

SECULARISM IN AZERBAIJAN

AND THE THREAT OF RADICALISATION IN THE REGION

June 2015

About the European Foundation for Democracy

The European Foundation for Democracy is a Brussels-based policy institute dedicated to upholding Europe's fundamental values of freedom and equality, regardless of gender, ethnicity or religion.

Today these principles are being challenged by a number of factors, among them rapid social change as a result of high levels of immigration from cultures with different customs, a rise in intolerance on all sides, an increasing sense of a conflict of civilisations and the growing influence of radical, extremist ideologies worldwide.

We work with grassroots activists, media, policy experts and government officials throughout Europe to identify constructive approaches to addressing these challenges. Our goal is to ensure that the universal values of the Enlightenment – religious tolerance, political pluralism, individual liberty and government by democracy – remain the core foundation of Europe's prosperity and welfare, and the basis on which diverse cultures and opinions can interact peacefully.

About the Counter Extremism Project

The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a not-for-profit, non-partisan, international policy organization formed to address the threat from extremist ideology. It does so by pressuring financial support networks, countering the narrative of extremists and their online recruitment, and advocating for effective laws, policies and regulations.

CEP uses its research and analytical expertise to build a global movement against the threat to pluralism, peace and tolerance posed by extremism of all types. In the United States, CEP is based in New York City with a team in Washington, D.C.

Additional information and research is available at www.counterextremism.com.



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**COUNTER
EXTREMISM
PROJECT**


EUROPEAN FOUNDATION FOR
DEMOCRACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Azerbaijan has emerged relatively recently from the Soviet system and sits in a politically sensitive neighbourhood. Regional powers have in the past co-operated with and supported local groups often seeking to destabilise the country in order to promote their own agendas. In such an environment, a delicate balancing act continues to take place between the democratic strengthening of its state institutions and the need for the country to ensure security.

The phenomenon of Islamic radicalism is present in Azerbaijan and has grown progressively since the country became independent from the Soviet Union. Virtually unknown in the 1990s, the country is now home to a significant indigenous community of Salafists who follow a particularly austere and puritanical interpretation of Islam and who are concentrated in the northern parts of the country. The presence of numbers of Azerbaijani foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria is an indication of the foothold Salafism has gained in the country.

Sectarian division in Azerbaijan, once uncommon, due in part to the fact that the majority doesn't seek to differentiate theologically between the Sunni and Shia denominations of Islam, has become obvious of late. Support for radical Shia ideologies as well as for the creation of an Islamic republic similar to Iran has become increasingly popular among certain groups in Azerbaijan.

The findings of this research indicate however that during the past few years there have been signs indicating a weakening of the phenomenon of radicalisation. The revision of the law on religious freedom is credited as one of the measures that have contributed to this process. Other measures include the monitoring of mosques that facilitate the detection of early signs of radicalisation.

There appears to be consensus among scholars and others interviewed for this research project about the positive impact of the multicultural model of Azerbaijan's secular system. This is an approach that fosters peaceful cohabitation between and among different communities and a moderate, tolerant interpretation of religion. This system, based on secular state institutions, is a rare example in a Muslim-majority country. Maintaining the secular nature and values of the country is a priority for the government.

The findings indicate Western support is important for the longer-term sustainability of the country. Among others, the West has an opportunity to support the increasingly active role of Azerbaijan within international organisations, such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), providing an opportunity for more comprehensive dialogue between the West and the Islamic World. It could also encourage Azerbaijan to take a more active role as a mediator in sectarian conflicts in the Middle East and beyond. In the shorter term the West can co-operate with Azerbaijan to tackle the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq through an international strategy.

For Azerbaijan, it can consider supporting closer dialogue and cooperation between Azerbaijani and Western experts and scholars on the values of its secular model of government, as well as on measures being implemented to address signs of radicalisation. This could include facilitating best practice and exchange programme visits. It could also support those NGOs and projects defending secularism, creating synergies between state and non-state actors in the promotion of shared values.



Azerbaijan's system of government, based on secular state institutions, is a rare example in a Muslim-majority country


INTRODUCTION

METHODOLOGY



**INTRODUCTION
METHODOLOGY
AND DEFINITIONS**


INTRODUCTION



In the framework of our Radicalisation Programme, EFD is researching and analysing the nature and the spread of the phenomenon of radicalisation in the European Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. We have examined the situation on the ground in a number of key countries with the aim to identify patterns and trends as well as specific local and regional developments in order to provide a threat assessment and specific policy recommendations. This will serve as a basis for comprehensive, well-tailored responses to the risks.

This report focuses on Azerbaijan. It assesses the current situation; the origin and nature of religious extremism in the country; the role of neighbouring countries in fuelling or supporting violent ideologies; and the response of the State. It examines existing preventive measures and how the secular nature of the State plays a role in preventing radical groups from finding fertile ground.

METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS



This research study was based on existing literature, selected academic essays, analytical papers and media reports. We have also conducted a series of targeted interviews in Baku with relevant experts from governmental bodies, academia, religious organisations and civil society organisations. The goal of the interviews was to validate information gathered from the preliminary academic research and to obtain a broad overview of how relevant actors assess the threat of radicalisation, its causes and different options for addressing the threat. Comments and responses are not for attribution, therefore in the report we only identify organisations and not the individual respondents.

For the purpose of this report, by ‘threat of radicalisation’, we refer to any tendency aimed at, and capable of, destabilising the state using violent and/or ideological means. This means that we do not include solely armed groups that resort to terrorist activities and acts of violence, but also political–ideological movements that aim to exploit democratic rules to assume power gradually and peacefully, thus subverting the secular state from within.

CHAPTER 1

GEOPOLITICAL

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CONTEXT**

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GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

‘For a predominantly Muslim country with a post-Soviet history, yet one that is on the political map of Europe, but has a neighbourhood that includes Russia, Iran and Turkey, effective foreign policy is not just an international relations instrument—it is a survival tool. At the same time, such a geopolitical location provides many opportunities. Located at the crossroads of the major trade and energy routes between East and West and maintaining the secularity of a state with a Muslim heritage, Azerbaijan is a natural bridge between Europe and Asia, the Muslim and Christian worlds and a gateway to energy and transportation corridors for the entire region in which it is located.’¹

These lines epitomise the complexity of Azerbaijan’s geopolitical situation, characterised by powerful neighbours such as Russia, Turkey and Iran, with their economic and political interests, and at the same time by strong economic, cultural and political ties with the West. This gives rise to somewhat eclectic foreign relations, Baku being at the same time part of the Council of Europe, of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation and of the Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as having strong ties with NATO and Israel.

This complexity is also reflected in the overall identity of Azerbaijan and its population: ‘[G]iven its geographical location the area has throughout history found itself under the influence of the cultures of the large empires that surrounded it. The outcome is a complex Azerbaijani identity with Iranian, Turkish and Russian influences.’² Indeed, Azerbaijan is a post-Soviet republic; has a majority Shia population like Iran; is a secular democracy like Turkey, with whom it also shares a language and Turkic ethnicity; and considers itself as a Western state.³

In addition, Azerbaijan is in a conflict situation with one of its neighbours, Armenia, which occupied the internationally recognised territory of Azerbaijan, an issue that foreign states have used as leverage against Baku in the past. Last but not least, Azerbaijan is an oil and gas producer: this, on the one hand, creates open and fruitful opportunities for the country, but, on the other, stimulates acquisitive tendencies in certain foreign states.

A complex neighbourhood

Azerbaijan is located in a geopolitically volatile region, being surrounded as it is by larger, more powerful and influential neighbours who are driven by different interests and who are keen to bring Azerbaijan into their respective orbits.

To the north is Russia, which resents the independence of Azerbaijan in a territory it considers its backyard and which is still largely under its influence. Indeed,

‘in view of the clear tendencies observable in Russia’s relationship with the countries of the former Soviet space, Azerbaijan stands out as an exception. Azerbaijan does not have Russian military installations on its soil, and is not a member of the Russian-sponsored Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Having withdrawn from what was then the CIS’s Collective Security Treaty in 1999, Baku has not allowed Russia to monopolise its energy, and maintains an independent foreign policy line.’⁴

It goes without saying that Russia looks with obvious disfavour at the pro-American, pro-European Azerbaijani foreign policy and attempts therefore to take advantage of any troubles in Azerbaijan’s relations with the West to extend its influence.⁵ Many issues furthermore complicate this picture: first, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, where Russia supported Armenia while trying to use this leverage to bring Azerbaijan back under its influence.⁶ Then there is the question of energy, where several controversies arose, mainly because Baku reasserted its autonomy from Russia and looked at the West as a preferred partner. Yet bilateral relations between the two countries seem to have improved lately, concerning both economic and military cooperation.⁷

Azerbaijan’s western border presents another challenge, with Georgia, a former Soviet republic which has friendly relations with Baku but is at odds with Russia; Armenia, a country at war with Azerbaijan over the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh; and Turkey, Azerbaijan’s ‘big brother’ in terms of having political, linguistic and ethnic similarities and being a secular,



Baku: tradition and modernity: the iconic Flame Towers

1 Makili-Aliyev, 2013: 2.

2 Bedford, 2009:15.

3 V. *infra*

4 Cornell, 2011: 350.

5 Cornell, 2011: chapter 13.

6 ‘Russia has done everything possible to convince Azerbaijan that peace in Karabakh will come from the maternal arms of Moscow—and all Azerbaijan has to do is return to Russia for protection.’ Selimov, cit. in *ibid.*: 354.

7 Makili-Aliyev, 2013: 5.

Muslim majority republic with strong ties with the West, although currently under an Islamist government that challenges Atatürk's heritage in both internal and foreign policy.

To the south lies the Islamic Republic of Iran, a Shia theocracy where some 18 to 25 million ethnic Azerbaijanis reside, and which looks with mistrust and resentment at its secular, pro-Western neighbour for a number of reasons, as will be outlined extensively in Chapter 3.

In addition to the diverse influences of its immediate neighbours, Azerbaijan has strong economic, political, cultural and ideological links with the West. In terms of economic cooperation, Western companies have benefited more from the exploitation of Azerbaijani energy resources, and most of Azerbaijani oil flows to the West. It is also noteworthy that Israel is the second largest importer of oil after Italy,⁸ Azerbaijan supplying 40% of Israel's oil through the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline.⁹

Together with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan is one of only two Muslim majority countries to have sent troops to Iraq during the Second Gulf War, after taking part in the war in Afghanistan against the Taliban. Azerbaijan also has a partnership with NATO, in the framework of an Individual Partnership Agreement.¹⁰

The United States Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act has, since 1992, theoretically prohibited any kind of assistance to Azerbaijan, unfairly punishing it in the eyes of some for Armenia's occupation of the internationally recognised territory of Azerbaijan. Although the US Congress, under pressure from the White House, has waived the ban on a yearly basis since 11 September 2001 (as a mark of Baku's strategic importance in the fight against terrorism), the fact that Section 907 is still on the books is perceived by Azerbaijan as an unfair form of pressure and an affront to national dignity, and impedes more effective American cooperation with the Caucasian state.¹¹

Finally, strong links with the West have not prevented Azerbaijan from playing in other fields: the country is part of both the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Baku's foreign policy is highly pragmatic. In spite of the challenging geopolitical context and its systematic efforts to move out of the Soviet heritage and reform its institutions, Azerbaijan has succeeded in maintaining good relations with its largest neighbours and in establishing cooperation and strategic partnerships with key international players.

⁸ Abilov, 2009: 156.

⁹ Sharon, 2014. Alexander, 2015.

¹⁰ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49111.htm

¹¹ V. Cornell, 2006: 31.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

The conflict with Armenia originated from a territorial dispute over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, territorially part of Azerbaijan but largely populated by Armenians as a result of Russian settlement policy. In 1988 deputies in the local council of Karabakh voted to unite the region with Armenia, a move that was approved in 1991 with a contested referendum, in which Azerbaijanis were not permitted to participate. All of that happened with the support of Armenia, provoking a military confrontation between the latter and Azerbaijan, which lasted until 1994. However, the ceasefire did not accompany a solution, as it left a large portion of Azerbaijani territory, much beyond Nagorno-Karabakh itself, occupied by Armenian forces, which caused the exodus of around 800,000 Azerbaijanis, forced to live elsewhere in refugee camps as internally displaced persons.

The close cooperation with Armenia that Iran and Russia continue to have today, has played a significant role during the conflict particularly as a means of pressuring Baku.

The energy issue and related controversies

Azerbaijan is a country rich in oil and gas deposits and therefore plays a crucial role as an energy provider. This does not necessarily make for good relations with its neighbours and also creates significant geopolitical issues for the country.

Azerbaijan is surrounded by powerful and much larger nations, such as Russia and Iran, which border Azerbaijan to the north and the south. They are desirous of taking advantage of Azerbaijani resources, potentially to the detriment of the West and have used the thorny issues related to oil exploitation and transport as a means of political leverage against Baku.

Azerbaijan has decisively sought economic partners in the West, with political support from Western governments, in order not to find itself trapped between two antagonistic neighbours. In 1994, the government concluded an accord regarding the exploitation and commercialisation of its energy resources, dubbed 'the contract of the century', with mostly American and European companies and with lesser participation of Turkish, Russian and Saudi ones.

If this secured a degree of Western involvement in the country and thereby provided a counterbalance to the aspirations of regional powers, it did not resolve the problem of pipelines, with the technical, economic, and above all, political issues these entailed. Indeed, because of the former Soviet infrastructure, all the existing pipelines flowed towards Russia. Baku had to decide whether to refurbish those, or explore other transit options: to the south, through Iran, or to the west, towards Turkey via Georgia. This pipeline, eventually completed in 2006 and known as the 'Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline', found strong, consistent support

from the three countries, as well as from the UK and the US whose companies were the most favoured by the agreement. Unsurprisingly, this project was fiercely opposed by Iran, Russia and Armenia.



Caspian Sea oil rigs: the geopolitics of energy

In addition, two more pipelines, one connected to the other, are being developed, linking Azerbaijan with the West: the Trans-Anatolian pipeline and the Trans-Adriatic pipeline, the first of which begins in Azerbaijan and ends at the Turkish–Greek border; the second extends it to Italy, passing through Greece and Albania. It is a substantial project, which potentially can bring gas to the West from the Caspian region, Iran and Israel. Indeed, in 2013 25-year contracts were signed to deliver gas and oil from Azerbaijan to EU states. Once again, most partners are from the West.

Such projects not only have an economic impact, but may also be regarded as a further trigger of political and strategic integration with Europe.

Another complication related to oil and uneasy borders comes from the legal status of the Caspian Sea, where disputes have arisen between and among coastal countries as to the exploitation of its rich waters and subsoil. In particular, Iran and Russia have tried to argue that the Caspian should be considered a lake, to which therefore the 1984 Convention on the Law of the Sea would not apply. This would leave the Caspian coastal states in

a situation of condominium that would not allow them to claim exclusive economic zones, thus favouring the bigger and more powerful ones in its exploitation.

In the larger geopolitical game Iran may be playing, this issue represents another instrument of pressure against Azerbaijan.

Uneasy neighbourhood, more challenges at home

To sum up, Azerbaijan faces internationally as many opportunities as challenges, in a highly articulated geopolitical context.

These elements of richness and complexity are to be taken into consideration when addressing the issue of Islamic radicalism, as they show the vulnerabilities and the delicate equilibrium to which the state is exposed externally, which cannot but have an impact on the situation internally.

CHAPTER 2

ISLAM IN AZERBAIJAN

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ISLAM IN AZERBAIJAN



Azerbaijan combines a predominantly Muslim population with a clearly secular institutional system and a tolerant, multicultural social fabric. Azerbaijan can even claim to have been the first secular Muslim republic, established in 1918, before the Soviet invasion.

Although there are no official statistics about religious affiliation of Azerbaijanis, it is generally estimated that Muslims constitute 96% of the population, of whom 65% are Shia and 35% are Sunni. However, this distinction is nothing more than a nominal one for the vast majority of the population who, according to statistics, are largely unaware of the basic difference between the two branches of Islam, and, in any case, in almost their entirety do not see issues of tension between Sunnis and Shias.¹² The adherents of both branches of Islam even go to the same mosques in Azerbaijan, which is in fact unique in the world. The two denominations coexist under the supervision of the Caucasus Muslim Board, where the sheikh, albeit Shia, is respected by Sunnis, and has a Sunni deputy.

Islam represents for most Azerbaijani Muslims a private spiritual matter, which does not affect their loyalty to the secular state or their amicable relations with other confessions. Furthermore, the percentage of those attending religious services is very low: fewer than 20% of Azerbaijanis do so regularly, and less than 40% go during special holidays, according to the Caucasus Barometer.¹³ Slightly dissimilar data emerge from another study, which nonetheless reinforces this impression of widespread secularism: according to Charles Robia, Azerbaijanis attending religious services once a week or more comprise less than 9%; those who declare that they always observe religious fasting around 14%; and those who pray regularly, or at least once a week, less than 19%.¹⁴

The moderate and overall secular mood of Azerbaijani Muslims is confirmed in several findings of a 2013 poll by the Pew Research Center of Washington concerning the views of the world's Muslims on religion, politics and society. Among other things, this research

shows that, for eight out of ten Azerbaijani Muslims, honour killings are never justified,¹⁵ and women should be free to decide whether to wear a veil¹⁶ and to seek divorce.¹⁷

This attitude is not reflected in spiritual issues alone, but also in people's disposition towards the West. According to Cornell, notwithstanding pro-Russian or Muslim influences, between two-thirds and three-quarters of Azerbaijanis support a pro-Western foreign policy. In particular, he estimates that 85% favour a pro-Turkish and pro-Western orientation, 10% (especially in the older generations) a pro-Russian one, and 5% (primarily in the south) a pro-Iranian one.

Many Azerbaijanis see their country as a bridge between 'East and West' and pride themselves of their country's tolerant stance on other religions. Suleymanov, for example, writes that Azerbaijan is a 'place where Europe meets Asia, where the Turkic world meets Iran and the Caucasus, and different Islamic groups meet different Christian and Jewish ones. Even if Islam is the dominant belief, other faiths like Christianity and Judaism have a long history of representation in Azerbaijan.'¹⁸ In this respect, Azerbaijan is one of the few Muslim countries where Jews are perfectly integrated within the society, and significant anti-Semitism has not been recorded to date, as confirmed by Baku synagogue representatives on the occasion of our interviews in Baku in January 2015. The new Baku synagogue was built with financial support coming from the State and from the sheikh of the Caucasus Muslim Board. A recent ceremony of dedication of a new Torah scroll was attended by Muslim, Russian Orthodox Christian, Albanian-Udi Christian and Catholic leaders: something unusual in most parts of the world. Azerbaijan therefore has a highly symbolic value, both for the region and for the West, as a 'secular, western-oriented and pluralistic Shia Muslim society'.¹⁹

Islamic revival?

In terms of people's religious beliefs, an Islamic revival, or even an emergence *tout court* of new-born religious sentiments, may be noted, starting with the collapse of the Soviet Union, both in belief and practice of faith.

Here an explanation is necessary, to avoid misunderstandings in a paper centred on the danger of religious radicalisation: the threat of *Islamism* is not the threat of *Islam*. Our definition of 'religious revival' therefore is neutral *per se*, lacks any value judgement and is the mere description of a phenomenon that is somehow unsurprising after decades

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, 2013: 89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 92

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 94

¹⁸ Bedford, 2009: 91.

¹⁹ Cornell, 2011: 298.

¹² Pew Research Center, 2013: 31.

¹³ Caucasus Barometer: «Attendance of Religious Services».

¹⁴ Robia, 2009: 9.

of enforced atheism by a brutal dictatorship, as shown also by the Christian revival that occurred for the same reasons in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is not by chance that one of the first catalysts of Islamic revival in Azerbaijan was the 'Black January' of 1990, when hundreds of civilians were killed or injured by Soviet troops. Nonetheless, it is a phenomenon to be kept under observation, in order to monitor its evolution and the directions it might take.



The country's secular traditions coexist easily with its Islamic heritage

In general terms, the percentage of Azerbaijanis declaring that religion is important in their lives has steadily increased, and has now reached 82%. In parallel, the percentage of those deeming religion not important, has been constantly decreasing.²⁰ Another relevant figure is also the rapidly increasing number of Azerbaijanis performing the *hajj* to Mecca.

We must stress again that these facts are meaningless in themselves: religion is not a problem *per se*, but only when it assumes aspects which might be dan-

gerous for the security and freedom of others, and for public order and security. However, some data emerging from the above-mentioned Pew poll are worth noting. For instance, in spite of a much vaunted tolerance and perfect cohabitation between and among different faiths, which our sources on the ground, both governmental and others, decisively assert, only 3% of Azerbaijani Muslims declare themselves to be comfortable with their daughter marrying a Christian. Just to give a better idea of the meaning of this result, it is the same figure as emerged in a country such as Pakistan, with arguably a high level of radicalisation among the population, while in Turkey this percentage increases to 20%, and in another post-communist, Muslim majority country, Albania, it even reaches 75%. Always according to the Pew Research Center poll, for 88% of Azerbaijani Muslims, believing in God is necessary to be considered of moral character; this percentage is even higher than in Pakistan, and much higher than in Turkey or Albania.

It goes without saying that these data are not sufficient in themselves to nullify our previous, indeed commonly acknowledged, assertions of a secular and tolerant society, but are signals to be carefully considered and monitored.

Scholars stress various causes for the phenomenon of Islamic revival. One factor is surely to be found in the new spaces of freedom that the fall of the Soviet dictatorship opened up: after decades of enforced atheism, religion responded both to a spiritual crisis and to a reaction against previous repression. The fall of the Soviet Union, although largely accompanied by an authentic and widespread nationalistic spirit, also brought about an uncertainty about individual identity, which was only partially filled by Western culture. From this perspective, Islam was a reaction not only to Communism but also to the perceived materialism of the West, whose values, while increasingly finding their way into Azerbaijani society, were in the meantime rejected by portions of it, in observance of the traditional concepts of honour and morality still deeply rooted in society.

There is no agreement among experts on whether education and socio-economic conditions play a role in the Islamic revival. According to some academics, frustration with poverty and social inequality are factors pushing people towards religion, and also towards a radical version of it. Here we must probably distinguish between different periods under consideration. It is undeniable that the Azerbaijani population, especially immediately following independence, suffered from extreme economic and social hardship. However, in the following years, thanks to the oil revenues and to government policies against poverty, the country saw extraordinary development, so that the poverty rate in 2009 was estimated at 13%, less than a fourth of what it had been in mid-1990s,²¹ and is currently estimated at 6%.²² Investments were also made in education and development of provincial areas, to the extent that the literacy rate in the country is currently estimated at the record level of 99.8%.²³ Furthermore, some academics note that many of the 'new believers' (both radical and non-radical) are educated and middle class and therefore do not fit into a model based on an analysis of those experiences. This was validated by some of the interviewees met during our research visit to Baku in January 2015 and in particular by an academic from ADA University. It has also been indicated that the socio-economic model does not explain the success of Wahhabism where the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan has failed,²⁴ or the penetration of Wahhabism and Gulenism among the middle classes.

In conclusion, a certain religious discourse can find a more receptive audience among those coming from socio-economic deprivation, without this being the only, or main, cause for radicalisation: Islamist ideology uses rhetoric referring to social justice and denouncing corruption, authoritarian practices, mismanagement and income disparities. Respect of religious leaders and responsiveness to their messages is often the result of their ability

²¹ Cornell, 2011: 247.

²² Central Intelligence Agency, 2014.

²³ Alexander, 2015.

²⁴ O'Rear, Hannah. "Negotiating Faith and Government in the Post-Soviet Islamic Republics: Azerbaijan as a case study." *McGill Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2012: 84.

²⁰ Caucasus Barometer: «How important is religion in your daily life».

to provide employment relief or social support. It follows that in a situation of a functioning welfare state, it is more difficult for Islamists to find supporters — which is why the government has invested considerable resources in this sector, as outlined in Chapter 5.

Islamic revivalism vs. foreign-led extremism

In introducing the following chapters, we must draw a distinction between a religious revival which has many *solely* internal causes, and foreign-led extremism which in its origin is not an endogenous phenomenon, having rather been largely promoted and imported from outside. According to scholars as well as experts we met in Azerbaijan, there are clear indications that neighbouring Iran has supported Shias, Persian Gulf countries have supported and funded Salafists groups and structures, and the Gulen Movement in Azerbaijan, especially during the time of Gulen's liaison with Turkey's governments, received support from Turkey.

The influences of these foreign powers, and the way in which extremist narratives could find a fertile breeding ground and spread internally, is what we are going to examine in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3

SHI'ISM AND


CHAPTER 3

**SHI'ISM
AND IRAN**



CHAPTER 3

SHI'ISM AND IRAN



As mentioned above, Azerbaijani society is mostly composed of Shia Muslims. They are especially present in the south, and in the Absheron and Baku regions. While the vast majority are moderate, some dangerous signs of radicalisation have been observed within the community, often in conjunction with foreign influences.

The most active epicentre of Shia activism has been the Juma mosque in Baku, under the guidance of Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, an Iranian-educated cleric preaching a pro-Iranian position. Because of his political activism, Ibrahimoglu was arrested in 2003 on the occasion of protests against Ilham Aliyev's election and sentenced to a five-year suspended jail term. The mosque itself was closed by police in 2005 for not being officially registered.

He employs a rhetoric which, combining Islam with democracy and human rights, has allowed him to target educated youth with a secular background. He currently chairs the Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion (DEVAMM), in Baku. His activities are focused on promoting Islamic principles; he led, for instance, a campaign to allow women to wear the hijab in official pictures and was in the forefront of the protests against the cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad.

Ibrahimoglu's Iranian training and background are clearly evident in his radical slogans. In 2005, after parliamentary elections, he held a public rally under the slogan 'We are not going to tolerate the Shah's regime!', which scholar Svante E. Cornell interprets as a call to reproduce the Iranian revolution in Azerbaijan.²⁵

In sum, his human rights and democratic credentials are far from unimpeachable and may instead represent a useful tool to attract internal and Western sympathisers not necessarily from a religious background, with the ultimate aim of turning Azerbaijan into an Iranian-style theocracy, thereby reproducing the same scheme and tactic used by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, which sabotaged the concept of democracy to attract a vast opposition front, while brutally reneging on it once he had seized power.

The distinction highlighted in Chapter 1 must always be borne in mind: 'democracy' is a

vague and undefined concept, and both polls and historical evidence show that when Islamists speak about democracy, rarely (not to say never) do they mean *liberal* democracy, where individual rights and freedoms are respected.

The Iranian factor

As outlined in Chapter 1, Azerbaijan is in a volatile geopolitical situation, as a secular, pro-Western state whose southern neighbour is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its position is complicated by the fact that not only does Iran border Azerbaijan but also it hosts a large community of ethnic Azerbaijanis, estimated figures between 18 and 25 million. On the one hand, Iran is concerned by Azerbaijan's ties to the West and the large numbers of ethnic Azerbaijanis within its territory, and on the other, it hardly views Azerbaijan as a legitimate, independent state, instead considering it part of its sphere of influence, if not indeed as part of its own territory. As observed by scholars Emil Souleimanov and Ondrej Ditrych, Iranian nationalists argue that Azerbaijanis residing in Azerbaijan are actually citizens of Iran, since the whole of Azerbaijan is historically and legally part of Iran.²⁶

It will come therefore as no surprise that Iran has attempted in numerous ways to destabilise independent Azerbaijan, to bring the state into the orbit of its own radical model. Indeed, Iran is believed to have been behind numerous covert and overt acts of hostility against Azerbaijan.

Iran exerts its influence via its cultural representations, dependent on its embassies and Ministry of Culture and under the Supreme Leader's control, such as the Organisation of Islamic Propaganda, the Hajj and Welfare Organisation, the Society for Reconciliation among Islamic Sects, the Khomeini Relief Committee, the Islamic publishers Al-Hoda and even some local branches of Hezbollah. The lattermost in particular seem to be active in the south, especially in the regions of Yardimli and Lerik.²⁷ All of these have been used as tools to propagate radical Shi'ism, both through indoctrination of imams and through 'humanitarian assistance'.

During the 1990s, in the climate of freedom that followed the fall of the Soviet Union, many religious schools were opened in Baku, as 'official or semi-official Iranian structures'.²⁸ At the same time foreign missionaries, trained in Iran, came to Azerbaijan to undertake extensive propaganda in favour of the Iranian 'model'. This has also worked the other way around; through Iranian-sponsored mosques and schools, Azerbaijanis have received scholarships, disguised as religious donations, to attend seminaries in Iran.²⁹ One of the

²⁵ Cornell, 2006: 59

²⁶ Souleimanov and Ditrych, 2007:107

²⁷ Wilhelmsen, 2009: 731.

²⁸ Sattarov, 2009: 143.

²⁹ Rubin, 2014: 4.

organisations dealing with these 'cultural exchanges' was Ahl al-bait, which also smuggled religious literature into the country.³⁰

Tehran's strategy has been straightforward: by placing as many Azerbaijani mosques as possible under the control of Iranian or Iranian-trained mullahs they succeeded in strengthening their influence in the country. Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is just one of the better-known examples of this approach. In recent years, another Iranian-trained preacher, Sheikh Taleh Bagirov, from Nardaran, began to preach a radical view of religion at the Hazrat Abulfaz Aga mosque. He often targeted the moderate positions of state religious bodies and agitated against the ban on the headscarf in schools. He was imprisoned, though after his release he continued to attack the government.



Shia mosque: the majority of Azerbaijanis doesn't seek to differentiate theologically between the Sunni and Shia denominations of Islam

In addition, humanitarian activities for displaced persons, such as those performed by the Imam Khomeini Imdad Committee, also known as the Imam Khomeini

Relief Committee, have been effective tools for radical propaganda, conducted with the use of religious literature smuggled into the country.³¹ As has been noted, there is in this 'humanitarian assistance' an irony, given the support Iran gave to Armenia against Azerbaijan.³² It is important to note that the Lebanese branch of the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee has been designated as a terrorist entity by the US because of its links with Hezbollah.³³

All this intense and surreptitious activity of radicalisation perpetrated by foreign actors explains why Azerbaijan in 1996 amended the 1992 Law on Freedom of Religious Belief so as to ban the activities of 'foreigners and persons without citizenship' conducting 'religious propaganda' (Chapter 5).

As well as religious interference, Iran has fuelled the secessionist sentiments of the Talysh, an ethnic minority located in the south of Azerbaijan, where an ephemeral independent republic was even declared in 1993, basically acting as an Iranian puppet. In terms of specific identity, the Talysh people speak an Indo-Persian language, but other distinctive features are not clearly defined. Although this ethnic minority has not been able to gain any traction in the political scene, it has reached the apex of the religious hierarchy within the Caucasus

Muslim Board.³⁴ The Talysh officially numbered 76,800 in 1999 and 112,000 in 2009,³⁵ but it is claimed that the latter number is underestimated (some even speak about 500,000).³⁶ Nearly 100,000, instead, are those living in Iran,³⁷ where a Talysh radio station is also operating.³⁸ Furthermore, the Iranian-based Sahar television station broadcasts daily in both Azeri and Talysh, spreading sentiment that is anti-US, anti-Israel, and anti-Western culture in general, while promoting the Islamic Republic as a model for society's well-being.³⁹

Iranian pressure has also materialised in overt acts of intimidation and hostility on the part of Iranian officials and bodies. In 2012, for instance, 'the Iranian government hung the flag of Azerbaijan upside down during a visit by the Azerbaijani defense minister to Tehran, so that a green band symbolizing Islam appeared on top.'⁴⁰ In 2013, the Tehran-based daily *Kayhan*, published an editorial calling for a referendum in Azerbaijan on its reincorporation into Iran. This episode is particular relevant considering the fact that *Kayhan's* editor is appointed directly by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and is considered to speak for him.

Iranian interference has not been limited just to diplomatic snubs or more or less explicit propaganda activity, but has gone as far as to assume a terrorist dimension. Iran seems indeed to be behind a number of armed plots against sensitive targets in Azerbaijan. In 2006, a major terrorist plot on Azerbaijani soil involving Iranian operatives was uncovered, and 15 Azerbaijanis trained by Iranian security forces were charged with plotting violence against Israelis and Westerners.⁴¹ They were members of a group called Jamaat al-Muwa-hidun, and among their targets were the US, Israeli and Russian embassies, the State Oil Company and the Central Bank.⁴²

In 2007, members of the so-called Northern Mahdi Army were arrested and convicted on charges of plotting a coup under the direction and training of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁴³ In 2008 a plot against the Israeli embassy in Baku was prevented, and suspicions fell on Hezbollah militants coming from Lebanon who were apprehended with explosives and other military devices. The terrorists allegedly had travelled back and forth from Iran with Iranian passports. Other members of the cell were apparently able to escape into Iran. Later, one of those arrested provided evidence of his contacts with Iran and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁴⁴

³⁴ Cornell, 2011: 168 and 275.

³⁵ The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2014.

³⁶ Kotecha, 2006: 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Fautré, 2014.

³⁹ Rubin, 2014: 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 2.

⁴¹ The American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islamism, 2013:3.

⁴² Wilhelmsen, 2009: 735. Valiyev, 2006.

⁴³ Nichol, 2009: 19. Wilhelmsen, 2009: 732.

⁴⁴ The American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 3. Rotella, 2009.

³⁰ Sattarov, 2009: 144.

³¹ Valiyev 2005: 8.

³² Rubin, 2014: 4.

³³ *Ibid.*

In 2012, just before the Eurovision song contest finals, 22 people were arrested for plotting an attack on sensitive targets. The Ministry of National Security itself released a statement accusing Iran of having trained them to perpetrate the attack under direct guidance of the Revolutionary Guards.⁴⁵ Although not all observers are persuaded of the Iranian trail, pointing instead to the Sunni jihadists of the north, it must be noted that this was one of the rare occasions on which the Azerbaijani authorities explicitly accused Iran of being behind a major security threat. Furthermore, that was neither the first nor last time that suspected terrorists were arrested and accused of plotting terrorist attacks and arms smuggling, aided and abetted by Iran.

Iran was also shown to have been behind the events of the 'Azerbaijani Salman Rushdie affair', when an authoritative Iranian Ayatollah called for the assassination, subsequently carried out, of Rafiq Taġi, a journalist accused by Nardaran's radicals of having offended the prophet Muhammad.⁴⁶

According to Azerbaijani authorities, as quoted by a number of scholars, Iran has been supporting the terrorist group Jayshullah, albeit Salafist.⁴⁷ The group is deemed responsible for several murders, an attack against the Hare Krishna society in Baku and a plot against the US embassy there.⁴⁸ Should this connection be proven, it would illustrate a dangerous connection between Shia and Sunni terrorism, based on the Hamas model. However our sources on the ground were not in the position to confirm or deny this assertion.

Although certain scholars deem the threat of Iran to be more contained than that of more or less independent Sunni groups, for it has many aspects of classic interstate diplomatic games and can thus be addressed through diplomatic channels and interstate agreements to a certain extent,⁴⁹ this is not quite the view of Azerbaijani actors, who almost unanimously see the Iranian threat as still present, and a visceral at that. One of the academics with whom we spoke in Baku went so far as to mention a 'hard security threat', which Iran does not bother to conceal in its public discourse.

Iran indeed feels that Azerbaijan in its turn represents a threat to its own core interests: Azerbaijan is an overtly secular state with military ties to the United States and Israel, and between 18 and 25 million ethnic Azerbaijanis live in Iran, potentially a 'fifth column'. For these reasons, on top of the classic Islamist ideology, Iran has every interest in driving Azerbaijan into its orbit through regime change, underpinned by the pervasive influence of radical Shi'ism.

45 The American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 3. Rubin, 2012: 3. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 2013.

46 Rubin, 2014: 3.

47 Baran and Cornell, 2010: 204. Cornell, 2011: 334.

48 Cornell, 2006: 61.

49 Cornell, 2011: 281; 308.

The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan

Iran's hand was also quite visible in the establishment and development of the main Azerbaijani religious party, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA). This was created in 1991 in Nardaran, the epicentre of radical Shi'ism in Azerbaijan. Many sources indicate that it was heavily financed and driven by Iran.⁵⁰

Not only was it sponsored by Iran, but according to a Baku think tank dealing with security issues, hundreds of its members were trained in the Iranian holy city of Qom with the explicit aim of exporting the Islamic revolution into Azerbaijan. In the mid-1990s the party even tried to acquire a paramilitary force based on Hezbollah's model, which marked the first crackdown on it by the state. Some of its members were accused of engaging in espionage for Iran, and its statute was declared unconstitutional, as it mixed politics and religion, thus contradicting the secular nature of the State. The party was therefore denied registration.

Thenceforth, the party has gone through various phases between legality, including an alliance with secular leftist forces, and calls to riot and overthrow the government, leading to new arrests and revocations of its registration. For instance, in 2002, further to accusations of having organised riots in Nardaran, the party's registration was once again revoked and its chairman, Hacı Alikram Aliyev, arrested.⁵¹

On the contrary, from 2003 until 2005 the party formed a left-wing coalition called 'Pro-Azerbaijani forces', or 'Unity of Azerbaijani forces', with two leftist parties, supporters of the former pro-Moscow President Ayaz Mutalibov.⁵² Although the coalition proved to be a failure in the 2005 elections and was later dissolved, some secular politicians had adopted religious slogans in their protest.⁵³ In the meantime, IPA leaders have tried to downplay the religious identity of the party by establishing reassuring parallels with Christian Democrat parties of the West and Christian politicians.⁵⁴ This is a clear example of what is explained above in relation to 'democracy', that is, a sophisticated and instrumental use of superficial parallelisms between realities and concepts which are only apparently and nominally similar but fundamentally diverse in their substance: while contemporary Christian democrats in the West 'typically view themselves as nominally Christian parties *within* a secular

50 Agayev and Meyer, 2011. Cornell, 2006: 60 foll.

51 Cornell, 2006: 60.

52 Bedford, 2009: 152. Cornell, 2011: 276

53 Cornell, 2006: 36.

54 Hacı Nuri Ağa's approach towards journalists (he is the head of Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, based in Nardaran) before the elections was, for instance, to relativise his Islamic party with examples from "the West": "... the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan is like the German Christian Democracy" and "I go to the mosque just as Bush goes to church". He is quoted in an article as saying that Islam is the guiding set of principles for his campaign, along with a commitment to democracy and an end to tribalism.

democracy', Islamist parties present themselves 'as an *alternative* to secular democracies'.⁵⁵ As mentioned earlier, this technique has the capacity to imitate the model of the Iranian revolution. Viewed through this optic, the apparent paradox of a radical Shia party forming an alliance with secular forces should not be surprising, as it might reflect the same tactic astutely used by Khomeini, of forming a broad alliance with leftist forces, then persecuting them once power was seized.

Since the above tactic proved to be unsuccessful, the coalition was dismantled right after the elections, and in 2011 the IPA's chairman, Samadov, was arrested for explicit incitement to overthrow the government. He urged the Azerbaijani people to rise up and take up arms against the government.⁵⁶ It must be further noted that most of those preventively arrested and accused in the above-mentioned plot to attack the Eurovision song contest finals were IPA members.⁵⁷

In relation to certain accusations levelled against the Azerbaijani government of repressing legitimate opposition by leveraging the Islamist bogeyman, some of them have even been accused of being Iranian spies, an indication of the grave threat they represent Azerbaijan.⁵⁸ The party has a strong anti-Semitic and anti-Western ideology,⁵⁹ a strong sectarian (Shia) vocation and a statute that explicitly calls for the establishment of an Islamic state, based solely on Islamic and not secular law.⁶⁰

As acknowledged by the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 'as a rule, "political" speech, even very critical of the State and the powers in place, is protected by Article 10—there is no "pressing social need" in a "democratic society", in the terms of Article 10, to suppress such speech. But there are cases in which political speech exceeds the limits set by the Convention, for example when it incites violence, racism, or xenophobia.⁶¹ Thus, it follows that 'It is perfectly legitimate, and expressly recognised in Article 17 of the European Convention on Human Rights that a State has the right to defend its constitutional order against groups that want to overthrow it in order to establish a new regime disregarding the rights and freedoms protected by the Convention.'⁶²

It seems apposite to recall here the *Refah Partisi v. Turkey* ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, where the dissolution of the Islamist party by the Turkish Constitutional

Court was deemed compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights on two main assumptions. First, 'the principle of secularism is certainly one of the fundamental principles of the State which are in harmony with the rule of law and respect for human rights and democracy'.⁶³ Second, a party can legitimately call for a change in the legal and constitutional structures of the state not only on condition that the *means* used are democratic, but also provided that the *goal* itself is compatible with fundamental democratic principles:⁶⁴ the attempt to establish a regime based on *sharia* conflicts with the latter requirement, insofar as 'sharia is incompatible with the fundamental principles of democracy, as set forth in the Convention'; this is the case because

[. . .] sharia, which faithfully reflects the dogmas and divine rules laid down by religion, is stable and invariable. Principles such as pluralism in the political sphere or the constant evolution of public freedoms have no place in it [. . .] It is difficult to declare one's respect for democracy and human rights while at the same time supporting a regime based on sharia, which clearly diverges from Convention values, particularly with regard to its criminal law and criminal procedure, its rules on the legal status of women and the way it intervenes in all spheres of private and public life in accordance with religious precepts.⁶⁵

Coming back specifically to the IPA, the party has never had mass following.⁶⁶ Several reasons have been identified for its weak grip on the Azerbaijani population, substantially ascribable to the inability to adapt to the local context. To begin with, it has a weak network outside the capital and problems of internal coordination: apparently, the heads of several regional branches do not recognise the authority of the chairman.⁶⁷ Most importantly, the ideology it promotes does not resonate among the Azerbaijani population.⁶⁸ First, it is centred on the Shia identity, within a society that for the most part does not care and even looks with suspicion at this sectarian division; the abovementioned think tank consulted in Baku confirms that the IPA failed because it was unable to create the Sunni/Shia divide it was trying to promote. Second, it is virulently anti-Western and promotes pro-Iranian policies, while most Azerbaijanis are pro-Western and despise Iran—not lastly, for its support of Armenia. Third, the model of governance the party promotes, based on sharia law, does not appeal to the vast majority of Azerbaijanis. Repression and scarce success could explain the multiple variations in the tactics adopted by the party.

⁵⁵ Collins and Owen, 2012: 506.

⁵⁶ Rubin, 2014: 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 4

⁵⁸ Collins, 2007: 90.

⁵⁹ Cornell, 2006: 61. Cornell, 2011: 276. Collins, 2007: 91.

⁶⁰ Collins, 2007: 91: 'The IPA advocates an Islamic state, based solely on Islamic principles and law and not on secular law.'

⁶¹ Strasser, 2012: 9.

⁶² *Ibid.*: 19.

⁶³ European Court of Human Rights, *Case of Refah Partisi (the Welfare Party) and Others v. Turkey*, par. 93.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 98.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, par. 123.

⁶⁶ Sattarov, 2009: 134.

⁶⁷ Cornell, 2011: 276.

⁶⁸ Collins, 2009: 91 foll.

CHAPTER 4


THE SUNNI THREAT

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While Shias are predominant in Baku and in the south, Sunnis are concentrated in the north and present in Baku.⁶⁹ In particular, the border with Dagestan is a zone where Salafists are found in some numbers, and it is a transit route to the war in Chechnya.⁷⁰ The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations distinguishes between two main categories of Sunni groups (both considered radicals to different degrees):⁷¹

- ▼ the Turkish branch, that is, Gulenists;
- ▼ the Salafi/Wahhabi branch, sponsored by radical actors from Gulf countries.

Gulen movement

Fethullah Gulen is a Turkish preacher, now residing in the United States, founder of the eponymous religious movement. The movement is also called Cemaat ('community'), Hizmet ('the service', as adherents began to call themselves a few years ago) and Zamancilar (linked to Gulen's newspaper, *Zaman*). Gulenists, Fethullahçi (after Gulen's first name) and Nurcu (after the movement created by Said Nursi, from which the Gulenist one originated), are all used to designate Gulen's followers.

It is not easy to describe the nature of the movement, a religious network, having 'no formal structure, no visible organisation and no official membership',⁷² yet characterised by a strong internal discipline and devotion, involved in diverse domains (from business to education and from charities to media), and with ambiguous objectives. According to admirers, and in its self-definition, it is a 'cultural and education movement' aimed at promoting 'a positive change in society' based on a humanistic and tolerant view of religion.⁷³ According to critics, it is a sect aimed at the surreptitious acquisition of power and at spreading socially conservative Islamic attitudes.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Baran and Cornell, 2010: 204.

⁷⁰ Cornell, 2006: 46.

⁷¹ Bedford, 2009: 129.

⁷² BBC News, 18 December 2013

⁷³ Gulen Movement.

⁷⁴ *Inter alia*, BBC News, 18 December 2013. Balci, 2013.

Hizmet began operating in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, Azerbaijan being the first country after Turkey where Gulen's schools were opened. The organisation is also active in Azerbaijani media, with radio and television channels and a newspaper.⁷⁵ The movement was for a time free to operate in Azerbaijan,⁷⁶ especially during the time of Gulen's liaison with the Turkish government;⁷⁷ Gulenism was indeed an instrument of Turkish foreign politics and cultural influence,⁷⁸ and received full support from the Diyanet Vakfi (Turkey's official religious institution). It has been argued that, as a result of this relative openness to his organisation, Azerbaijan is one of the places where Gulen has achieved the greatest success and impact.⁷⁹

One of the sources of Gulen's power is in business activities: 'Small and medium-sized Turkish businesses and industries in Azerbaijan are mainly managed by the movement's sympathisers, thus have played a major role in establishing the *cemaat* in this area.'⁸⁰ The TUSIAB business association (International Association of Turkish and Azerbaijani Manufacturers and Businessmen) originates from the Gulen movement.

Within TUSIAB, the *Çağ* company once managed all of Gulen's schools in Azerbaijan, which represented the other main tool of Cemaat's penetration. Those schools received conspicuous financing from businessmen.⁸¹ The head of *Çağ*, Enver Ozeren, is also the head of the organisation in Azerbaijan.⁸² As a mark of the movement's ambiguous objectives and underground activities, allegations have recently been reported about an exchange of communications between Ozeren and Gulen, in which the former was purportedly updating the latter about the 'cadres' they were setting up within Azerbaijani institutions.⁸³ As a result of those suspicions, and especially of the crackdown on Gulen and his followers in Turkey, in July 2014 Gulen's schools in Azerbaijan were shut down.⁸⁴ Only the university is still operating, although under strict state control.

It must be said that Gulen's schools are not religious ones. Despite being private, they are under state control, and no religious teaching officially takes place.⁸⁵ Furthermore, everybody, including our sources on the ground, confirm that education provided in those

⁷⁵ The TV channel Samanyolu and the radio station Burj-FM. Karagiannis, 2010: 54.

⁷⁶ Wilhelsem, 2009: 736.

⁷⁷ Sattarov, 2009: 261.

⁷⁸ Balci, 2013: 8.

⁷⁹ Aliyev 2013: 93. For a visual diagram of Gulen's activity in the country, see *ibid.*: 95.

⁸⁰ Balci, 2013: 4.

⁸¹ Balci, 2013: 4. Sattarov, 2009: 141.

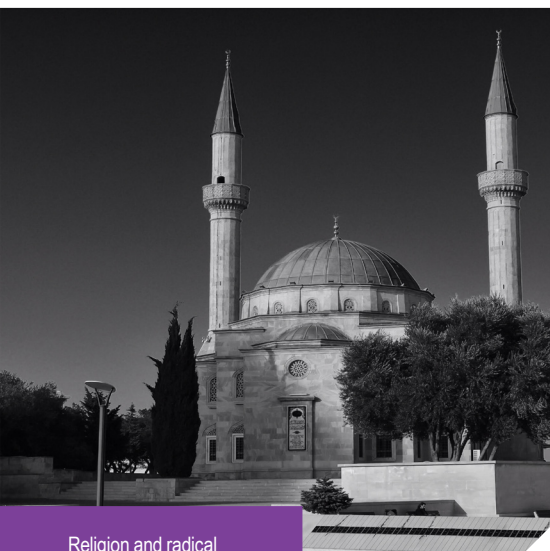
⁸² Aliyev, 2013: 95.

⁸³ Today's Zaman, 2014.

⁸⁴ Lomsadze, 2014.

⁸⁵ Balci, 2013: 5.

schools, and in the university, was and is of high quality, which is what enabled Gulenists to target urban elites in particular, with little penetration in other social contexts.⁸⁶



Religion and radical Islamist ideologies are regularly used by many regional powers against Azerbaijan

In general, the Gulenists' relationship with religion is ambiguous. For instance, it is true that Gulen's schools did not teach religion; however, this allegedly happened informally after classes, during *sohbet*, a kind of 'tea and talk'.⁸⁷ According to its critics, a typical sect-style brainwashing was taking place in those schools, with young students constantly indoctrinated by elder brothers and sisters in the dormitories on Nursi's and Gulen's ideology.⁸⁸

In any case, the most explicitly religious Gulen activity in the country was the Support to Youth Foundation, a charity which held Arabic and Quran classes and had a furnished library of religious books.⁸⁹ Although it is reported that sales of religious texts in Gulenist bookstores has been stopped since 2000, in parallel with a change in strategy—to become more cautious and less overtly religiously affiliated⁹⁰—our sources confirm that Nursi's and Gulen's books are still distributed in Azerbaijan, albeit under strict control.

As to Gulen's university, named Qafqaz (i.e. "Caucasus"), it was also starting to develop an increasingly successful religious programme at the beginning of the 2000s, before the government banned the process of studying there, as the faculty was not under state supervision.⁹¹

Concerning Gulen's relations with other Islamists—Shia and Salafi groups—these are tense. Shias accuse him of practising *taqiyya* (dissimulation), that is, of adopting a secular façade to advance his political agenda. The Salafists accuse him of *bida*, that is, of introducing heretical innovations against the tradition, although sometimes they praise the movement for containing the Shia influence.⁹² This open competition and hostility between different brands of political Islam finds confirmation in the fact that Gulen was able to attract young Azerbaijanis 'who see it as an alternative to the secular Baku regime as well as "medieval" Salafi–Wahhabi Islam and Iranian-style Shia Islamism'.⁹³

⁸⁶ Aliyev, 2013: 101.

⁸⁷ Balci, 2013: 5.

⁸⁸ Aliyev, 2013: 97.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: 94.

⁹⁰ Sattarov, 2009: 262.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*: 142.

⁹² Aliyev, 2013: 99.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 96.

In terms of ideology, it is not easy to assess to what extent Gulen and his acolytes promote a radical version of Islam, especially in Azerbaijan where, more so than in Turkey, the movement has presented itself as a 'post-Islamic' one, capable of carrying out its religious discourse without mentioning it explicitly.⁹⁴

Our sources agree on the fact that Gulen and his followers present a threat to Azerbaijan. However, their vision differs on the nature of this danger. Some maintain that it has nothing to do with religion, being an issue merely of power and politics; as mentioned earlier, members of Gulen's sect would have attempted to infiltrate the government and acquire key positions within the State's hierarchy. Others talk about a downright threat of religious radicalisation.

What we can safely say is that this religious ideology, whatever it be, does not represent the same danger as that coming from Salafis and radical Shias, which involves overt attacks on the State, by political and violent means. On the contrary, Gulen's movement is a highly ramified and largely secret one whose daytime activities, ranging from education to business, appear to be just the tip of the iceberg, and its activity seems in the meantime to be less dangerous and more subtle. Yet its secret ramifications, and their potential, should not be underestimated: '[T]he Gülen movement has formed a transnational network of semi-underground cells that are far larger than most estimates'.⁹⁵ These would be operating as a sort of intelligence service, collecting data on economics, politics, religion and so forth in those countries where the organisation is trying to expand its influence.⁹⁶ There would be also attempts to surreptitiously infiltrate the establishments of Turkey and the CIS.⁹⁷

In other words, it seems to be more an issue of power than of an ideological threat. Whatever its goals and ideology may be, the movement, because of its wide ramifications and its sectarian and largely secretive nature, seems to require close attention and monitoring on the part of the State.

⁹⁴ Balci, 2013: 2

⁹⁵ Aliyev, 2013: 93.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Salafists/Wahhabis

Salafism/Wahhabism identifies a radical strain of Sunni Islam aimed at restoring the purity of religion and life existing at the time of the Prophet, in terms of mores and religious rituals. Although the two currents were not in reality identical, from a historical and theological point of view,⁹⁸ they may be used interchangeably to denote a form of ultraconservative radical Islam which rejects what it perceives as the ‘contaminations’ of modernity, particularly that of the West.

Several thousand Salafists are estimated to be currently present in Azerbaijan, with estimates ranging from 10,000 to 25,000.⁹⁹ It is important to note that it would be misleading to believe they solely, or mainly, belong to underprivileged groups: on the contrary, researchers have found that the typical Salafist social profile ‘is often a young, well-educated individual with rather high disposable income and social status’.¹⁰⁰

Scholars have identified different phases of Salafist penetration into the country,¹⁰¹ which—it is important to recall—came initially as a completely exogenous phenomenon.

The first wave may be spotted in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, via missionaries from the Gulf, with Saudi and Kuwaiti sponsorship. Probable or likely State inertia in immediately addressing this phenomenon has two explanations. In the first place, Salafist penetration largely took advantage of the war with Armenia, which enabled Salafists and charities to exploit the humanitarian catastrophe to advance their radical agenda. Another possible reason is that in the 1990s and early 2000s the government considered Sunnism as a counterbalance to the main threat, namely Iran.¹⁰²

The second wave of militant Salafism, still exogenous, came after the second Russo-Chechen war, when Russia pushed jihadi fighters from the North Caucasus into Georgia and Azerbaijan.¹⁰³ In the third phase, whose inception can likely be traced back to the construction of the Abu Bakr mosque in 1997, the phenomenon of radical Salafism began to take root in Azerbaijani society, and the process of radicalisation became an internal one.

⁹⁸ Current Salafism arose in Egypt in the nineteenth century, Wahhabism in what is now Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century. Salafism was particularly different from Wahhabism when it originated, insofar as early Salafists were trying to reconcile Islam with modernity, while Wahhabism was a radically anti-modern movement. Both of them had in common a purist interpretation of Islam, going back to the pure Islam of ancestors (*salaf*). However, both of them are now reactionary and radical movements, and can be referred to interchangeably for our purposes. For a rough distinction, see Stanley, 2005.

⁹⁹ The American Foreign Policy Council’s World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 5.

¹⁰⁰ Wilhelmsen, 2009: 735.

¹⁰¹ Souleimanov and Ehrmann, 2013.

¹⁰² Mamedov, 2014.

¹⁰³ ‘The Russian military command tried to push Chechen rebels—particularly those of Salafist orientation—out of the North-Caucasus into the neighboring states of Georgia and Azerbaijan.’ Valiyev, 2005: 9.

In terms of tactics and means employed by radicals, the Azerbaijani government has identified three main stages of the growth of Salafism: ‘First, there is the spread of Wahhabi literature and the provision of financial assistance to potential activists. The second stage involves the training of the activists, and the final stage deals with the mobilisation of active members for acts of terrorism designed to destabilise the state.’¹⁰⁴

Charities

As in the Shia case, charities play a fundamental role in promoting Salafism and Wahhabism, with financing coming from the Gulf. In the first wave of Salafist propagation previously described, it is even claimed that ‘several Northern Azerbaijani towns were converted to Salafism by Saudi organisations’,¹⁰⁵ in conjunction with the Nagorno-Karabakh war. One of the most relevant was the Salafist Congregation, sponsored by Saudi and other Gulf citizens.¹⁰⁶

Yet this is but one of many instances of radical Wahhabi organisations coming from the Gulf and disguised as charities and benevolent foundations. The construction of the Abu Bakr mosque itself and the renovation of no fewer than 62 mosques in Azerbaijan, were financed by an organisation, the Kuwaiti Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage, which in 2001 was banned on charges of supporting al-Qaeda.¹⁰⁷

Another charity active in Azerbaijan is the Jeddah-headquartered Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), which provided the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas with thousands of dollars.¹⁰⁸ As in the Jayshullah case, this furthermore reveals similarities of concern between Iranian and Gulf states’ range of terror activities.

Saudi and Kuwaiti charities have even been main centres of recruitment for jihadists. For instance, Azerbaijanis to be sent into Chechnya were recruited by the abovementioned Kuwaiti charity, the Revival of Islamic Heritage,¹⁰⁹ and by the Saudi charity Al-Haramain, which was consequently shut down by Azerbaijani authorities in the early 2000s.¹¹⁰

The Abu Bakr mosque in Baku

In Baku, the epicentre of Salafism is the Abu Bakr mosque. In contrast with the Shia Juma mosque, the Abu Bakr community has adopted a more subtle strategy than its Shia

¹⁰⁴ Valiyev 2005:10.

¹⁰⁵ Souleimanov and Ehrmann, 2013.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Bedford, 2009: 166.

¹⁰⁸ The American Foreign Policy Council’s World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 6..

¹⁰⁹ Nichol, 2009: 18.

¹¹⁰ The American Foreign Policy Council’s World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 6.

counterpart, focusing more on personal mores and habits, such as clothing, lifestyle and individual or family morals, and less on politics. Indeed, the leadership of the Abu Bakr mosque promotes more a restoration of values than a change in government. Hence, this Sunni community is perceived as less opposed to the government than the Shia Juma mosque. It is registered with the Caucasus Muslim Board, and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRO) has not found evidence of illicit activities there. The Imam, Suleymanov, though educated in Saudi Arabia, appears to be loyal to the government, or at least he does not challenge it openly,¹¹¹ and has even published a book urging followers to 'obey the ruler'.¹¹² The chairman of the SCWRO confirmed to us that, in their view, Salafists do not present a problem as long as their radicalism is confined to personal preferences regarding daily life and individual morals.

It is critical to emphasise that it would be erroneous to conflate this apparent 'quietism' with an absence of danger. First, the Abu Bakr mosque is a radical institution that fosters a dangerously extremist religious discourse, which can have an impact on the tolerant and liberal mores of society and support infringements of individual rights. Furthermore, the mosque's webpage forum hosts radical guests who call for the end of the current regime, not unlike their Shia counterparts, the only difference being in

the caution exerted by their leaders in the public discourse.¹¹³

Of greater concern, Salafist/Wahhabi extremism at the Abu Bakr mosque does not express itself only in long beards and white tunics. Some radical groups have taken a terrorist turn, and many of them seem to have links with the mosque.¹¹⁴ The latter has been indicated as a centre for recruitment of foreign fighters directed to Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya,¹¹⁵ and hundreds of Wahhabis attending the mosque have been arrested during the years for plotting terrorist attacks or even a coup d'état.¹¹⁶

111 The American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 4..

112 Bedford, 2009: 155

113 Bedford, 2009: 159.

114 Wilhelmsen, 2009: 735.

115 Cornell, 2006: 57. One such group is the North Caucasus Mujahideen, which was recruiting at the beginning of 2000s volunteers for fighters in the Chechen war. Wilhelmsen, 2009: 735.

116 Wilhelmsen, 2009: 734.

Sunni terror: North Caucasus jihadists and northern Azerbaijani ethnic minorities, Al-Qaeda and foreign fighters

Chechnya and Dagestan are among the main traders in the import–export of terrorism in the Caucasus. Jihadists coming from there find fertile ground in neighbouring northern Azerbaijan where, as noted above, radical Sunnis are mostly concentrated.

A major factor is that, as happens with the Talysh in the Shia case, a connection exists between radical Sunnism and some ethnic minorities concentrated in the north. In general, the most problematic are the communities of Dagestani ethnicity (Avars, Lezgis, Tsakhurs and others),¹¹⁷ which, according to a 2009 census, constitute around 3% of the Azerbaijani population,¹¹⁸ although unofficial sources claim much higher figures.¹¹⁹ They are concentrated especially in the regions of Guba, Gusar, Khachmas (Lezgi minority), Zagatala and Balakan (Avar),¹²⁰ and have strong ties with Russia.¹²¹ For a Westerner to have a clearer perception of the threat these may pose, we could mention that the terrorists responsible for the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 were Avars on their mother's side.¹²²

Our sources confirm that Islamists find fertile ground in exploiting ethnic minority issues, for radical Islam appears to be a source of identity for some. One such threat has come from Sadval, a separatist movement founded by Lezgis, whose goal is to join Dagestan.¹²³ The movement is considered a terrorist one and is thought to be behind an explosion in the Baku metro in 1994.¹²⁴ In addition to being sponsored by Russia,¹²⁵ in 2000 it was reported that Sadval was also cooperating with Wahhabis.¹²⁶ Furthermore, terrorist Lezgi separatists have also been involved with the above-mentioned movement Jayshullah, several of whose members have been trained in Chechnya.¹²⁷

Indeed, the dramatic impact of Islamist terrorist movements from Chechnya needs to be taken into consideration. Thousands of Chechen refugees in Baku fuelled extremism in the 1990s,¹²⁸ and Chechen groups and individuals, of Salafist orientation, are behind some of

117 Souleimanov, 2012.

118 The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2014.

119 Kotecha, 2006: 38.

120 Wilhelmsen, 2009: 733.

121 Kotecha, 2006: 41. Russia is indeed used as a means of pressure against Azerbaijan: «Lezgins feel Russia will protect them from Big Brother Azerbaijan's punishment—like the Talysh feel about Iran». *Ibid.*: 44.

122 The American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 5.

123 Nichol, 2009: 6. However, it does not seem the movement is active any longer. Kotecha, 2006: 39.

124 Kotecha, 2006: 39. Fautré, 2014.

125 It seems that this support decreased at the end of the 1990s, which is why the movement has decreased in importance since then. Fautré, 2014.

126 Kotecha, 2006: 44.

127 Nichol, 2009: 18.

128 Wilhelmsen 2009: 735, Valiyev, 2005: 8.

National counter-radicalisation policies and prevention measures have been effective in reducing the rise of radicalisation

the most dangerous terrorist threats. As previously noted, Russia played a role in pushing extremists into Azerbaijan.

One of the most violent and dangerous Salafist groups, the Forest Brothers, is believed to have been founded by an Arab veteran of the Chechen war.¹²⁹ The Forest Brothers, probably set up by Azer Miskhanov, consists of two groups: Sumqait-Jamaaty and Quba-Qusar Jamaaty. Sumqait, Quba and Qusar are all towns located in the north of Azerbaijan, which reconfirms how the ethnic–geographical element is crucial.¹³⁰

Members of the Forest Brothers have been deemed responsible by the Ministry of National Security for a terrorist attack against the Abu Bakr mosque in 2008, in which 2 people were killed and 18 injured.¹³¹ In 2012, a massive crackdown against jihadist cells in several northern districts took place, and several members of the Forest Brothers were arrested. On the same occasion, significant amounts of weaponry, ammunitions and literature promoting Wahhabism were confiscated.¹³²

Also on that occasion, during which there was an armed confrontation with casualties among Azerbaijani officers and police, a connection between Azerbaijani Salafists and the Dagestani ‘Caucasus Emirate’ was discovered.¹³³ The jihadist cell was planning several attacks against state and Shia targets, accused of ‘heresy’.¹³⁴ The Forest Brothers seem to have had contacts even with Al Qaeda, through an armed terrorist group led by a Saudi citizen, Nail Abdul Kerim al-Bedewi, known as Abu Jafar, from the city of Sumqait,¹³⁵ which also hosted the main epicentre of the group.

Other groups have been found linked with Al Qaeda.¹³⁶ Indeed, the presence of Al Qaeda in the country has been definitively confirmed since 1998, when the terrorist organisation took responsibility for the attack against the US Embassies in Dar es-Salaam and Nairobi, by way of a fax sent from Baku.¹³⁷ A significant terrorist attack was reportedly prevented in 2007, when, according to the authorities, Salafists were planning to bomb several foreign embassies and major oil companies,¹³⁸ which, as we have seen above, are sensitive targets for Shia terror as well.

¹²⁹ Baran and Cornell, 2010: 204.

¹³⁰ Mirzayev, 2013: 12.

¹³¹ Fuller, 2008.

¹³² Souleimanov and Ehrmann: 2013.

¹³³ Hahn, 2012: 16.

¹³⁴ Souleimanov, 2012.

¹³⁵ The American Foreign Policy Council’s World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 4. Zelin, 2014. Markedonov: 2008.

¹³⁶ The American Foreign Policy Council’s World Almanac of Islamism, 2013: 3. Valiyev, 2006, although the author makes it clear that in some cases it is difficult to assess the validity of such claims.

¹³⁷ Cornell, 2006: 13.

¹³⁸ Wilhelsem, 2009: 736.

Another major problem caused by a particularly extremist branch of radical Sunnis, which nowadays affects not only Azerbaijan but arguably the world, is constituted by foreign fighters joining the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).

In Azerbaijan, hotbeds of foreign fighters are again to be found in the north, especially among the Lezgi community, with the most important centre of recruitment reported to be located in the city of Sumqait. This is a town with a tradition of armed radicalism. It is there that in 2007 police broke up the Abu Jafar group, linked to Al Qaeda;¹³⁹ Sumqait also hosted a branch of the Forest Brothers, the other being found near Quba and Qusar, as seen above. As far as foreign fighters are concerned, those *jamaat* were meant to provide support to mujahedeen in Afghanistan and Chechnya.¹⁴⁰ Other incidents have occurred in the same area, such as the killing of police officers in Balakan and Zakatala and the discovery of illegal weapons in Qusar. The leader of the jihadi cells routed in 2012, Vuqar Padarov, is an example of a foreign fighter having participated in *jihad* abroad (North Caucasus, in this case), and returned to Azerbaijan with the intention of taking up arms against his homeland.

What is perhaps surprising to note, in a Shia majority country where Shia extremists have direct links with Iran, is that when we talk about Azerbaijani foreign fighters we mean exclusively Sunnis combating Syrian president Bashar Al Assad: during the past year, there has been no report of Shias fighting with pro-government forces. According to reports dating back to Spring 2014, there are 200–250 Azerbaijanis fighting in Syria. Currently, the majority of them appear to have joined ISIS, although some are still with Jabat al-Nusra.¹⁴¹

Once again, the controversy over the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan has repercussions for Islamic radicalism: several jihadists involved with ISIS seem to belong to the group Karabakh Partisans, whose members fought in Chechnya and then wished to start a *jihad* against Armenia.¹⁴² There are also concerns that the IDPs from Karabakh are a particularly vulnerable target for the call to wage war abroad, in spite of being Shia in the majority. Although some such cases have been reported, there does not seem to be a specific correlation between IDPs and radicalisation.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Zelin, 2014.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Zelin, 2015.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 5

THE STATE'S

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RESPONSE



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The State has adopted different tools to tackle the threat of radicalisation. These include legal instruments aimed at keeping religion out of politics and at monitoring religious activities in the country. Such control is mostly implemented by the Caucasus Muslim Board and the State Committee for the Work with Religious Organisations, which ensures that religious organisations' aims and activities are in compliance with the law. A similar control, carried out by the ministries of Justice and Finance, has been extended to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) whose nature is not overtly religious, but which could advance a radical discourse under the cover of humanitarian and welfare activities.

At a further level, the Ministry of National Security and the intelligence services are active in monitoring radical clerics who sometimes use mosques, places of prayer and religious organisations to radicalise and even recruit for internal and foreign *jihād*. A new law criminalising foreign fighters has been adopted, along with the existing instruments against terrorism, implemented both at the national level and in partnership with foreign countries and supranational organisations. Besides surveillance and repression, the State has also promoted a policy aimed at increasing welfare and education, to avoid having poverty, under-development and lack of education create a breeding ground for radicalism.

Existing legislation

The Azerbaijani Constitution is based on the principle of secularism. It provides a legal framework that guarantees freedom of religion and belief, while ensuring that believers and religious figures do not undermine the secular nature of the State. First, the principle of secularism is *expressis verbis* enshrined in Article 7, which defines the Azerbaijani state as a 'democratic, legal, secular, unitary republic'.¹⁴⁴

Article 25 guarantees equal rights to all citizens, irrespective of, *inter alia*, religious belief, while actual freedom of religion, and the right to profess it, is provided at Article 48, along with the fundamental inclusion of freedom of atheism.

However, some legitimate limitations surround the right to express religious belief. The above-mentioned Article 48 grants the right to carry out religious rituals, provided these are not in violation of public order and public morals. Similarly, 'No one shall be forced to express (to demonstrate) his or her religious faith and belief, to execute religious rituals and participate in religious ceremonies,' (Art. 48, par. V) and generally, as a guarantee both for the state and for the rights of others, 'religious beliefs and convictions do not excuse infringements of the law' (Art. 48, par. IV). In terms of freedom of expression, Article 47 prohibits 'propaganda provoking racial, national, religious and social discord and animosity', and in the same spirit, Article 18 prohibits 'spreading and propaganda of religions humiliating people's dignity and contradicting the principles of humanism'.

As to the relations between religion and state, the same Article 18 clarifies that the two are reciprocally separated, that all religions are equal before the law, and that the State educational system is secular. Under the same rationale, that of guaranteeing the actual separation between the State and religion in the name of secularism, Article 85 states that 'religious men' cannot be elected deputies of the Milli Majlis (Parliament) of the Azerbaijan Republic, and, in parallel, Article 89 stipulates that a member of the Milli Majlis may lose his/her mandate upon taking on a position in a religious organisation.

At an inferior legal level, the values of the Constitution find concrete implementation in the 1992 Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief—as subsequently amended—some of whose provisions seem to trace exactly the constitutional norms. In the first place this law, in conformity with the Constitution, establishes the principle of freedom of religion. It also aims to prevent the latter from being used as a Trojan horse capable of subverting the secular nature of the State. For instance, Article 1 of the law establishes that 'It is prohibited to propagandise religions with the appliance of religious violence or sowing discord among the people with the aim of changing their religious way of life or forcing to confessing religion'.¹⁴⁵

Article 5 regulates religious associations and their role in the public sphere, once again inspired by the secular principle of reciprocal independence between religion and state:



The Azerbaijani secularist model guarantees freedom of all faiths

¹⁴⁴ Official English translation http://azerbaijan.az/portal/General/Constitution/doc/constitution_e.pdf.

¹⁴⁵ The translation of the law is provided in the report on religion of the Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

'In the Azerbaijan Republic, religion and religious associations shall be separated from the State. The State shall not instruct religious associations to fulfil any State's affair and doesn't interfere with their activities. All religions and religious associations shall be equal in relation to the law. Establishing any superiority or limitations for one religion in comparison to another shall not be allowed.' Article 5 also establishes that 'religious associations shall not partake in the activity of political parties and help them financially.' At the same time, in conformity with constitutional provisions, political parties cannot engage in religious activities, nor can religious leaders simultaneously serve as public officers.

As per Article 6, 'the system of State education is separated from religion', although teaching of religion may be included in educational programmes of State institutions, and in any case it can be provided by religious associations, in accordance with the law.

To tackle one of the main factors of exogenous radicalisation, described above, an amendment to the Law was passed in 1996, banning the activities of 'foreigners and persons without citizenship' from conducting 'religious propaganda'.¹⁴⁶ Foreign missionaries are this way prevented from operating in the country.¹⁴⁷ This affects not only Muslim groups but also Christian ones, notably Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRO)

Apart from the legislative provisions outlined above, two bodies are entrusted with control of mosques, clerics and religious organisations.

The first is the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), a religious institution in existence since 1944 and entrusted with representation of Muslims, both Shia and Sunni, in Azerbaijan and Georgia. All clerics and mosques in the country are under direct control of the Caucasus Muslim Board,¹⁴⁸ to the extent that in a meeting with representatives of the CMB and the Baku Islamic University, they confirmed to us that there are currently no mosques or imams outside the jurisdiction of the CMB.

The CMB's main function is religious-administrative control over Muslim religious entities in Azerbaijan. This was codified by a specific amendment to the 1992 law on Freedom of Religion, stating that the CMB is the structure to which Muslim religious communities in Azerbaijan are subordinate.¹⁴⁹ In particular, Article 8 of the Law decrees that 'In the Azerbaijan Republic, Islamic religious communities are subordinated by [sic] the Caucasian

Muslims Board, in terms of organisational matters, whereas non-Islamic religious associations have the right to be subordinated and to change their respective subordination to religious centres (organisations) operational in the Azerbaijan Republic and outside it.'¹⁵⁰

Another fundamental duty falling within the CMB mandate is to provide religious education and training of imams at the Baku Islamic University. This religious institution has been in existence, with different names, since 1989.¹⁵¹ It is placed under the Caucasus Muslim Board and registered with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations.¹⁵² It was created with the aim of forming state-trained imams to replace the self-declared ones and offers the same curricula for Sunnis and Shias.¹⁵³ It is also intended to avoid mullahs being educated abroad.¹⁵⁴ Madrasas are also active, still managed by the CMB, so the official religious education system rests entirely under the responsibility of the Caucasus Muslim Board.

Other tasks of the CMB include managing the pilgrimage to the holy sites of Islam, as well as diplomatic activities in foreign countries.¹⁵⁵ As to the latter, it has been even averred that the CMB has acted at times 'as a second Ministry of Foreign Affairs'.¹⁵⁶ In relation to this, during our meeting with representatives of the CMB in Baku, they indicated that the CMB is planning to open four representations in key states, such as Iran, Russia, Georgia and Turkey.

While the CMB is a religious institution not directly dependent on the State, the government also created its own body to monitor religious activities in the country. This was a Department of Religious Affairs functioning at the Cabinet of Ministers of the Azerbaijani Republic,¹⁵⁷ replaced in 2001 by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations.

The presidential decree establishing the body states that its main duty is to 'create relevant conditions for [. . .] ensuring the freedom of religious faith, to ensure control over the abundance to the other legislation acts on the freedom of religious faith, and to regulate more seriously the relations between the State and religious institutions.'¹⁵⁸

In more concrete terms, this requires in the first place that religious organisations apply to the SCWRO for registration, which is compulsory in order for them to operate.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁰ Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

¹⁵¹ Sattarov, 2009: 170.

¹⁵² Religious Education Institutions. Available at http://azerbaijans.com/content_506_en.html (last accessed April 28, 2015).

¹⁵³ Motika, 2001: 6.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Sattarov, 2009: 168.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Sattarov, 2009: 160.

¹⁵⁸ Bedford, 2009:142.

¹⁵⁹ Bedford, 2009: 143.

¹⁴⁶ Bedford, 2009: 142. Sattarov, 2009: 131.

¹⁴⁷ Bedford, 2009: 172.

¹⁴⁸ Sometimes indicated as 'Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Caucasus' or 'Administration of the Caucasus Muslims'.

¹⁴⁹ Sattarov, 2009: 131.

As clarified by the government, the lack of registration does not affect freedom of religion and worship per se.¹⁶⁰ However, without registration, religious organisations are not recognised as legal entities, which means, *inter alia*, that they cannot qualify to receive state subsidies and have no right to engage in economic activities or to hold property or a bank account.¹⁶¹ It should be noted that this is particularly relevant in order to contrast money laundering and 'religious donations' used to finance terrorism and other illicit activities.

As to the requisites for registration, a religious organisation is entitled to apply for registration if it has a minimum of 50 members. Registration can be denied under the law, or can be subsequently revoked, if information provided is false, if the association is not in effect a religious one, or, most importantly, 'if its actions, goals, or essence contradict the Constitution and other laws'.¹⁶² This is specifically the case of organisations bearing a radical ideology in contrast with the constitutional and legal limits seen above.

While the law expressly prohibits the government from interfering in the religious activities of any individual or group, there are exceptions. The law regulates cases in which religious organisations may be dissolved, including acting contrary to the objectives upon which the organisation was established; causing racial, national, religious, or social animosity; and propagating a faith that degrades human dignity or contradicts the principles of humanism. Other grounds for dissolution include hindering secular education and inciting members of a religious organisation and other individuals to cede their property to the organisation.¹⁶³

Organisations which are denied registration are entitled to file an appeal in court.¹⁶⁴

Among other tasks of the SCWRO, there is supervision of religious literature, especially imported from outside, as this was an effective tool of radicalisation in the 1990s, as seen above. Importation of certain material can therefore be prohibited, as can its distribution. Sale of religious materials, in whatever form, requires a 'verification mark' by the government.¹⁶⁵

Regarding the division of duties between the CMB and the SCWRO, the former is responsible for religious control of mosques and imams, while the latter ensures that religious organisations respect the law of the land. The chairman of the SCRWO stresses in any case that coordination exists between the two bodies; for instance, imams are appointed by the CMB in accordance with the SCWRO. Those imams are responsible for their communities,

¹⁶⁰ Fautré, 2013.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² U.S. Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2013: 2.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 3.

and have to report radical elements to the sheikh, who informs the SCRWO and other competent state authorities.

In addition to this 'self-control' exerted by religious authorities themselves, surveillance of clerics inside the mosques is undertaken by the Ministry of National Security.¹⁶⁶ The Ministry monitors mosques and religious organisations, and raids houses where radical and hidden Islamic groups assemble for meetings. For its part, the SCWRO is in constant contact with the intelligence services, and on being alerted, begins investigation of the suspicious organisation. Tens of illegal mosques and organisations have thereby been shut down.

Law regulating non-governmental organisations

As outlined in relation to religious organisations, certain requirements are needed for their registration, and this in turn is necessary to perform most activities. The purpose is that of preventing uncontrolled groups from spreading radical ideologies, promoting attacks against the constitutional order, or even colluding with terrorist organisations.

Although the control exerted by the CMB and the SCWRO concerns only *religious* organisations, similar problems arise with regard to NGOs that may be disguised as non-religious ones but still surreptitiously promote the same radical religious goals, often with financing coming from foreign countries. To address this aspect, the law regulating NGOs was amended in 2014. New provisions require that NGOs discuss the merits of their projects with the Ministry of Justice and submit a budgetary plan for the financial aspects to the Ministry of Finance.

Stricter control is also exerted on foreign organisations sending money into the Azerbaijani territory. According to the law, only foreign organisations which have registered their affiliates and representative offices and accrued a right to act as a donor in the Republic of Azerbaijan will be entitled to award grants. As a result, three categories of donors will be entitled to make donations: (i) Azerbaijani citizens, (ii) legal entities officially registered in the Republic of Azerbaijan and (iii) foreign legal entities that have entered into specific agreements with the Ministry of Justice. Furthermore, the activities

¹⁶⁶ Cornell, 2006: 66.



Synagogue in Baku -
religious minorities are
protected

performed by NGOs at the expense of foreign financial resources are to be submitted to the Ministry of Justice. Such amendments to the law on NGOs are intended to enhance transparency, to avoid money laundering and to combat financing of illegal activities.

Counter-terrorism and foreign fighters

Legislation in Azerbaijan establishes that it is illegal to join an insurgency abroad. Several of the organisations met in Baku, including the Centre of Strategic Studies (SAM), SCWRO and an academic from ADA University, indicated that individuals known for or suspected of being “foreign fighters” are closely monitored by the intelligence agency and may be arrested, either preventively or upon their return to Azerbaijan. No other measures are currently being undertaken either in terms of counter-radicalisation programmes or to prevent individuals from leaving the country to fight abroad.

Azerbaijan is actively cooperating with the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United States, NATO and other international bodies in operations aimed at countering terrorism, money laundering and trafficking of people and materiel. The country is also party to the Council of Europe’s Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism. In line with its international commitments, legislation on anti-money laundering and terrorism financing was adopted in 2009, making control over suspicious operations stricter.

As reported in the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Terrorism (CODEXTER) in 2007 and 2014,¹⁶⁷ the general legal framework of Azerbaijani action against terrorism is substantially provided by Presidential Decree No. 920 of 2002, approving the ‘Plan of action for the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 1368 of 12 September 2001, 1373 of 28 September 2001, and 1377 of 12 November 2001’, that is, measures against international terrorism, including blacklisting of terrorist organisations and individuals, freezing of assets, travel bans and other instruments; by Law No. 687-IQ ‘On the Fight against Terrorism’ of 18 June 1999; and by Law No.712-IIQ ‘On National Security’ of 29 June 2004. Also, the penal code has been amended to define better and more severely punish certain terrorist activities.¹⁶⁸ Terrorism is defined in the 1999 law as ‘committing of explosions, fires and other actions threatening the lives of people, damaging their health, causing significant property damage or occurrence of other hazardous consequences to the public, with the purpose of destruction of public security, spread of panic among [the] population or influencing the decisions of state authorities or international entities, as well

as threat of committing of such actions for the same purposes’.¹⁶⁹ In addition to specific acts of terror, activities related to terrorism which are illegal under the Azerbaijani criminal code include financing of terrorism, public appeals to terrorism, conducting exercises with a terrorist purpose, disinformation about terrorism, hijacking, hostage-taking, maritime piracy, creation of criminal organisations with terrorist purposes, illegal detention of weapons and radioactive material, sabotage and others.¹⁷⁰

In terms of competences, the ministries of National Security, the Interior, Defence, State Border Service, and Special State Protection Service participate in the fight against terrorism within the framework of their respective jurisdictions. When an anti-terrorism operation occurs, all bodies and officials are placed under a common operations centre that serves as a unified chain of command and whose head is in charge of the operation, having authority over all officials involved therein.¹⁷¹

Other interventions

Programmes to prevent radicalisation cannot be implemented and succeed solely by repressive means. Addressing the deep cultural and societal causes is equally of paramount importance as a preventive approach.

In this context, Azerbaijan has invested in multiple areas in recent years. One of the scholars met in Baku outlined some of the state actions aimed at addressing situations that might facilitate the spread of extremist ideologies. First, although radicalisation is not necessarily a phenomenon due directly to adverse social conditions and poverty, the State has adopted welfare policies with a view to impeding recruitment through social assistance. Indeed, one of the many features of Islamist groups and movements is to root themselves in the social fabric of a country by providing food, jobs and other social necessities. This creates the space for religious indoctrination.

Further, the government has invested heavily in education, opening new universities, campuses and secondary schools. It has also established a scholarship programme whose funding has allowed some 5000 young Azerbaijanis to study in top partner universities around the world, while still more investments have been made in educational infrastructure and technology.

Education takes place not only in school but also through specific educational projects implemented by governmental offices in vulnerable areas, to raise awareness on sensitive topics. For instance, in some areas of the south of the country the Ministry of Youth, Sport

¹⁶⁷ Council of Europe: http://www.coe.int/t/dlapil/codexter/Source/country_profiles/legislation/CT%20Legislation%20-%20Azerbaijan%20struggle%20against%20terrorism.pdf and http://www.coe.int/t/dlapil/codexter/Country%20Profiles/Profiles-2014-Azerbaijan_EN.pdf

¹⁶⁸ Council of Europe - Committee of Experts on Terrorism, 2014: 2 foll

¹⁶⁹ Council of Europe - Committee of Experts on Terrorism, 2007: 1

¹⁷⁰ Council of Europe - Committee of Experts on Terrorism 2014: 4

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*: 9.

and Tourism has organised seminars on women's rights, drug awareness and religion. As part of a major campaign against early marriages and forced marriages, especially in rural areas, the government has organised a series of awareness-raising seminars in coordination with local NGOs, schools and even local clerics.


The State is countering the radical narrative with arguments based on an enlightened and modern interpretation of religion.

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



**CONCLUSION
& POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS**

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



The goal set out for this research project was to achieve a better understanding of the terrorism threat level in Azerbaijan and provide a preliminary assessment of the phenomenon of radicalisation in the country, its causes, the main players and the response of the State.

The following are the key elements that emerged from the analysis of existing literature and studies as well as from interviews and meetings held in Baku by the authors of this report.

- ▼ The phenomenon of Islamic radicalism is present in the country and has been growing steadily since Azerbaijan became independent from the Soviet Union.
- ▼ According to different sources, including the Centre for Strategic Studies in Baku, during the past few years there have been signs indicating a weakening of the phenomenon.
- ▼ The revision of the law on religious freedom is credited as one of the measures that have contributed to this process. Other effective measures include the monitoring of mosques that facilitate the detection of early signs of radicalisation. According to the Caucasus Muslim Board, this is one of the reasons why the level of radicalisation in Azerbaijan is lower than in Europe.
- ▼ There appears to be consensus among scholars as well as among the individuals met in Baku during our research visit, about the positive impact of the multicultural model of Azerbaijan's secular system. This is an approach that fosters peaceful cohabitation between different communities and a moderate, tolerant interpretation of religion. This is particularly relevant for typically vulnerable communities such as Jews.
- ▼ This system, based on secular state institutions, is a rare example in a Muslim-majority country. Maintaining the secular nature and values of the country is a priority for the Azerbaijani government. Although the level of religious

extremism in the country is considered as relatively low, there is awareness that this situation might change, especially given the current situation of instability in the Islamic world and, more generally, the rise of radical Islamist ideology fuelled by some countries and external groups.

- ▼ Counter-radicalisation policies and prevention measures of Azerbaijan have been effective in terms of preventing the rise of radicalisation and related security threats. There are opportunities for mutual exchange of best practices between the West and Azerbaijan.
- ▼ Azerbaijan has emerged relatively recently from the Soviet system and sits in a politically sensitive neighbourhood. Regional powers have in the past cooperated with and supported local groups often seeking to destabilise the country in order to promote their own agendas. In such an environment, a delicate balancing act continues to take place between the democratic strengthening of its state institutions and the need for the country to ensure security.
- ▼ Sectarian division in Azerbaijan, once uncommon due in part to the fact that the majority doesn't seek to differentiate theologically between the Sunni and Shia denominations of Islam, has become obvious of late. Support for radical Shia ideologies as well as for the creation of an Islamic republic similar to Iran has become increasingly popular among certain groups in Azerbaijan. However, the presence of numbers of Azerbaijani foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq indicates the emergence of radical Sunni extremism in the country. Although the State has introduced new preventive measures to tackle these issues, the roots of these challenges need to be addressed through a comprehensive, international containment strategy. From this point of view, the West is the only natural ally for Azerbaijan.
- ▼ Democracy and human rights are regularly used by radical groups with the aim of furthering their own agendas. In this sense, it is important to differentiate between these groups and the legitimate concerns of genuine human rights defenders.
- ▼ The findings indicate Western support is important for the sustainability of the country. Religion and radical Islamist ideologies are regularly used by many regional powers against Azerbaijan, in line with promoting their own strategic imperatives in the region.

For European and US policymakers

- ▼ Develop and support joint governmental programmes to share best practices on countering religious radicalisation in the US, EU and Azerbaijan.
- ▼ Support the increasingly active role of Azerbaijan within international organisations, such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), providing an opportunity for more comprehensive dialogue between the West and the Islamic world.
- ▼ Encourage Azerbaijan to take a more active role as a mediator in sectarian conflicts in the Middle East and beyond.
- ▼ Co-operate with Azerbaijan to tackle the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq through an international strategy.
- ▼ Support Azerbaijan's efforts in the fight against international terrorism.
- ▼ Support civil initiatives, programmes and civil society projects on the development of secularism in the Muslim world in cooperation with Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani experts.
- ▼ Support establishment of partnerships between Azerbaijani and secular Muslim experts in order to reach out to different Muslim groups in the West.
- ▼ Develop joint academic programmes on issues such as Islam and secularism, radicalisation and political Islam and support the establishment of networks among Azerbaijani and Western experts.

For Azerbaijan

- ▼ Maintain vigilance in monitoring and addressing signs of radicalisation and in particular social media acknowledged by experts as the primary forum for recruiting foreign fighters.
- ▼ Support closer dialogue and cooperation between Azerbaijani and Western experts and scholars on the values of the secular model as well as on measures being implemented to address radicalisation. This could include best practice and exchange programme visits.
- ▼ Consider playing a more active role in encouraging and facilitating closer dialogue and cooperation between the Western and Islamic worlds.

- ▼ Consider an international role in promoting the principle of secularism, which guarantees religious freedom for all, including to Muslims in the Western countries.
- ▼ Establish a comprehensive list of terrorist organisations and individuals, in line with international standards.
- ▼ Continue to support, in coordination with civil society organisations, awareness campaigns, similar to the ones against early and forced marriages, aimed at combating less progressive interpretations of Islam and out-dated cultural practices. This could be accompanied by education programmes aimed at increasing awareness on Western values, such as secularism and gender equality.
- ▼ Support those NGOs and projects defending secularism, creating synergies between state and non-state actors in the promotion of common values.

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