry affected the Islamic resurgence as secular Turkey also built mosques and madrassas, while enjoying greater support from the Baku authorities than Iranian mullahs. Linked to the religious overtures from Iran was the rise in 1992 of a political organization, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, with

its membership soon estimated at 50,000, mainly in towns and villages around Baku. In 1995, the leader of the party, Aliakram Aliyev, was arrested, and his organization denied re-registration (renewal of the permit for activities), on the grounds that it received financial support from abroad, and because some of his followers were suspected of spying for Iran. However, the party continued to exist legally under a more moderate leadership. More broadly, all Islamic organizations, as well as mosques, were nominally put under the authority of the Muslim Spiritual Board. Subsequently, Parliament adopted a law banning the activities of foreign missionaries and requiring that local religious communities register with traditional religious organizations. The purported aim was to prevent the exploitation of religion for political purposes by foreign emissaries. As for the main political parties, pro-government and opposition alike, their programs agree on maintaining full separation of religion from state. The Azerbaijani elites give every sign of upholding their historic traditions of secularism. That tradition appears to have wide public support. Although a recent poll indicated an increase of religiosity, the overwhelming majority of respondents expressed their preference for keeping Islam out of economics and politics.

With this in mind, how successful has the Islamic revival been? The answers clearly depend on one's viewpoint. A former Communist functionary sees a coming wave of religious fanaticism, while an Iranian visitor from Tabriz is appalled by the laxity and lack of theological training of the Azerbaijani clergy. Most observers agree that Islam survived Soviet rule, but at a price. They notice that the level of general religious knowledge is relatively low among many young and middle-aged urban Azerbaijanis.⁹ Some underscore the curious phenomenon of committed nonbelievers who nevertheless regard themselves as culturally Muslim. One recent survey estimated the

proportion of ardent believers at close to 7 percent, slightly more than the number of declared atheists—almost 4 percent—with the largest numbers falling into the category of those who consider Islam above all as a way of life, without strict observance of prohibitions and requirements, or as a fundamental part of national identity.¹⁰ Some call it secular Islam, some folk Islam. Meanwhile, amid the public discussions on the character of Islam in Azerbaijan, some women have called for restoration of legal polygamy and temporary marriage allowed by Islamic law. This is because the long-term absence of numbers of young men—due to military service or travel abroad in search of work—has produced a shortage of prospective marriage partners.

Islam and National Identity

As for Islam as an attribute of national identity, against whom is this identity asserted? An obvious answer is against outsiders, notably Russians, and generally against persons of Christian or European background. But with regard to other Muslim countries, Azerbaijanis also emphasize the need for a specifically indigenous character of Islam as a part of the long historical process of emancipation from outside, notably Iranian, influences. This notion of a “national Islam” is reinforced by the perception that Iran has tilted in a somewhat biased fashion toward Armenia in the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, with a resulting break in Islamic solidarity. Otherwise, “national Islam” is reminiscent of older notions of national social democracy, or national communism, as a way for overcoming not just sectarian but regional and clannish divisions—as well as the classic Azerbaijani dichotomy: the big city of Baku versus the rural provinces.

There have been other tremors. The riots during the summer of 1999 in the northern town of Gokcay offered a glimpse of reawakening Sunni-Shia rivalry in circumstances suggesting involvement of Iran-

ian clergymen. Far more ominous are indications that, as in the time of Shamil, the North Caucasus is in the throes of an armed conflict without Shiite or Iranian involvement. Islamic militants commonly, but incorrectly, referred to as “Wahhabis” have used the territory of Chechnya to penetrate Daghestan, provoking a Russian counter-offensive. The Russians repeatedly proclaimed the defeat of the militants, but the fighting went on. Moscow claimed supplies of weapons were secretly passing through the territory of Azerbaijan, an allegation formally denied by President Haidar Aliyev. The term “Wahhabism” obviously stems from a fundamentalist Saudi Arabian sect whose overseas reach is financed by petrodollars.

The Azerbaijani authorities, however, invoked the “Wahhabi” threat to ban an opposition rally in Baku, following which some participants were expelled from Azerbaijan, and others delivered into Russian hands. Even before 9/11, an agreement with Russia had been signed on limiting the flow of arms and militants across the frontier, strengthening border controls, and arresting suspected supporters of the Chechen insurrections. Additionally, antiterrorist cooperation with Washington has apparently been underway for years, as shown by President Clinton’s thanks to President Aliyev on the capture of several extremists in 1998.¹¹ Following the World Trade Center catastrophe, the Baku government suppressed Islamic relief organizations believed to be assisting militants in Chechnya.

These steps were in line with Aliyev’s declaration of wholehearted support for the global struggle against terrorism. During the first months of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan offered overflight rights to the United States, along with intelligence sharing and use of the airbase in the Apsheron Peninsula. Yet as post-9/11 tremors continue to roll across the Islamic world, the responses in a country that borders Chechnya and Iran may prove less pre-

dictable. The historic tradition of Islam in Azerbaijan is not only adaptation but also concealment.

If the sources for radical Islam spring from socioeconomic grounds, there is a vast potential for disaffection among the impoverished masses, including the Karabakh war refugees, to whom the benefits from oil wealth do not filter down through the more privileged elites, who are perceived as corrupt unbelievers. Certainly the history of the Communist years offers scant evidence that closing mosques and arresting mullahs will extinguish the thirst for faith, and the potential for ethnic conflagration. ●

Notes

1. For surveys of Azerbaijani history since the conquest by Russia, see Audrey L. Altstadt, *Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford, Cal.: Hoover Institution Press, 1992); Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). See also, Jörg Baberowski, “Nationalismus aus dem Geist der Inferiorität: Autokratische Modernisierung und die Anfänge muslimischer Selbstvergewisserung im östlichen Transkaukasien 1829–1914,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2000), pp. 371–406.

2. For a recent discussion of the topic, see Michael Smith, “The Russian Revolution as National Revolution: Tragic Deaths and Rituals of Remembrance in Muslim Azerbaijan (1907–1920),” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, vol. 49 (2001).

3. For a recent discussion of the subject in a Western language, see Jörg Baberowski, “Stalinismus an der Peripherie: das Beispiel Azerbaïdjan 1920–1941,” in *Stalinismus vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. M. Hildermeier (Oldenburg, 1999).

4. Nayereh Tohidi, “Guardian of the Nation: Women, Islam, and the Soviet Legacy of Modernization in Azerbaijan,” in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, ed. Herbert L. Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi (Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

5. For a recent work on the subject, see Etan Kohlberg, “Taqiyya in Shi’i Theology and Religion,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, ed. Hans G.

Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa (New York: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. 345–60.

6. Ali Abasov, “Islam v Sovremennom Azerbaidzhane: obrazy i realii,” in *Azerbaidzhan i Rossia. Obshchestva i gosudarstva*, ed. D. M. Furman (Moscow, Fond Sakharova, 2001), p. 305.

7. A. Akhadov, *Islam v Azerbaidzhane: Dinlerin Gorush Markazi, Dunya dinlari bashari zangilik kimi* (Baku, 1998), p. 31.

8. *Program of the People’s Front of Azerbaijan* (English translation), p. 8.

9. Fereydoun Safizadeh, “On Dilemmas of Identity in the Post-Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan,” *Caucasian Regional Studies*, vol.3, no.1 (1998).

10. Tair Faradov, “Religiosity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: A Sociological Survey,” International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), newsletter, August 2001, p. 28. On religious organizations in Azerbaijan, see also, U.S. Department of State, *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Azerbaijan*; Raoul Motika, “Islamskie seti v Azerbaidzhane 90-kh godov,” in Furman, ed., *Azerbaidzhan i Rossia*, pp. 311–22.

11. Institute for War and Peace Reporting, October 5, 2001, info@iwpr.net; see also, U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, Eurasia Overview, 2000*.