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ISLAM IN AZERBAIJAN

Special Editor: Sofie Bedford

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Islam in Azerbaijan (Historical Background)

By Altay Goyushov, Baku

Abstract

This article provides a history of the development of Islam in the territory of current Azerbaijan through the end of the Soviet period.

Introduction

Azerbaijan is a secular Muslim nation on the western shores of the Caspian Sea in the South Caucasus which restored its independence with the demise of the Soviet Union. Almost instantly, this tiny country faced a significant revival of its various religious identities, which had been suppressed by the militant atheism of the Communist regime. Although dissemination of Islamic belief in the territories of current day Azerbaijan started in the middle of the 7th century A.D., formation of religious and ethnic identities here has always been a dynamic and complex process, which has gone through numerous changes over the course of a long, rich history, ultimately laying the foundations for the current situation.

In the 11th century, the formation of the Seljuk Empire forced a shift in the ethnic composition of the Azerbaijani populace, boosting the proportion of Turkic people and Sunni Islam. Five hundred years later, the Sunni Hanafi version of Islam, patronized by Seljuk Turks, suffered a severe setback with the rise of the militant Shia Safavid dynasty, which was supported by Qizilbash (Redhead) Turcoman tribes. Due to this conversion, forcibly imposed by Safavids, the religious loyalties of the locals were deeply divided. Only the Russian conquest of the 19th century and the formation of a local, secularly educated elite under imperial patronage gradually eased long-lasting tensions between the Sunnis and Shias of Azerbaijan. These fresh circumstances paved the way for the formation of a new secular nation. Thus, the fall of the tsarist regime was followed by a brief two-year period of independence for the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic. Although the First Republic was swallowed by the Soviet Union, nation-building in the Soviet Autonomy of Azerbaijan actually made the restoration of independent statehood after the collapse of the Communist regime a viable possibility.

Under the Caliphate

The fall of Azerbaijan's current territories under the control of the Islamic caliphate began in the middle of the 7th century, when the Arabs launched a major attack on the Iranian Sassanids. However the Arab defeat of the Sassanids and the local Christian Mikhranid dynasty did not bring an end to the war. During the following century, Azerbaijan became a major battlefield for fighting between

the Omayyad Caliphate and the Turkic Khazar State.

By the middle of the 8th century, the Abbasids had replaced the Omayyads in the Caliphate. This period was also marked by the establishment of Islamic rule in the current territories of Azerbaijan. The Islamization of the local Christian, Zoroastrian and pagan populations accelerated, although some of the local Christians, namely the autochthonous Caucasian Udi people, preserved both their Christian religion and unique language.

During the second decade of the 9th century, the region generated a major uprising against Arab rule. The so-called Khurramite movement, led by the charismatic leader Babak (Islamic name: Hassan), set out to reclaim its ancient Zoroastrian heritage and mixed it with some elements from Shia Islam. For 20 years, this rebellion routed numerous Arab armies. While Babak's uprising was ultimately defeated by the Arab armies, this revolt shook the foundations of the Caliphate and became one of the major causes of its eventual disintegration a few decades later.

The First Turmoil and Stability Brought by the Seljuks

Thus, with the fragmentation of the Caliphate over the next 200 years, Azerbaijan fell under the control of conflicting Muslim dynasties. These ruling dynasties, as well as the population in general, adhered to rival factions of Islamic belief, such as mainstream, Zaidiyyah and Ismaili Shiism, Hanafi and Shafi'i Sunnism, or even belonged to the radical Kharijites.

Only in the 1040s, under the conquering Seljuk dynasty of Turkic Oghuz origin, a relative religious stability was established that endured for the next two hundred years. The founder of the Seljuk dynasty converted to Islam from either Judaism or Nestorian Christianity when the Oghuz tribes under his command settled in the Jand province near the Aral Sea in Central Asia. This dynasty championed the Hanafi version of Sunni Islam by making it the dominant official religion. Seljukid Toghrul grew into the de facto ruler of the Muslim world when he captured Baghdad in 1055 and obtained the official title of Sultan from the Abbasid Caliph. The creation of the great Seljuk Empire, along with religious stability, caused a significant shift in the ethnic composition of Azerbaijan, making the majority of its population Turkic speakers, although the Persian

language still dominated local literary life.

A Major Setback

For most of the 13th century, non-Muslim Mongol invaders dominated the political life of Azerbaijan, which was then included in the territories of the Ilkhanate state, ruled by the Mongol prince Hulagu. Although the Mongols adopted a somewhat tolerant religious policy in general, from the beginning, Hulagu's relationship to Islam was markedly hostile.

Beginning in the middle of the 13th century, neighboring Mongol rulers, in what is often called a political move, gradually adopted Islam, a religion followed by the bulk of their subjects. While for the majority of the century the Ilkhanid rulers remained non-Muslim, in 1295 Ilkhanid Ghazan khan also officially adopted Islam. Although Ghazan chose to follow Sunni Islam, in 1310 his brother Oljaitu embraced Shiism, making it the preferred religion for the rest of the rulers of Ilkhanids, as well as the succeeding Chobanid and Jalairid dynasties of the 14th century.

The Second Turmoil

During the last decades of the 14th century, Azerbaijan suffered the invasion of the Central Asian ruler Timur and his sons. Officially Timur was a follower of Hanafi Sunni Islam, but his mentor and closest adviser was a renowned Shia scholar Seyyid Barakah. Although Timur used religion as an excuse to launch military campaigns, it seems that religion was not the major defining factor either for his alliances or for his wars.

During the years of Timur's invasion, some regions of Azerbaijan became strongholds for the Hurufi movement, which was a radical deviation from the mainstream Shiism.

In the first half of the 15th century, Azerbaijan was ruled by the Sunni Shirvanshahs and the Turcoman Shia Black Sheep Tribal Confederation. The latter was eventually defeated and replaced by the rival Turcoman Sunni White Sheep Tribal Confederation.

Major changes came only in the early 16th century when Ismayil, a young head of the militant Shia Turcoman Qizilbash movement, established a new ruling dynasty of Safavids.

The Frontline between the Shias and Sunnis

An adherent of Twelver Shiism, Ismayil the First defeated the Sunni Shirvanshahs and the White Sheep dynasties, forcing the Sunni population to adopt Shiism. However, Ismayil's advance to the west was halted by the Ottoman Sultan Selim. For the following two centuries, Azerbaijan became the border between the Shia Safavids and the Sunni Ottomans. This circumstance also defined the religious loyalties of locals, causing a roughly equal

division of the Azerbaijani population to the north of Araxes river into Shias and Sunnis.

While Tahmasp, the son of Ismayil the First, managed to convince the Mughal ruler of India Humayun to adopt Twelver Shiism in an exchange for military aid, Humayun's successors reversed this decision. Tahmasp's own successor Ismail the Second also showed early signs of sympathy toward the Sunnis by abandoning the extremely hostile anti-Sunni attitudes of his father and grandfather. However, he was killed only two years into his reign and the anti-Sunni policies of the former Safavid rulers were restored.

The Reconciliation Attempt of Nader Shah

The Sunnis of Azerbaijan were followers of the Hanafi and Shafi schools. While the Turkic speaking Sunnis of Azerbaijan were mainly Hanafites, the majority of the mountain people who spoke the native Caucasian languages followed the Shafi branch of Sunni Islam. In turn, the majority of Azerbaijani Shias adhered to the mainstream Twelver branch of Shia Islam.

In the 17th century, a major ideological dispute within the Twelver branch of Shiism exacerbated the bitter rivalry between the "Akhbari" and "Usuli" factions. "Akhbaris," who only allowed the Quran and the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad and Shia Imams as a source of Sharia (Islamic Law), were crushed by the "Usulis," who unlike their rivals also accepted modern "Ijtihad," i.e. the legal reasoning of distinguished scholars, for deriving new religious laws.

The 18th century was marked by a major attempt to reconcile Sunni and Shia versions of Islam.

In 1736, Nader, the military commander from the Turcoman Afshar tribe, overthrew the rule of the Safavid dynasty by declaring himself a Shah. Nadir launched a series of religious reforms aimed at easing differences between Shias and Sunnis. He prohibited the cursing of the first Rashidi caliphs, which was a custom during Shia mass prayers. Furthermore, Nader publicly wore a hat called the "Kolahi-Naderi" which celebrated all four Rashidi Caliphs. He introduced the term "Jafari" to describe mainstream Shias by repeating Sunni methodology when the names of juridical schools bore the names of their founders. He negotiated the recognition of "Jafarism" among the Ottomans as an official fifth legal school along with the four other Sunni versions of Islam. Although he failed to achieve this goal, Shias were allowed to join Sunnis during the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Russian Conquest

The assassination of Nader in 1747 left his realm in a state of disarray. Semi-independent Khans ruled their constituencies until the early 19th century when the Rus-

sian Empire conquered the lands to the north of the Araxes River. The Russians had experience ruling over Muslim subjects, but this was the first time they had to deal with Shia Muslims. In the beginning, Imperial authorities invited a prominent Shia cleric from Iran to organize the religious life of Shias living in the newly acquired lands. However, this venture failed and a new plan, which sought to organize separate Sunni and Shia institutions, was introduced, although its full implementation was delayed due to an armed uprising against Russian rule in the North Caucasus.

In general, the Russian authorities considered Sunnis more hostile and this sentiment was reinforced by the aforementioned armed uprising in the Sunni-dominated North Caucasus. Russian conquest, however, coincided with a Sunni revival in Azerbaijan. The local spiritual leader of the Sunni Nagshbandi Sufi order, Sheykh Ismail Shrivani-Kurdamiri, became an inspirational figure, not only for Azerbaijanis, but also for those engaged in the revolt against the Empire in the North Caucasus.

This surge of Sunni Islam forced Russian authorities to implement unprecedented measures, forcing Sunnis to abandon their homeland and move to the Ottoman Empire. This move shifted the centuries-old balance of the number of Sunnis and Shias who resided in Azerbaijan in favor of the latter.

After the defeat of the armed revolt, in the 1870s the Imperial authorities established two separate Muslim Boards to supervise the religious life of the Sunnis and Shias of Azerbaijan with a Shekyhulislam as the head of local Shias and a Mufti as the leader of the Sunnis. Both of them were headquartered in Tiflis (the current capital of Georgia), which also was the place of residence of the Russian Caucasian Vice-Roy.

Secularization

The most important development after the Russian conquest was the birth of a new powerful elite in Azerbaijani Society: an intelligentsia with a secular education. Although the first representatives of this stratum, like Akhundov, Kazem Bek and Shahtakhtinski became famous because of their vocal anti-Islamic rhetoric, the majority of Azerbaijani reformers displayed a more conciliatory tone towards Islam, not blaming the religion itself, but instead Muslim clerics and despotic rulers for the decline and current state of affairs in the Islamic world.

This intelligentsia defeated the clerics in the struggle to lead society and carried out significant reforms by introducing native secular schooling, a Muslim press, native theatres, as well as an opera etc. to the local pop-

ulation. They even established the secular parliamentary democracy after the collapse of the monarchy in the Russian empire, declaring the independence of the Azerbaijani Republic in 1918.

The reconciliation of the Sunnis and Shias was one of the main issues in the agenda of intelligentsia and they united Sunni and Shia Muslim Boards into one body during the years of Republic.

Sovietization

In April of 1920, Azerbaijan was occupied by the Red Army. The first sign of Bolshevik anti-religious policy was a campaign against the most important annual Shia processions of Ashura, i.e. the commemoration of Imam Huseyn's death (Shia saint, grandson of Muhammad) on the battlefield. But the major attack, just as in the rest of the Soviet Union, began in the end of the 1920s and accelerated during the land collectivization. When the mosques were closed, visits and donations to the so-called pirs, i.e. graves of both Sunni and Shia saints, became the most visible sign of religious life. The lack of religious scholars and clergy also triggered the rise in the importance of Shia seyyids, so called descendants of Prophet Muhammad.

The Muslim Board of Transcaucasian Muslims, which was closed in the early 1920s, was reopened in 1944 due to foreign policy reasons rather than domestic demands. Although, in general, the modernization of public life deepened the secularization of Azerbaijani society in the post-war era, the moderation of the regime and a chain of nationalistically-minded, local Communist party leaders caused some activation in the religious realm of public life. The Soviets responded by appointing a strongman, a KGB general, as the head of the local Communist party in order to suppress these signs of national and religious awakening. However, the Islamic Revolution in Iran further influenced these, as yet, weak signs of Islamic revival.

Conclusion

Under Soviet rule, circumcision and Shia funeral ceremonies continued nationwide. Mosque attendance, especially during Ashura, had been increasing considerably since the late 1970s. Meanwhile, weddings and other kinds of mass celebrations during the Muxarram month of the Muslim calendar were never held, even in modernized urban areas such as Baku. While the Soviet atheistic education almost completely eliminated religious knowledge, it was not able to destroy the country's deeply embedded Muslim identity, which in turn, paved the way for the gradual revival of Islam after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

About the Author

Altay Goyushov is assistant professor in the Department of the History of Turkish and Caucasian Nations at Baku State University.

Azerbaijan and “Tolerant Muslims”

By Jennifer Solveig Wistrand, Washington, D.C.

Abstract

A great majority of the Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke over the course of the twenty-two months of ethnographic research¹ I conducted in Azerbaijan perceived themselves to be, and publicly presented themselves as, religiously tolerant individuals, or “tolerant Muslims”. In this article, I suggest that there are two main reasons motivating Azerbaijanis to publicly express a religiously tolerant position. One is Azerbaijanis’ understanding of their country as a place that has, historically, been home to, and tolerant of, many different religious traditions. Another—and, I believe, a more important reason—is Azerbaijan’s proximity to Iran. Azerbaijanis know that Iran is perceived by many Western countries, whose recognition and respect they seek, to be a “fundamentalist” Muslim society—in other words, not committed to religious tolerance—and, thus, undesirable as a political ally and an economic partner. This knowledge is motivating Azerbaijanis to pursue a number of different strategies that are intended to help them project an image of themselves as “tolerant Muslims” so that they can position themselves to enter into political alliances and economic partnerships with Western powers and, in so doing, gain recognition and respect on the international stage.

Practicing Tolerance

One evening in April 2007, while I was eating dinner and switching back and forth between several different television channels, I caught a segment of AZTV’s (an Azerbaijani-language television channel’s) evening news program. It was airing an address President İlham Əliyev had made earlier in the day for Azerbaijan’s Christian community, wishing them a happy Easter weekend. While the President was speaking, a reporter commented for the television viewing audience that Azerbaijan is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country that respects different religious beliefs and practices. Since AZTV is an ostensibly pro-government channel, I was tempted to dismiss the President’s message as a purely political gesture toward a Christian minority in a country with an overwhelmingly Muslim population. There was, undoubtedly, a political element in the Easter weekend address. However, there was also, I believe, an element of sincerity. The President’s comments, and the reporter’s remarks, resonate with a great majority of the Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke who perceive themselves to be, and publicly present themselves as, religiously tolerant individuals, or “tolerant Muslims”.

For example, shortly after I arrived for a several-month research trip in an agricultural community in central Azerbaijan, Reyhan, the elder daughter of the Azerbaijani family who hosted me, and I spent an afternoon at her aunt’s home. After Reyhan, her extended family and I had watched a video of Reyhan’s cousin’s recent engagement party, Reyhan, her cousin, aunt, uncle, a couple of their neighbors and I had tea and chatted. While everyone was discussing

Ramadan, which was going to begin in about one week, Reyhan’s uncle brought up his brother who, he mentioned to me, was a Christian. Surprised, I asked him how long his brother had been a Christian. He said he had converted to Christianity several years ago while living and working in Russia and Kazakhstan. One day, he explained, his brother picked up a Christian Bible and started to read it. Before he had finished it, he realized he was meant to be a Christian rather than a Muslim, so he converted. I asked Reyhan’s uncle if there were any other Christians in the area. He said there were around fifteen individuals with whom his brother got together in someone’s home on a regular basis to hold a religious service. Since it had been apparent from the discussion about *Ramadan* that Reyhan’s uncle was a Muslim, I asked him how he felt about his brother’s conversion to Christianity. He smiled and said: “We are free. We can practice any religion we want.” No one who was having tea disagreed with this statement.

Strategic Reasons for Tolerance

In this article I suggest that there are two main reasons motivating Azerbaijanis to publicly express a religiously tolerant position. One is Azerbaijanis’ understanding of their country as a place that has, historically, been home to, and tolerant of, many different religious traditions. Another—and, I believe, a more important reason—is Azerbaijan’s proximity to Iran. Azerbaijanis know that Iran is perceived by many Western countries, whose recognition and respect they seek, to be a “fundamentalist” Muslim society—in other words not committed to religious tolerance—and, thus, undesirable as a political ally and an economic partner. This knowledge is motivating Azerbaijanis to pursue a number of different strategies that are intended to help them project an image of themselves as “tolerant Muslims” so that they can position themselves

¹ The fieldwork upon which this article is based was conducted in Azerbaijan in Azerbaijani, Russian and English over the course of twenty-two months between January 2006 and April 2008; individuals’ real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

to enter into political alliances and economic partnerships with Western powers and, in so doing, gain recognition and respect on the international stage.

As noted above, one of the factors that appears to be motivating Azerbaijanis to publicly present themselves as “tolerant Muslims” is history. The present-day territory of Azerbaijan has been inhabited by Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Caucasian Albanian Christians, Russian Orthodox Christians, Molokans, (European) Jews and “Mountain Jews”, among others. A large majority of the present-day population identifies, in some way, with Islam. (Reliable statistics are difficult to obtain. According to the CIA’s *The World Factbook*, 93.4% of the population is Muslim <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/aj.html>.) However, there are still active communities of, for example, the descendants of the Caucasian Albanian Christians, who are called Udis, living in Azerbaijan. Additionally, there are many visible reminders of the various religious traditions that have been or are presently practiced in the area. According to Azerbaijani scholar Anar Gafarov: “Given its long and complex history and its tradition of tolerance, Azerbaijan has on its territory places of worship for many different faiths past and present, including the ancient Albanian-Christian temples, Russian Orthodox Churches, and Jewish synagogues . . . At present, there are approximately 1,300 mosques in Azerbaijan, of which 220 have been built since 1991, some 40 churches, five synagogues, and other temples, and more than 500 other places of worship for those of other faiths.” (Gafarov 2010) In other words, a large number of Azerbaijanis are visually reminded on a daily basis of the different religious traditions that have co-existed for a long time within their country.

A second factor that seems to be even more strongly motivating Azerbaijanis to publicly convey a sincere expression of religious tolerance is the existence of two larger and more powerful neighbors with overwhelmingly Muslim populations—Turkey and Iran—and the desire to see Azerbaijan’s influence in political and economic arenas increase significantly. Many of the Azerbaijanis with whom I interacted spoke highly of the Turks, and their political and economic systems, and expressed an interest in seeing Azerbaijan develop similar institutions. At the same time, many of Azerbaijan’s school classrooms display a poster with side-by-side pictures of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (the founder of the modern Republic of Turkey) and Heydər Əliyev (the late president of Azerbaijan and father of the current president) that says “We are two states, One nation!” (*Biz iki dövlət, Bir millətlik!* in Azerbaijani), underscoring the cultural affinity between the two peoples. Most Azerbaijani homes that have televisions receive at least one Turkish-language channel. One can buy several different Turkish-language newspapers on the street

in Baku. There are a fair number of Turks living and working in a variety of sectors in Baku. In sum, Turkey’s people and their social, political and economic practices are, by and large, welcome in Azerbaijan. Turkey is not generally perceived to be an impediment, let alone a threat, to Azerbaijan’s acceptance into strategic political and economic circles. The same cannot be said of Iran.

Since achieving independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan has seen the rise of a number of ostensibly apolitical organizations that are perceived, by some, to be disseminating fundamentalist Islamic messages, as well as several Islamic political parties. For example, the Imam Khomeini Assistance Committee is a humanitarian organization that has been operating in Azerbaijan since 1993. As of 2001, it had 415 branch offices throughout the country, most of which were focused on serving the refugee population (meaning, for the most part, internally displaced peoples from the conflict over Karabakh). While the Committee has provided relief aid for society’s more vulnerable members, however, it is also purported to have supplied them with various types of religious material from Iran. (Balci 2008; Valiyev 2005)

In a related vein, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA) emerged in 1991 in Nardaran, a town about thirty minutes by car north of Baku. It registered with the government the following year, as all political parties must do, and soon thereafter it was believed to have around 50,000 members, primarily among the less-urban and less-educated. In the mid-1990s, however, the IPA’s leader was arrested and imprisoned, and the Party’s registration was suspended. The IPA was purported to have been receiving significant financial assistance and spiritual guidance from Iran. In addition to advocating for an Islamic state, its members espoused anti-Semitic and anti-American rhetoric. The IPA has since resumed its activities, albeit illegally, since its registration has never been reinstated. In 2002, several of its members were implicated in an anti-government uprising that took place in Nardaran and which left one person dead and twenty, if not more, people injured. In 2008, the leader of the Party announced his desire to see the Israeli Embassy in Baku closed. (Bakir and Fuller 2007; *Day.Az* December 13, 2008 <http://news.day.az/politics/140269.html>; Swietochowski 2002; Valiyev 2005)

Seeking Ties with the West

In an effort to maintain a culture of religious tolerance that is consistent with Azerbaijanis’ perceptions of their history and, more importantly, I contend, conducive to cultivating political alliances and economic partnerships with the West, Azerbaijanis are pursuing a number of different strategies at both the national and the local level. A comprehensive examination of these strategies is beyond the scope of this article. However, two deserve some atten-

tion since they are intended to help distinguish, and distance, “religiously tolerant Azerbaijanis” from “fundamentalist Iranians” (not to mention “Wahhabis”).

Novruz is a highly anticipated holiday in Azerbaijan, and it was a recurrent topic of conversation throughout my research. Its prominence as a holiday is a recent phenomenon, though. During Soviet times, New Year (January 1) was the most important holiday in Azerbaijan. *Novruz* was barely acknowledged, certainly not publicly. Indeed, less than one generation ago, most *Novruz* celebrations took place within the home and were limited to preparing special pastries (*qoğal*, *şəkərbura* and *pahlava* which represent the sun, moon and stars, respectively) and exchanging gifts of new clothing. Now, twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, *Novruz* is an extravagant—and highly publicized—country-wide affair. For example, the government erects hand-painted placards throughout Baku a couple of days in advance of a number of national holidays, such as October 18, which recognizes Azerbaijan’s independence from the Soviet Union. It does the same for *Novruz*. However, in addition, the television channels air a number of pre-*Novruz* programs. According to everyone with whom I spoke about the holiday, each year’s pre-*Novruz* broadcasts begin a little earlier, and are a little more elaborate, than the previous year’s. The radio stations also promote *Novruz*. Ten days prior to the holiday in 2008, while I was in a taxi on my way to interview a government official, I heard a several-minute-long *Novruz* “commercial” in which an academic-sounding voice explained that the four Tuesdays that precede the holiday recognize the four main, or essential, elements of the earth.

The culmination of weeks of preparation for, and anticipatory celebrations of, *Novruz* is a multi-day national holiday that includes “trick-or-treating”, cockfighting and jumping over bonfires, among other activities. In 2007 President İlham Əliyev declared the holiday to begin on Friday, March 16 and to end on Monday, March 26, which meant that students were not in school for eleven consecutive days. The following year the President announced the holiday would last from Thursday, March 20 until Sunday, March 30. (In 2007 *Novruz* fell on March 20, and in 2008 it fell on March 21, the vernal equinox.) The amount of time officially designated for *Novruz* is significant. In the fall of 2007 the government tried to reduce the number of days the school-age and working-age populations were on vacation. *Novruz* was not among the holidays it targeted, though. Why? In short, *Novruz* is—or has become in Azerbaijan—a popular pan-religious holiday, with obvious Zoroastrian roots, and the activities in which Azerbaijanis collectively engage in order to celebrate it enable them to, among other things, publicly present themselves as religiously tolerant individuals distinct from their fundamentalist neighbors to the south.

At the same time that Azerbaijanis are projecting a national—and, it is hoped, an international—image of themselves as “tolerant Muslims”, they are also monitoring the messages that their and their family members’, neighbors’ and friends’ day-to-day behaviors send. Over the course of my research, I conducted a number of formal and informal interviews with Azerbaijanis about their religious beliefs and practices. In general, those who self-identified, at least culturally, as Muslims and had been largely, if not exclusively, raised in the post-Soviet period were more interested in becoming “practicing Muslims” than were those individuals’ parents or grandparents, who were more interested in preserving the image of “religiously tolerant Azerbaijanis” distinct from “fundamentalist Iranians” (and “Wahhabis”). Obviously the two images—practicing Muslim and religiously tolerant individual—are not inherently incompatible with one another. However, as my final ethnographic example shows, some, and I would argue many, Azerbaijanis are concerned that the image of the practicing *Azerbaijani* Muslim does not necessarily signal a religiously tolerant individual and might harm, albeit unintentionally, Azerbaijan’s ability to develop strategic alliances and partnerships with Europe and North America and, ultimately, gain the international recognition and respect that Azerbaijanis desire.

One evening in late 2007 I had a conversation with a middle-aged Azerbaijani woman who lived in central Baku about her university-aged daughter’s, Pəri’s, developing interest in Islam. First, this woman listed a number of her relatives’ and co-workers’ children who had begun to pray (five times per day), underscoring the fact that few of their parents did so. I asked this woman why she and other members of her generation had not, like their children, begun to pray. She explained that during the Soviet period they were taught that there is no God and, consequently, they were not allowed to pray. Now, however, children are taught that there is a God and, she emphasized, they are encouraged to pray. This woman went on to say, as many of the other middle-aged Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke had said, that religious freedom was one of the greatest freedoms they had acquired in the post-Soviet period. That said, she cautioned, everyone should be free to practice—or not practice—his or her religion as he or she desires.

Pəri knew that her mother had some reservations about her resolve to become a “true” (*əsl*, in Azerbaijani) Muslim, one who practices Islam in the “correct” (*düz*, in Azerbaijani) way. Indeed, several months after I interviewed Pəri’s mother, I interviewed Pəri, and her answers to my questions immediately touched upon those tensions. I asked Pəri when and from whom, or from what, she had learned about Islam. She said that she had started to seriously learn about religion in middle school. She had admired a female classmate, she went on to say, who was

simultaneously modern and religious. I asked Pəri to elaborate. She explained that this girl was stylish and well-traveled as well as educated about Islam, and she wanted to be like her. “She was *not* like those girls in Iran who are just religious,” Pəri stressed. While the number of young Azerbaijanis who are interested in becoming practicing Muslims is not insignificant, the desire to be, and to be per-

ceived as, “tolerant Muslims” is still, I believe, paramount in the minds of most Azerbaijanis, including young “religious” Azerbaijanis, a great majority of whom, like their elders, desire to see Azerbaijan enter into political alliances and economic partnership with, and gain recognition and respect on the international stage from, Western powers—who publicly profess a commitment to religious tolerance.

About the Author

Jennifer Solveig Wistrand is currently a visiting Research Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars’ Kennan Institute in Washington, DC. She holds a PhD in anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis. Her research interests are Islam, migration, refugees and IDPs, education and gender in the former Soviet Muslim-majority republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

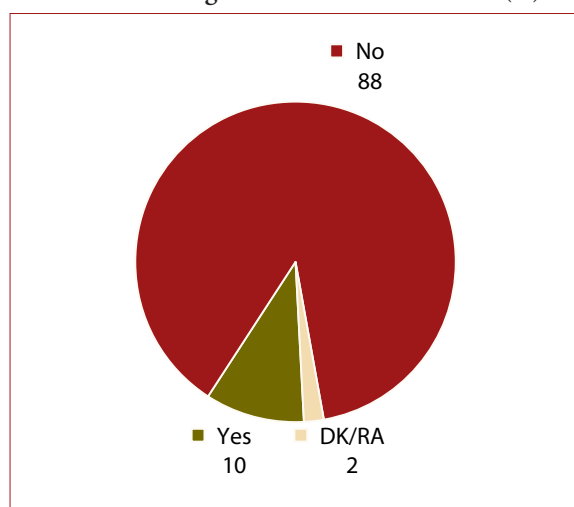
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OPINION POLL

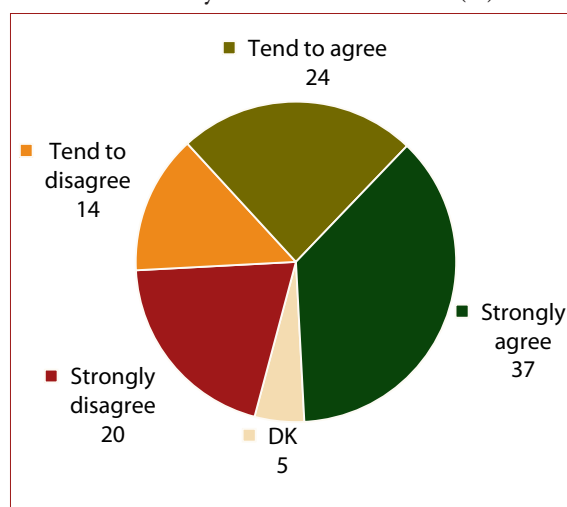
Religious Tolerance

Figure 1: Do Any Of Your Close Friends Belong To A Religion Different From Yours? (%)



Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 2: It Is Possible To Belong To Azerbaijani Society And Not Be Muslim? (%)



Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Oppositional Islam in Azerbaijan

By Sofie Bedford, Uppsala

Abstract

This article discusses how the Abu Bakr and Juma mosque communities came to be seen as representatives of “Oppositional Islam”. The communities were labeled oppositional by authorities who feared a politicized religion and were provoked by their unwillingness to accept renewed state control of religion. At the same time, the communities saw themselves as oppositional in that they rejected the way religion was practiced and interpreted in state-controlled mosques and among the general public in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Pressure on the mosque communities brought their members closer together and reinforced this polarization.

Mosque Communities as Oppositional Troublemakers

Immediately after independence, interest in religion boomed in Azerbaijan, as in most other former Soviet states. Initially this “religious boom” brought about fewer restrictions on religion, but gradually the authorities reintroduced state supervision of religious communities. The state drew a distinction between official and unofficial Islam, with official Islam under state control and unofficial Islam remaining outside of it. Muslim communities questioning this line of action were deemed troublemakers and became targets of state intervention. Recent incidents, such as rallies against the informal hijab ban in public schools and arrests of members of the infamous Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, illustrate that there are lingering tensions between state and religion, but the most acute stage of this conflict appeared in the mid-2000s, between the state and the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities.

The major trouble for the Shi’ite Juma mosque community started when its members did not renew their state registration and questioned the authority of the Caucasus Muslim Board. When the mosque’s popular Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, was arrested during a political demonstration in 2003, the conflict escalated. After his release, he continued to loudly criticize the government for the lack of human and political rights in the country. In the summer of 2004, the Juma community was evicted from its mosque, which is located within the Old Town, a designated national heritage site that therefore allegedly belongs to the state. After the eviction, the mosque was closed for renovation and, since it reopened, the community has not been allowed to return. The Imam, in his own words, promotes a democratic approach to Islamic practice and worship, which made this congregation especially popular among young educated Azerbaijanis. That the Imam received his religious education in the Islamic republic of Iran, a country with which Azerbaijan’s relations are rather complicated, made him and his community suspect in the eyes of some. Others, especially during and just after

his prison term in 2004, see the Imam as something of a martyr, suffering for his work for human and religious rights. Despite obstructions, the members of the Juma community has not in any way discontinued their activities. They also took a step towards politics when they publicly joined forces with the democratic opposition block, Azadliq, during the 2005 parliamentary elections.

The other community is focused around the Abu Bakr mosque. Not only do its members belong to the Sunni branch of Islam in a Shi’ite-dominated country, they also follow a conservative strain of Islam prescribing a traditional lifestyle, unusual for post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Their lifestyle made community members suspect in the eyes of outsiders and the mosque has often been pictured as a hotbed of Muslim radicalism and extremism, sponsored by “foreign radicals”. In 2001, the Military Court for Grave Crimes sentenced a number of Azerbaijanis who planned to fight in Chechnya. All of these individuals were allegedly recruited in the Abu Bakr mosque and the Imam was summoned to testify. During another trial concerning the pan-Islamic Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement, prosecutors showed that its members had visited the Abu Bakr mosque. Thanks to the trials, the mosque received a lot of negative public attention, with critics labeling it “Wahhabi,” a synonym for extremist. Efforts to close the mosque as a result of these events proved unsuccessful, but restrictions were put on the community’s activities. The charges might have been dismissed, but the relationship between the community and the state was severely damaged. As a result, following the initial controversy, the community decided to “play by the rules”, doing its best to comply with the various demands raised by the authorities — registering with the Caucasus Muslim Board and in other ways co-operating with secular and religious officials when needed. This acquiescence improved relations with the authorities and secured a more accommodating atmosphere for the Imam and community members, at least in Baku. Things took a turn for the worse, however, when a grenade attack on the mosque in 2008, allegedly carried out by militant Dagestanis,

left two worshippers dead and many wounded, including the Imam. The event shocked the community and, to make matters worse, the mosque was closed for investigations and has yet to reopen (as of 2012). A ban on praying outside mosques, which was put in place after the explosions, has caused further frustration.

The Prevailing Notion of Official Islam

One of the keys to understanding the controversies described above is the idea, common among policy makers in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, that the combination of religion and politics, for a secular society, is something dangerous that might have catastrophic effects if left unchecked. State policy dictates a strict division between religion and politics, prohibiting “religious men” from taking part in any form of political activity. This rule is what put the Imam of the Juma mosque in prison and it has also been the justification for the authorities’ repeated targeting of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, whose leaders have spent most of the 1990s and 2000s locked up. This division appears ambiguous for various reasons. Not only is it difficult to grasp who exactly should be considered a “religious man”, but state controls on religion — via censorship, educational monopoly and registration of religious communities — makes it obvious that the authorities already are involved in the sphere of religious activities.

Even though this attitude is not unique to the former Soviet sphere, it was perhaps easier and more natural for post-Soviet states to turn this idea into a cornerstone of national policy. Many Soviet politicians continued on as leaders of the independent states, bringing with them their atheist ideals and communist experience. In the same spirit, the independent states kept in place many of the official and unofficial government organs dealing with religion to ensure that all religious activity took place under state control. The first such instance is the Caucasian Muslim Board to which all Islamic communities in Azerbaijan, just as during Soviet times, are subordinated. The role of this organization used to be to liaise with secular authorities and control all religious activity from above. In cases where the authorities suspected that the movement in question harbored political ambitions, they were labeled “oppositional” and dealt with accordingly. Today it is supposed to be an independent body, detached from the state, but its credibility in this respect has been seriously damaged due to political statements by the head of the Board, *Sheikh-ül-Islam*, in support of the Aliyev regime. Another means for keeping religious activity in line is the registration of all religious communities with the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA). This committee, and the cumbersome registration process itself, have faced strong

criticism from religious rights organizations. As mentioned above, the rejection of these efforts to re-institutionalize religion was initially the reason for the conflict between the Juma and Abu Bakr communities and the secular and religious authorities. Even though the Abu Bakr imam soon decided he was better off cooperating with the establishment, aspects of his congregation’s activities continued to make them contrarians in the eyes of the authorities.

The notion that state-controlled religion is apolitical and good, while independent religion is political and oppositional lives on, not only in formal institutions, but in attitudes and practices in society as well. In the Soviet Union, representatives of “official Islam” strived to establish a new identity that contained both Muslim and Soviet pieces. According to this method, certain Muslim rituals and celebrations became synonymous with ethnic traditions and de-Islamicized. The anti-religious propaganda was successful in the sense that outspoken religiousness outside this framework was viewed with skepticism as a symbol of an “old-fashioned” society. Being “Muslim”, official-Islam style, was a national identifier rather than an expression of religious belief.

This religious skepticism prevails and public displays of faith are frowned upon. One example is parents forbidding their daughters to wear the veil (a symbol of a backward society). Similarly the issue of the *hijab* and its place in secular society is an issue at the national level. In 2005 when their old Soviet identity cards expired, many women in Azerbaijan were affected by a law banning women from wearing head scarfs in photographs on all identity documents, including driver’s licenses and internal passports. While the authorities insist the rule was adopted to protect the secular nature of Azerbaijan, the right to wear the *hijab* as an expression of religious freedom has been advocated by many NGOs and human rights groups and is also one of the issues prioritized by the Juma community. In 2010 veiling again became a conflictual matter when an informal *hijab* ban in public schools brought on protests by religious activists. While there is no law against having a beard, this religious expression has likewise been seen as a symbol for something that is not commonly accepted in society and therefore should be opposed. Especially members of the Abu Bakr community report incidents of forceful beard shaving and physical abuse by certain local authorities objecting to this public display of faith.

A New Approach to Religion

Yet, being “oppositional” is not only a label put on these movements by others. The Abu Bakr, as well as the Juma, mosque community members describe themselves in terms of opposing old religious structures by rejecting

the way religion is practiced and interpreted in state-controlled mosques and among the general public. While in the Soviet system it was unthinkable that the young, enlightened and modern generations would, or would want to, pray, these communities, to the contrary, cater to the young and educated. As a result of the Soviet atheist policy, Muslim education in Azerbaijan suffered from a severe lack of educated teachers and instructional material and many citizens became totally ignorant of Islam. For example, according to official Soviet rhetoric, the polarization between Shi'as and Sunnis, present in many other Muslim countries, did not exist in Azerbaijan, an assertions that appears to be related to a lack of knowledge of what constitutes the differences between these two branches of Islam.

Attitudes are slowly changing as people, especially the young, are becoming more knowledgeable about Islam through, for example, religious studies abroad. Members of the Abu Bakr and Juma mosques describe "other" state-controlled mosques as uninformed, outdated, corrupt and dirty and "their" mosques, in contrast, as a place where religion is practiced correctly and high quality religious education can be achieved. The absence of payments for various religious rituals in the Abu Bakr and Juma mosques is another topic emphasized by community members. It is clear they were fed up with corruption as a permanent part of life in Azerbaijan. In this respect, the mosque became a "safe haven" for them. Similarly, those having difficulties at home defending their religious expression saw the mosque as a "free space", an alternative home, as well as a place to meet new friends.

The oppositional features of these communities were, however, never the main point on the agenda. Instead, the new approach to Islam was mainly seen as something positive among youth seeking alternative ways to understand their situation and express themselves. Still, it was

perceived as a threat by the authorities fearful of the mobilizational power of new movements. The interaction with state actors led the mosque communities in totally different directions. While the Abu Bakr mosque community became more introverted, making sure not to provoke the authorities further, the Juma Imam and his community tried to establish themselves in the political arena. Still, in neither case did formal restrictions or informal constraints, such as negative publicity or harassment, dampen the goings-on inside the community. Rather it seems that being singled out by others as "oppositional" has served to reinforce the movements' collective identity, as well as make them more visible and more popular.

Conclusion

The most intense phase of the conflict between the authorities and mosques is over. The mosque communities are continuing their activities albeit in other facilities as they do not have access to their respective mosques. The authorities are essentially letting them "carry on". It also appears the Soviet way of "being Muslim" is increasingly being replaced in Azerbaijan by a new informed way of believing as many more people are "finding religion". At the same time, the state control of religion has intensified. A number of mosques have been closed. As in the past, the publication, import, sale and dissemination of religious literature or items are strictly regulated by the SCRA, but the punishment for disobedience is now more severely enforced and can result in up to two years in prison. These measures are continuously justified by a fear of "foreign radicals", i.e. the ideas of politicized, oppositional religion disturbing the stability of Azerbaijan. The somewhat sad conclusion is that with old attitudes and practices prevailing among those in power, it becomes increasingly difficult for the people on the ground to simultaneously be a good Muslim and a good citizen.

About the Author

Dr Sofie Bedford is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Uppsala Centre for Russia and Eurasia Studies, Uppsala University. Her research interests include: political, social, ethnic and religious mobilization in a post-Soviet context. Among her recent publications are: *Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan: Repression and Mobilization in a Post-Soviet Context*. Stockholm: Department of Political Science, 2009 and "Ukraine's Global Strategy in the Post-Crisis Economy: Developing an Intelligent Nation to Achieve a Competitive Advantage," *Innovative Marketing* 1, 2011 (with Norm Bedford and William Hutchinson).

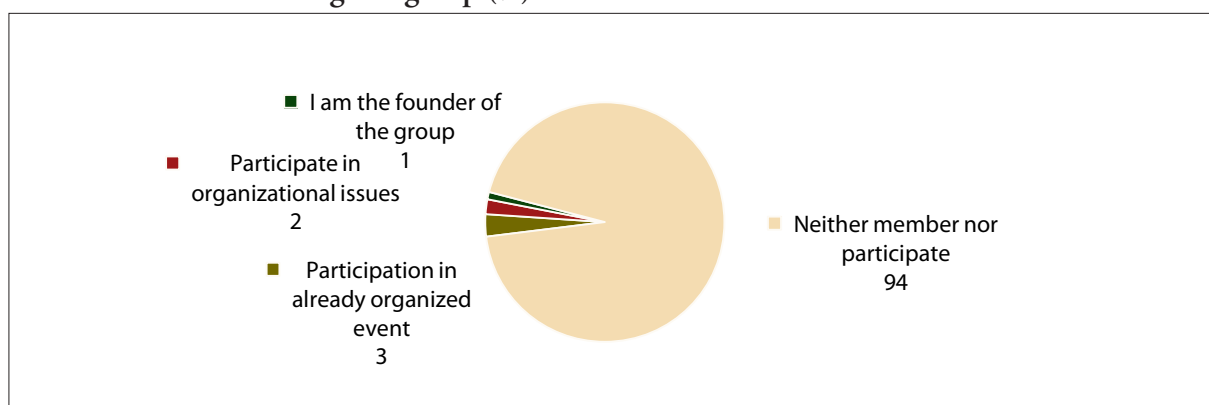
Further Reading

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- Bedford, Sofie (2009) *Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan: Repression and Mobilization in a Post-Soviet Context*. Stockholm: Department of Political Science.
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OPINION POLL

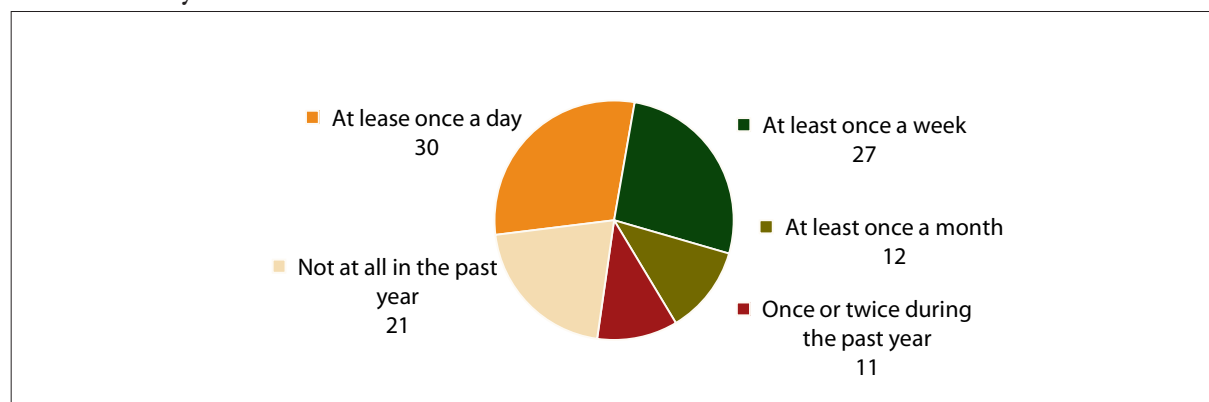
Religiosity and Attitudes Towards Religion

Figure 1: List any groups, both formal and informal that you have been involved during the last 12 months: religious group (%)



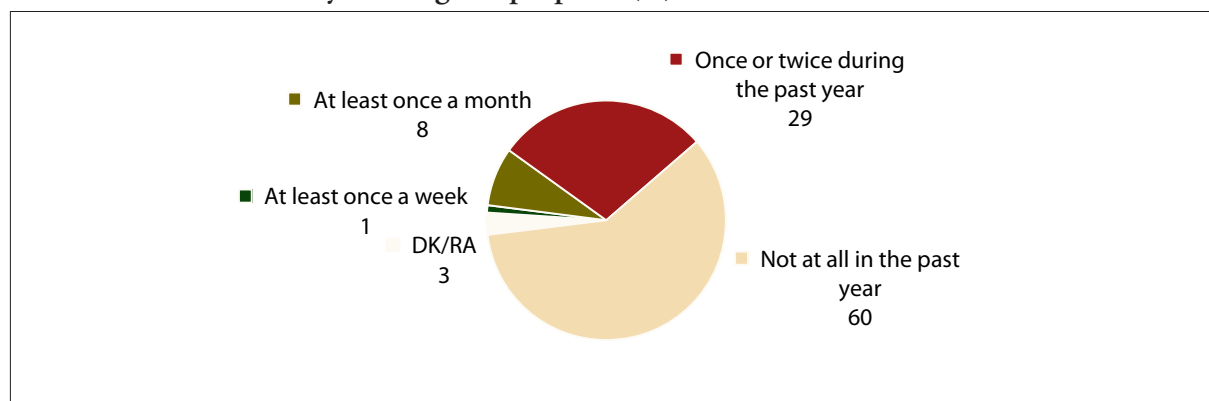
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 2: How often have you been involved in the following activities during the past year? Prayed at home



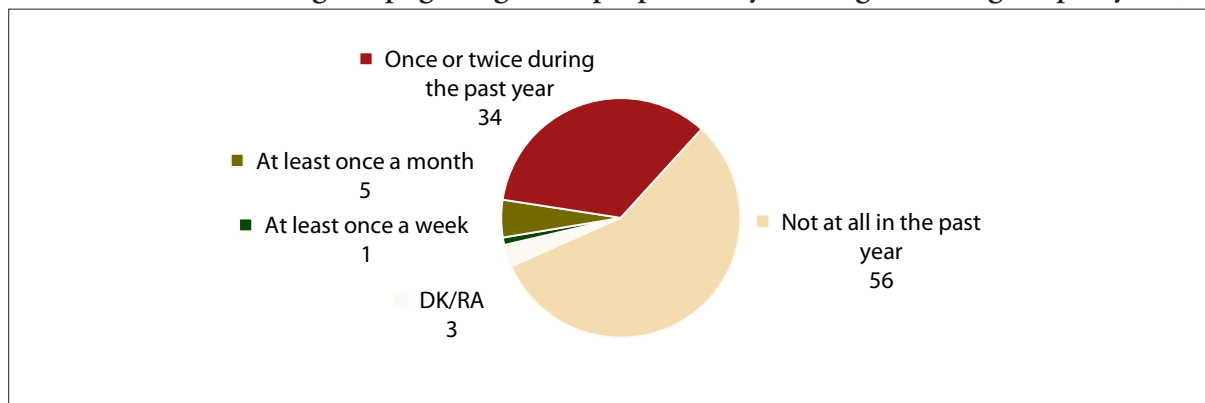
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 3: How often have you been involved in the following activities during the past year? Donated money for religious purposes (%)



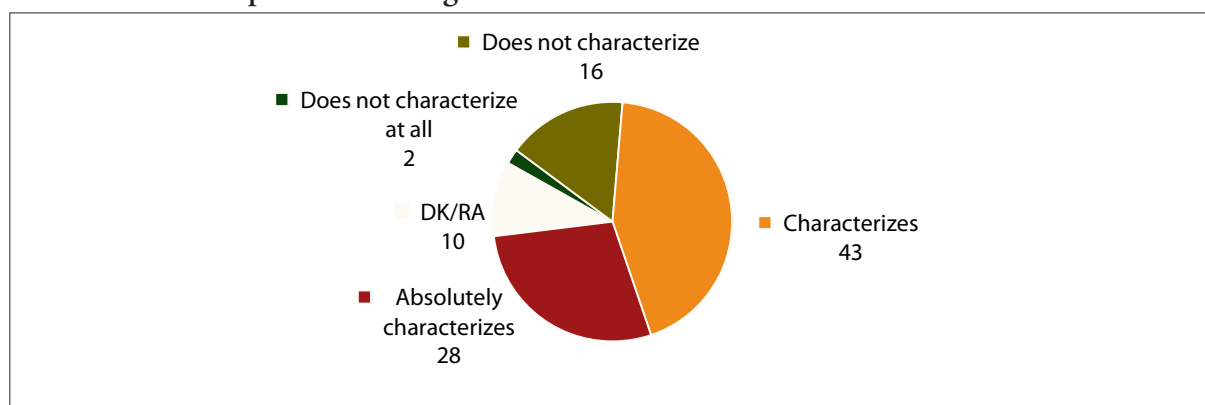
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 4: How often have you been involved in the following activities during the past year?
Gone on a religious pilgrimage with people from your religion during the past year (%)



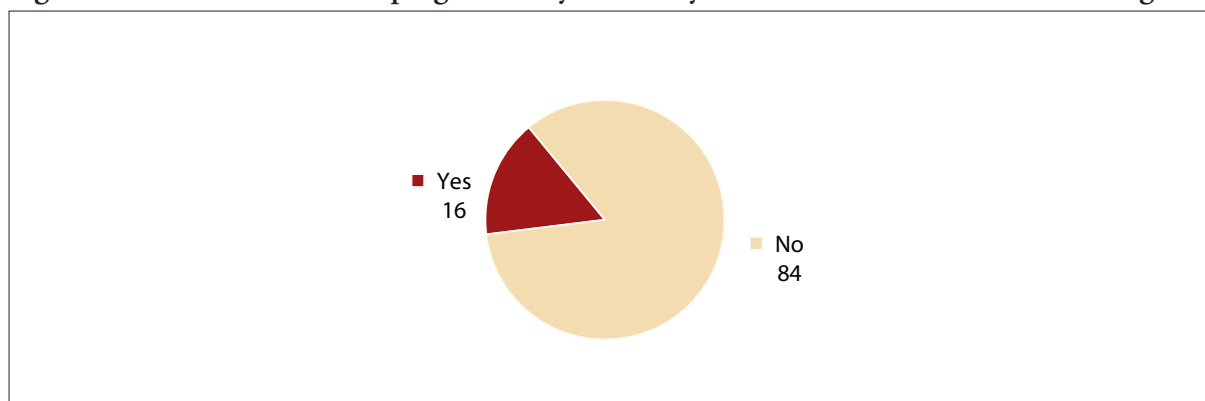
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 5: Do you think the values listed below characterize today's Azerbaijani society in general? Respect for the religious institutions



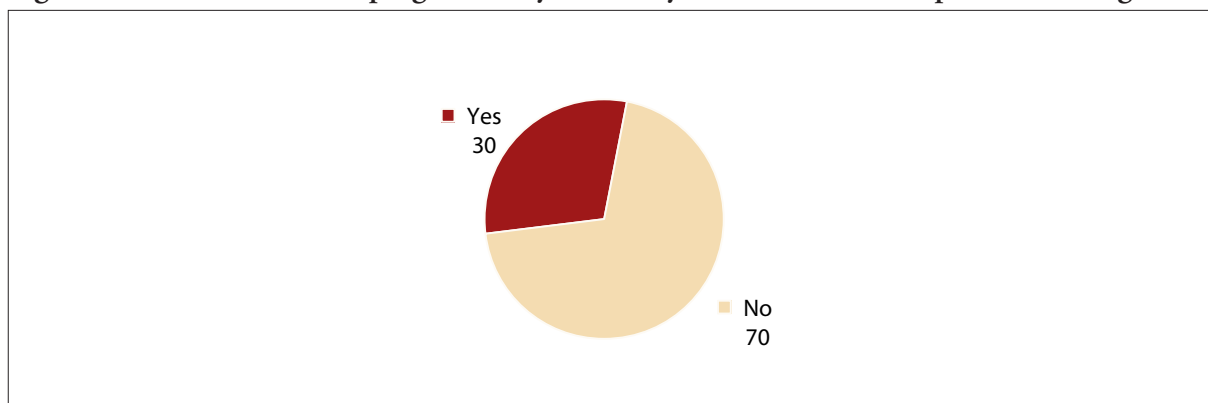
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 6: What kind of radio programs do you usually listen to at least once a week? Religion



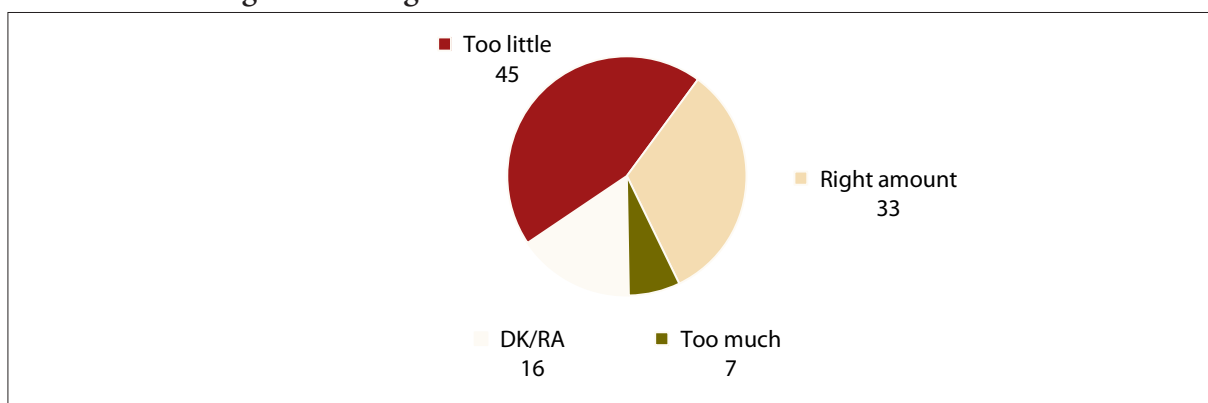
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 7: What kind of TV programs do you usually watch at least once per week? Religion



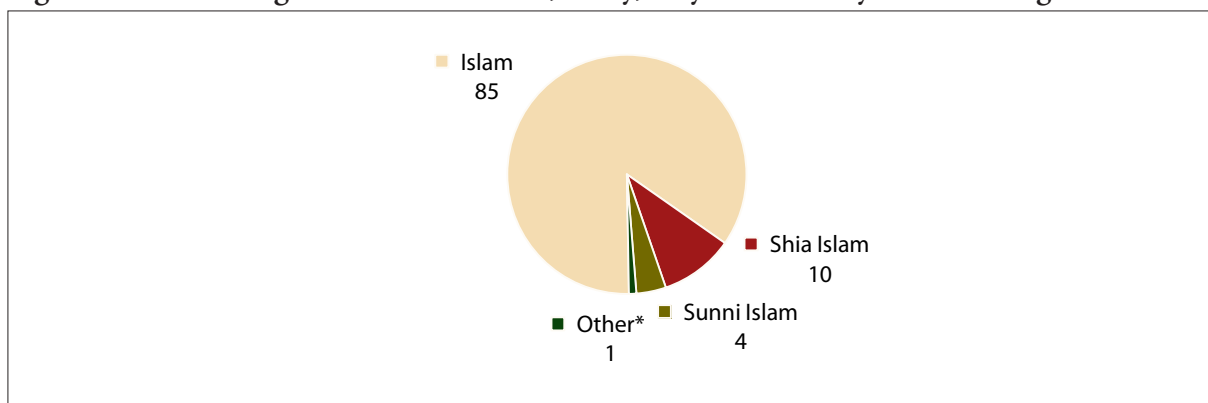
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 8: How much time do the Azerbaijani national TV channels devote to coverage of the following issues: Religion



Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

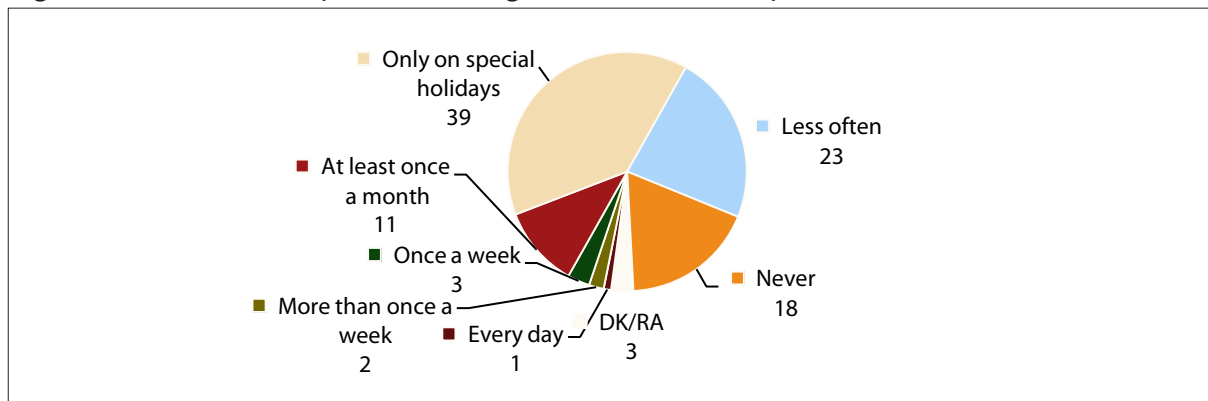
Figure 9: Which religion or denomination, if any, do you consider yourself belong to?



* Other includes: None, Roman Catholic Church, Georgian, Russian or Greek Orthodox Church, Protestant Church, Other Christian Church or group

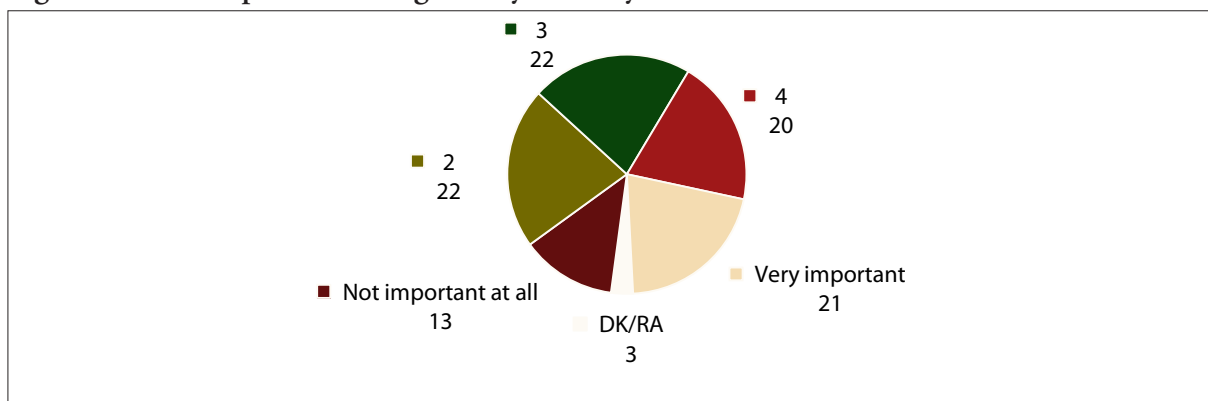
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 10: How often do you attend religious services recently?



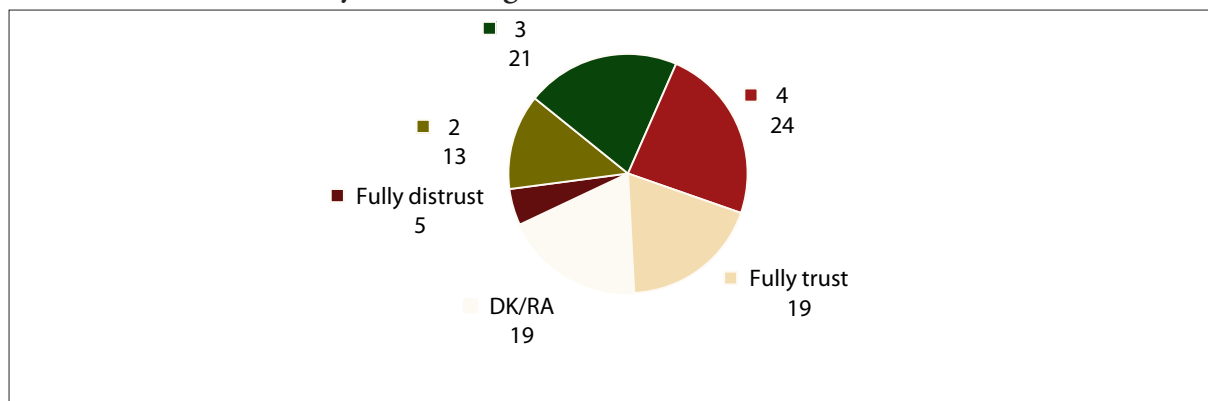
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 11: How important is religion in your daily life?



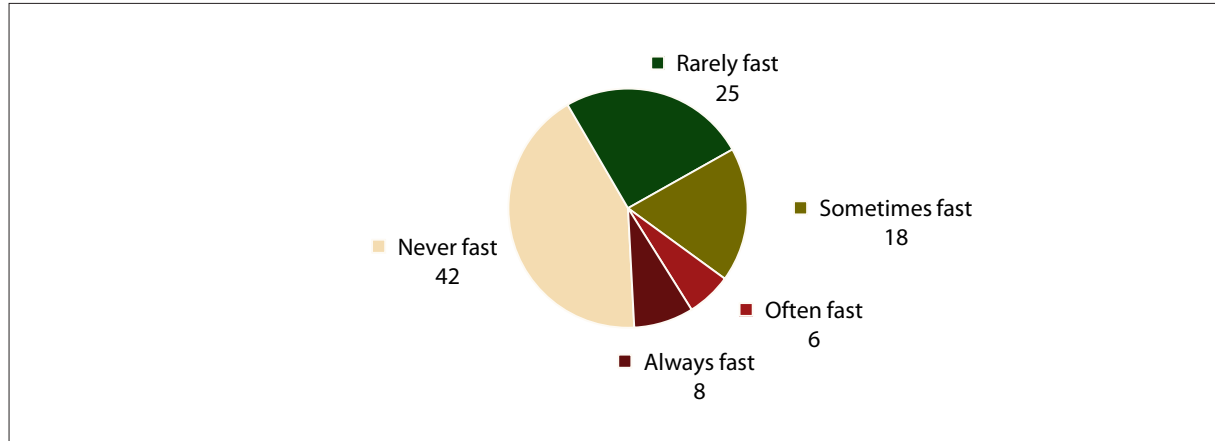
Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 12: I will read out a list of social institutions and political unions. Please assess your level of trust toward each of them on a 5-point scale, where “1” means “Fully distrust”, and “5” means “Fully trust”: Religious institutions



Source: Caucasus Barometer 2011, Azerbaijan

Figure 13: How often do you fast when it is required by your religious traditions?



Source: Caucasus Barometer 2011, Azerbaijan

CHRONICLE

From 24 October to 15 November 2012

24 October 2012	Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with the leader of the breakaway region of South Ossetia Leonid Tibilov in Moscow
25 October 2012	The Georgian Parliament confirms Bidzina Ivanishvili as new Prime Minister with 88 votes to 54
25 October 2012	A building under construction in the Armenian capital of Yerevan collapses, injuring 11 workers
26 October 2012	Georgia's new Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze declares that Tbilisi will not restore diplomatic relations with Moscow while Russia has embassies in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
26 October 2012	The Tbilisi City Council (Sakrebulo) approves the mayor office's proposal to halve for the next five months the waste collection fee
27 October 2012	The Azerbaijan and Armenian Foreign Ministers meet in France to discuss the issue of the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh in a meeting mediated by the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group
29 October 2012	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian accuses some prosecutors and law enforcement officers of having links with organized crime groups during a televised meeting at the prosecutor's general office
29 October 2012	The Azerbaijani State Border Guard Service says that an Iranian national was arrested after a shoot-out between Azerbaijani guards and an armed group
31 October 2012	The Russian Interior Ministry announces the firing of the entire leadership of a district police department in Moscow following the arrests of three police officers on suspicion of murdering an Azerbaijani citizen in September 2012 and trying to sell his car
1 November 2012	The Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR buys Itera-Georgia and becomes the sole distributor of natural gas in Georgia with the exception of the capital Tbilisi
2 November 2012	The Azerbaijani Parliament adopts amendments to the law on public gatherings to increase fines up to 10,000 US dollars for participating in and organising unsanctioned public demonstrations
7 November 2012	Former Georgian Defence Minister and Interior Minister Bacho Akhalaia is arrested in an investigation into alleged multiple cases of exceeding official powers
7 November 2012	Joint Chief of Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces Brigadier-General Giorgi Kalandadze is arrested in an investigation into an alleged case of exceeding official powers
8 November 2012	Turkey orders the landing of an Armenian aircraft flying to Syria to search its cargo in an effort to prevent its airspace being used to carry military supplies to Syria
12 November 2012	Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili visits Brussels on his first foreign trip to meet with President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso and EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Štefan Füle
12 November 2012	NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen says that he is "extremely concerned" over the recent arrests of high officials from the former government in Georgia
14 November 2012	The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesman Elman Abdullayev says that a note will be handed to Uruguay's Foreign Minister to protest the visit by an official Uruguayan delegation to the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh
15 November 2012	Several officials from the Georgian Interior Ministry, including high-ranking officers, are arrested after being questioned by prosecutors

Compiled by Lili Di Puppò

For the full chronicle since 2009 see www.laender-analysen.de/cad

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Lili Di Puppo, Iris Kempe, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Nana Papiashvili, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines

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Research Centre for East European Studies • Publications Department • Klagenfurter Str. 3 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: fsopr@uni-bremen.de • Internet: www.laender-analysen.de/cad/