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Radical Islam or Government Paranoia in Azerbaijan?

By Arzu Geybulla (Istanbul)

Abstract

This article explores the presence of religious groups in Azerbaijan, their varying influence, and the role Azerbaijani state authorities play in their growth and popularity. The Azerbaijani government's uneasiness in the face of growing evidence of Islamic religiosity is rooted in perceived contradictions with state campaigns to portray Azerbaijan as modern, secular state. However, the country's stagnating economy, inflation, unemployment and inequality tell a different story. Following years of political repression, religion is one of the few generally accepted avenues for expressing divergent views and, in some cases, forms of dissent—and even radicalization. For this reason, the Azerbaijani government has periodically engaged in selective Islamic religious suppression to prevent the politicization of increasing Islamic sentiments. However, it is largely the economic, political, and social grievances that drive popular dissent in Azerbaijan, as opposed to major trends in radicalization itself.

Introduction

While the Azerbaijani government periodically boasts of a secular, modernizing agenda, it is also in the midst of an on-going crackdown against its political opposition, which has generated international coverage and condemnation. Its image tarnished, Azerbaijani authorities have sought to use counterterrorism justifications—fighting so-called religious radicals—in an effort to make the case for their own indispensability to Western governments.

While the Azerbaijani government suppresses Muslim religious activists under the guise of counter-extremism, Azerbaijani authorities are also building up their own Islamic bona fides. In May 2017, Baku will host the 4th Islamic Solidarity Games. Two years ago, President Ilham Aliyev paid a visit to the *Kaaba*, a sacred site at the center of Islam's most revered mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. When it comes to explaining these contrasts, Aliyev describes Azerbaijan as “unique,” saying that “we are members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Council of Europe. In 2015 we hosted the first European Games and this year we are hosting the 4th Islamic Solidarity Games.”¹

Although the Azerbaijani government has sought to balance religious suppression at home with outward demonstrations of Islamic piety, this approach is only incubating Azerbaijan's security dilemma. The more pro-democracy voices are silenced and independent civil society organisations are immobilised, the easier it becomes for radical groups to strengthen their influence.

The Tolerance Myth

It was not until after Azerbaijan gained its independence from the Soviet Union that its citizens rediscov-

ered Islam in large numbers. In an interview with *Open Democracy*, Azerbaijani political analyst Eldar Mamedov, said that it was Islam that filled the void after nationalism was discredited in the early 1990s, following the democratically elected Popular Front government's failure to rule effectively. But this reconnection with Islamic roots “did not carry connotations of extremism,” said Mamedov. Rather, it was “a purified form of Islam, free from local customs and ‘superstitions.’” The Popular Front and its leader, first independent President Abulfaz Elchibey supported a Turkish-style, and pan-Turkic, secular nationalist ideology, which failed to fill the ideological void left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union.²

Religious influences from neighboring countries may have begun to fill that void. Today, Islam in southern Azerbaijan feels closer to the brand of Shia Islam in Iran. By contrast, Salafi Islam is more popular in the north, especially among the Sunni Lezgi minority as well as among some residents in Baku, Sumqayit, and their outlying regions. In the most commonly cited statistics, a large majority of Azerbaijanis—some 85 percent—identify as Shi'a, with most of the remainder identifying as Sunni Muslim. However, Azerbaijani religion scholar Altay Goyushov puts the breakdown closer to 35 percent Sunni and 65 percent Shi'a. A Turkish version of Sunni Islam, backed by the US-based Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gulen, was increasingly prevalent across the country through mosques and a network of schools, but these relations were severed in 2013 after the alliance between the ruling Justice and Development Party and the Gulen network turned acrimonious. At the same time, there are a number of nominal Muslim adherents in Azerbaijan who do not identify with any major denomination, or may even identify as Shia

1 <<https://www.azadliq.org/a/ilham-eliyev-munhen/28319534.html>>

2 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/arzu-geybulla/azerbaijan-ruling-in-bad-faith>>

out of a sense of national identity, and may not be particularly observant.

The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), a state-run religious body and a holdover from the officially atheist Soviet period, is the nominal spiritual authority. However, the CMB and its head, Allahshukur Pashazade, are widely perceived as extensions of the regime. Outside of the CMB, religious independence is sharply curtailed. According to a 2016 report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Azerbaijan's respect for religious freedoms deteriorated along with respect for democratic norms, stemming in part from enforcement of a highly restrictive 2009 religious law regulating religious activities, materials, and codifying intrusive state involvement,³ among other things. The report also notes extensive state interference with religious activities, harassment of members of religious groups, and an increase in arrests, detentions and, other forms of sanctions against religious activists.⁴ In March 2013 the government of Azerbaijan introduced a series of legislative amendments concerning religious literature, making it a criminal offence to import, publish, or distribute any kind of religious material, audio, or video except those approved by the Caucasus Muslim Board.

The Azerbaijani government's discomfort with independent religious activity was put on display during the so-called "Nardaran case" in 2015, where 18 members of the Shia-affiliated Muslim Unity Movement were arrested and charged with terrorism, illegal possession of arms, conspiracy, and inciting religious hatred. All were sentenced to lengthy jail sentences, from ten to twenty years in jail. In their statements at the court, they reported ill treatment and torture, but all allegations were ignored by the authorities. The men were arrested during a police raid at the house of Movement leader Taleh Bagirzade in the town of Nardaran, a bastion of conservative Shia Islam located on the outskirts of Baku. Bagirzade had been arrested before; in 2011, Bagirzade was arrested for protesting a headscarf ban in

schools, and released in November 2012. In 2013 Bagirzade was arrested again following a sermon delivered in Nardaran, when he criticised authorities for severe economic inequality and compared President Ilham Aliyev to Saddam Hussein.

Bagirzade was again released in 2015, but said he had no intention of backing down from his criticism of the authorities. "I am just in a bigger prison," Bagirzade said in one interview following his release, and continued to criticize the government in his sermons before he was arrested again. In the aftermath of his arrest, pro-government media were quick to describe Bagirzade and his followers as religious extremists. However, other Azerbaijani dissidents, including journalist Khadija Ismayilova, disagreed and described his arrest as unrelated to radical Islam, but rather as a result of his criticisms of the government.

While Bagirzade has attracted support from some Azerbaijani liberals, he himself is not a liberal democrat. Bagirzade has never openly opposed the Iranian system, and has publicly noted that Azerbaijan had at times been ruled by Sharia law before the 19th century. According to regional analyst Eldar Mamedov, "Bagirzade and his associates represent activist, politicized Shi'a Islamism in the mold of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

However, Bagirzade has also found some popularity through his outspokenness, demonstrating that there is an audience for religious political activism, even if outright support for Sharia law itself is low. Most likely this is why Bagirzade and his movement have been the targets of state attention so frequently.

A Real Threat Or an Attempt to Get Western Support?

At the same time, the state's crackdowns against religious groups in general, and the Muslim Unity Movement in particular, appear to maintain a narrative of the modernizing, secular Azerbaijani government combating Islamist extremism. Following the 2015 raid in Nardaran, Azerbaijani officials released a statement claiming the intent of the operation was "to neutralize an armed criminal group that acted under the cover of religion and was seeking to destabilize the social-political situation and organize mass unrest and acts of terrorism." If the statement is any indication, Bagirzade and his followers represented a latent threat to regime stability.

According to Mamedov, given his religious education and ongoing ties in Iran, Bagirzade's arrest could also be an attempt to demonstrate the persistence of an Iranian threat as a means of cultivating Western sympathies. More broadly, public crackdowns against anti-government Islamists could also be used to discre-

3 The law limits religious freedoms and justifies fines, police raids, detentions and imprisonment. Other provisions include compulsory state registration with complex and intrusive requirements; no appeal for registration denials; religious activities limited to a community's registered address; extensive state controls on the content, production, import, export, and dissemination of religious materials; and required state approved religious education to preach and teach religion, or lead ceremonies. Individuals in violation of this law are subject to fines which since 2010 have increased 16-fold. <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_Tier2_Azerbaijan.pdf>

4 <http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CCPR/C/AZE/CO/4%20&Lang=En>

dit the secular opposition by seeking to associate them with religious extremists. Days after Bagirzade and his associates were convicted, pro-regime outlet Haqqin.az published a story claiming that members of the independent political movement ReAL (Republican Alternative) were backed by the Iranian government, having agreed to act as intermediaries between the Embassy of Iran in Baku and representatives of other opposition groups in Azerbaijan.⁵ The prosecutor office was quick to launch an investigation, calling in members of the movement for questioning, who dismissed the claims as fabricated.

In addition, just twelve days after Bagirzade's arrest, Fuad Gahramanli, the deputy chairman of the opposition Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (AHCP), was arrested after openly criticizing the government in reaction to Bagirzade's arrest on Facebook. Facing three violations of the criminal code including calls for mass unrest and violence, Gahramanli was sentenced to 11 years in prison in January 2017.

Hidden Agenda

While the crackdown against the Muslim Unity Movement and other political activists in Azerbaijan is a case for concern, it is possible that the authorities are diverting attention from a genuine problem with radicalization and growth in Azerbaijan's Salafi community, which has been a source of hundreds of fighters joining the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. According to Mamedov, the hundreds of Azerbaijanis fighting in Syria or Iraq were mostly first radicalized in Azerbaijan before leaving to join the war in Syria. Yet, there is little public information available on recruitment networks that he says "have obviously gained a foothold in the country".

According to a recent paper on Islamic State networks of jihadism in Azerbaijan, more than 200 Azerbaijanis have been killed in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and over 800 militants "have fought or are currently fighting there". However, despite these large numbers, militant Salafism has yet to emerge domestically as a widespread security threat. While this is seen in some quarters as evidence of successful government counterterrorism operations, it is more likely that this is a result of Azerbaijani state policies that encouraged out-migration of Salafi militants and noncombatants to Syria, which mirrored a policy utilized by the Russian Federation as a means of sapping its own North Caucasus insurgency.

While such an approach was likely effective in Azerbaijan to an extent, as it certainly was in the Russian North Caucasus, it is also a strategy of inherently diminishing returns. Uninterrupted militant recruitment networks operating domestically are necessary to facilitate foreign fighter flow, but these networks could have a broader radicalizing effect on the communities where they operate; some drawn to extremist messaging may choose to fight abroad, but many more may instead opt to remain in the country. In addition, the rapid decline of the Islamic State's military position in Syria and Iraq is also likely to both inhibit Azerbaijani foreign fighter flow and compel a return of fighters to Azerbaijan en masse. More broadly speaking, the repressive state apparatus in Azerbaijan may be seeking to eliminate perceived threats to its stability, but political crackdowns only create opportunities for forces that operate outside of typical channels of political expression, including for Islamists.

About the Author

Arzu Geybulla is an Azerbaijani columnist and journalist focusing on human rights and press freedom in Azerbaijan. Geybulla has written for Al Jazeera, Open Democracy, Eurasianet, Foreign Policy, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Meydan TV, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, and Global Voices. She was the recipient of the 2014 Vaclav Havel Journalism Fellowship with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and was featured on the BBC's 100 Women Changemakers in 2014. In 2016, she was Central Asia Azerbaijan Program Fellow at George Washington University. Geybulla currently lives in Istanbul.

5 <<http://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-real-movement-iran-meeting/28270497.html>>

CHRONICLE

7 February – 2 April 2017

7 February 2017	The Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for relations with Russia Zurab Abashidze meets with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin in Prague to discuss trade and economic relations as part of an informal bilateral dialogue launched in 2012
10 February 2017	Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze meets with the new US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during an official visit in Washington to build contacts with the new administration and discuss the security environment in the Caucasus region
13 February 2017	Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov during a visit to Baku and underlines the good strategic relations between the two countries as a solid basis for future cooperation
13 February 2017	The Georgian National Security Council's Secretariat announces the launch of discussions on a "unified" National Security Strategy
16 February 2017	NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg says that NATO will continue to work together with Georgia to help it reach the goal of NATO membership following a NATO–Georgia Commission meeting
19 February 2017	Thousands of protesters rally in support of the Georgian TV channel Rustavi 2 demanding justice and fairness in an ongoing dispute over the ownership of the channel
20 February 2017	The Georgian Foreign Ministry says that it does not recognize a constitutional referendum held in the Nagorno Karabakh region
23 February 2017	Armenian Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan meets with Georgian officials during a visit to Tbilisi to discuss bilateral cooperation and emphasizes the good neighbourly relations between the two countries
23 February 2017	The United National Movement (UNM) opposition party in Georgia calls for the creation of a parliamentary commission of inquiry on the transit agreement with Russian company Gazprom
27 February 2017	EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos visits Tbilisi to congratulate the Georgian leadership on the EU Council's final decision on visa liberalization for Georgian citizens
27 February 2017	The European Union and Armenia agree on a new deal to strengthen political relations during a visit by Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian to Brussels
1 March 2017	Armenian Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan denies reports of discussions with Georgian officials about the possible reopening of the railway link between Russia and Georgia via Abkhazia
5 March 2017	The application by former South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity to take part in the presidential elections scheduled for April is rejected by the South Ossetian Central Election Commission.
8 March 2017	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian meets with French President Francois Hollande in Paris to sign agreements on tourism, the creation of a French University in Armenia and research cooperation
9 March 2017	The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) announces Azerbaijan's suspension from the organization and states that Azerbaijan "lacks an enabling environment for civil society"
10 March 2017	The Azerbaijani Parliament approves new legislation tightening Internet regulations by prohibiting material promoting violence, religious extremism and terrorism
12 March 2017	Parliamentary elections are held in Abkhazia with 12 candidates winning a seat in the first round of voting
16 March 2017	In support of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, the United States do not recognize parliamentary elections held in Abkhazia
16 March 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili joins the fifth Baku Global Forum hosted by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev
17 March 2017	Several hundred people protest the death of an activist as a result of a hunger strike in Yerevan
21 March 2017	Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov in Moscow to discuss security and defense capacity building in the breakaway region
21 March 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili visit the town of Marneuli in the Georgian region of Kvemo Kartli to join the festivities on the occasion of Nowruz, which is celebrated by Muslims in Georgia and is an official holiday since 2010

22 March 2017	The Georgian Parliament overturns a presidential veto on a new surveillance bill which foresees the creation of a special agency to conduct surveillance operations
23 March 2017	Georgia's National Security Council meets to discuss Georgia–NATO relations, the security environment in the Black Sea region and the new initiative for a “unified” National Security Strategy
27 March 2017	Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili holds talks with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Groysman on the sidelines of the GUAM summit in Kyiv to discuss trade and economic cooperation in energy, infrastructure and agriculture
28 March 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili state that residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia can benefit from visa-free travel to the European Union
28 March 2017	At the request of Ukraine, the United Nations Security Council holds a meeting behind closed doors on the situation in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
30 March 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili makes a first symbolic visa-free trip to Lithuania accompanied by ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetian citizens
31 March 2017	Russia and the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia sign a new defense agreement to formally merge South Ossetia's military with the Russian armed forces during a ceremony attended by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu
2 April 2017	According to official results, the ruling Republican Party of Armenia wins the parliamentary elections in Armenia with about 50 percent of the vote

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