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*A strip of land situated between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, the post-Soviet Caucasus embarked on a painful identity quest at the turn of the third millennium. This – still ongoing – quest involves several daunting choices: between Moscow, Washington and Brussels, between oil and democratic values, and between feudal realities and revolutionary ideals. Throughout the last decade, the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute has been conducting in-depth research of the conflicting and often subtle trends in the regions' politics. This volume contains a selection of research papers published by the Caucasus Institute since 2001 in Armenian, Russian and English, which best represent the challenges faced by this varied region at this crucial stage of development.*

Edited by Alexander Iskandaryan  
Copy editing by Richard Giragosian and Nina Iskandaryan  
Translations by Aghassi Harutyunyan, Irina Stepanova  
and Nina Iskandaryan  
Cover design by Matit, [www.matit.am](http://www.matit.am)  
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## ISLAM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE BORDERLAND: THE CASE OF AZERBAIJAN<sup>1</sup>

*By Tadeusz Swietochowski<sup>2</sup>*

Throughout most of its history, Azerbaijan shared its destinies with Iran, including the Islamization that began in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century, and the firm implantation of the Twelver Shi'a Islam in the 16<sup>th</sup> century under the Safavid dynasty. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century brought another turning point in the history of Azerbaijan: passing under the rule of a European power. As the result of the Russo-Iranian wars, in 1804-1813 and 1826-1828, the country and its people were permanently divided by the frontier drawn along the Araxes River. The Turkic-speaking Muslims of the Russian-held part of Azerbaijan differed from those remaining in Iran in one essential respect: there was a comparatively larger proportion of Sunnis among them. The Russian estimates of the 1830's showed that the ratio of Shi'a to Sunni Muslims was almost even, with the latter having a small edge.

While the sectarian distribution did not correspond with the administrative divisions, the Sunnis formed a majority in the northernmost and western parts of the country, subject to influences from the mountainous centers of Sunni Sufism especially the Naqshbandi order – Dagestan and Chechnya. The figures for the 1860's show a sudden and drastic decline of the Sunni population, which eventually stabilized at the level of about a third of the inhabitants of the Russian-held Azerbaijan.

The decrease in the proportionate strength of the Sunni element, ethnically to a large extent non-Azeri Turkic, was the result of their emigration to Ottoman Turkey, after the final suppression of the Northern Caucasus region by Russia. Russia, an underdeveloped and impoverished but expansionist colonial empire, resorted extensively to "divide and rule" policies, not only with regard to Christian and Muslim populations of Caucasia, but also toward the Islamic sects. Azerbaijani Shi'ite volunteers (but not Sunnis) were enlisted in Russia's conflicts with Turkey, the war of 1828, the Crimean War of 1853-56, and the war of 1876-78. The Shi'a - Sunni

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1 This paper was published by the CI in Russian as: Swietochowski, Tadeusz. "Islam i natsionalnoe samosoznanie na pogranychnykh territoriyakh: Azerbadzhan." *Religiya i politika na Kavkaze* ("Islam and National Identity In The Borderland: The Case Of Azerbaijan." *Religion and Politics in the Caucasus*). Ed. by Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: Caucasus Media Institute, 2004 (in Russian). – Pp. 8-30.

2 The author is a Professor of the History Department of History at Monmouth University, New Jersey.

relations were the major concern for the Azerbaijani modernizing movement that began to emerge in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The sectarian split reflected also differing political, cultural, and linguistic orientation typical for a borderland. The Shi'a tended to regard themselves as a part of the Iranian world, continuing the use of Persian as the literary language, while the Sunnis, though to a lesser degree gravitated toward Ottoman Turkey...

In the matter of language, the Sunni intellectuals were inclined toward literary Turkification. The rise of the native language press with the Baku newspaper *Akinchi* (1875-78), would soon lead to an intense public controversy sparked by criticism of the rites of the Ashura or the 10th day of the month of Muharram, the Shi'ite tradition of commemorating the martyrdom of the Imam Husain, killed in 680 at Karbala at the hands of other Muslims, the Umayyad khalifat forces<sup>3</sup>. In more than two thousand mosques and holy places of Russian-held Azerbaijan, the day of Ashura was marked with celebrations during which the participants, having worked themselves into a frenzy, inflicted wounds on their bodies by self-flagellation. The angry reactions that followed the expression of criticism came especially from Karabakh, a region renowned for its Ashura celebrations. The ensuing debate on the pages of the *Akinchi*, the first open discussion of an issue of public concern, revealed the extent of the strife between the two sects as much as between the reform-minded intelligentsia and the traditionalists. The deeper backdrop of the debate was spelled out in the newspaper's comment: "there is no unity among us, no cohesion. Half of the Muslims who live in the Caucasus are Shi'ites, half are Sunnis. The Sunnis cannot stop hating the Shi'ites and vice versa. Neither group wants to listen to the other."<sup>4</sup>

An unspoken dimension of the sectarian controversy was the question of the communal identity of the people called at that time Transcaucasian Muslims, or Tatars. The founder of modern Azerbaijani literature, Mirza Fathali Akhundzade, in his philosophical writings called for the need for "Islamic Protestantism" as a cure for divisive intolerance and fanaticism. As an immediate measure, he advocated that his countrymen cease keeping aloof from Russians under whose protection their

3 For a discussion of *Akinchi*, see: Swietochowski, Tadeusz. "Akinchi 1875-1878. The Rise of Azerbaijani Press and Public Debates in the Readers' Correspondence." *Presse und Öffentlichkeit in Nahen Osten*, eds. Herzog, Ch., Motika, R. Pistor-Hatam, A. – Heidelberg: Orientverlag, 1995. – Pp.175-83.

4 For a recent discussion of the subject, see: Smith, Michael. "Pamiat ob utratakh i azerbaidzhanskoe obshchestvo." *Azerbaidzhan i Rossiya: obshchestva i gosudarstva* ("Memory of losses and the Azerbaijani society." *Azerbaijan and Russia: Societies and States*). Ed. Dmitri Furman. – Moscow: Andrey Sakharov Foundation, 2001 (in Russian). – Pp.88-117. On the Muharram rites in Baku, see also: Lassy, Ivar. *The Muharram Mysteries among the Azerbaijani Turks of Caucasia*. – Helsinki: 1916.

lives, dignity, and property are secured. The spirit of fanaticism that prevails among them will disappear forever. There will arise among the Caucasian Muslims a desire for literacy and aspiration for learning which will guide them toward the improving of their morals. Until now it was only their religion that prevented most of them from learning the Russian language the knowledge of which, in the view of the clergy, makes the salvation of the soul unthinkable.<sup>5</sup>

Otherwise, identifying himself with Iran, he extolled the pre-Islamic glories of the Zoroastrian epoch that came to an end with the conquest by the "hungry and naked Arabs". In effect, he initiated the tradition of native secularism, a trend accepted by many modernizing intellectuals, not so much because of their hostility to Islam, but rather as a means of overcoming the sectarian division. Others embraced Jadidism, an educational movement opposing the separation of Islam from public life while calling for its modernization, especially through improved schools.<sup>6</sup>

It was the turbulent political condition that more than anything else was to shape the fortunes of Islam in 20<sup>th</sup> century Azerbaijan, and both the Shi'ites and Sunnis would be equally affected. In the face of common adversities their rivalries and antagonisms would lose not only intensity but, indeed, relevance. In the new political condition created by the weakening of the Russian autocracy with the 1905 upheaval, under liberalized government policies, such sensitive issues as gender inequality symbolized by the veiling of women became the topic of a long lasting press debate spearheaded by the most popular of Azeri magazines, Mollah Nasr al din.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, remarkably, the criticism of the Ashura rites did not grow; in fact the reverse was noticeable. The emerging native revolutionary movement, in its quest for mass appeal reached for the deeply rooted tradition of the Shi'ite funeral rites. Once a main target of the modernizers' condemnation, this tradition now came to serve as a means for the effective political mobilization of the masses, which otherwise were not responsive to conventional propaganda. In 1907, the funeral of Khanalar Sarafaliyev, a native Social-Democrat, turned into a large political demonstration, and among its organizers was a young Bolshevik activist, Joseph Stalin. Quite apart from generating a close link to the masses, the Azeri revolutionaries saw in the use of the traditional Islamic funeral rites the means of asserting the native distinctiveness from the Russian comrades, be it the Mensheviks or the Bolsheviks.<sup>8</sup>

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5 *Akinchi*, no. 2, 1877.

6 Akhundov, Mirza Fathali. *Asarlari*. – Baku: 1958-62, vol. 2. – P. 384.

7 For a recent discussion of jadidism, see: Malashenko, Aleksei. *Islamskoe vozrozhdenie v sovremennoi Rossii (Islamic Revival in Modern Russia)*. – Moscow Carnegie Center, 1998 (in Russian). – Pp.32-33.

8 See: Siegel, Evan. *Debate on Women's Rights: Azerbaijan 1907*, unpublished paper submitted to

From now on, during all of the period of revolutionary *Sturm und Drang* stretching up to 1920, the native Social-Democrat Himmat (Endeavor) group, and then the national-liberal Musavat (Equality) party, made use of the funeral rites of native Muslims, who had fallen in political confrontations, and the setting was inspired by the traditions of Ashura or religious rites with revolutionary politics marked the origins of what would be called a national social-democracy. It came along with the sense of Islam as the distinctive mark of communal awareness at the time when not only the population, but also the intellectual and political elite of Russian-held Azerbaijan still did not have a clear notion of their own nationality.

The controversy between the emerging Azerbaijani nationalism and the traditionalist Islamic identity came to the open under the first independent republic in existence from 1918 to 1920. While Musavat, the largest political force, stood for the secular nation-state, its main antagonist was the pan Islamic Ittihad (Union) party, which called for the rule by traditional Islamic norms, and promoted the ideal of the unity of all Muslims of the Russian empire. In its hostility to the idea of the Azerbaijani nation-state, the Ittihad welcomed the Bolshevik invasion, only to take soon up arms against the new power.

The crucial test for Islam in Azerbaijan came with the Soviet rule. Toward the peoples whose primary identity was still Islamic, the Soviet regime applied anti-religious policies, and in doing so it tried to draw on the legacy of the intelligentsia's native secularism and anti-clericalism. Even though the Soviet policies toward Islam were always tainted by hostility, its degree of intensity varied. In the 1920's period of *korenizatsia* (indigenization), the guiding principle was in effect a social contract with the native modernizing forces, largely the intelligentsia, shaped by the spirit of enlightenment, Jadidism, and secularism. In return for the acceptance of Soviet power, they were given access to government positions as well as the recognition of national identity - full rights for the national language and culture, a notion that tacitly included Islam. Likewise, the Azerbaijani Soviet regime, headed by Nariman Narimanov, often presented itself as the spokesman for national aspirations, hence the term national communism referring to the Azerbaijani ruling party's politics of the period.<sup>9</sup>

Soviet-type secularism in the early 1920's tended to be relatively moderate and

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the Middle East Studies Association Annual Convention, 1999.

9 For a discussion of the Bolshevik policies toward the Muslim intelligentsia, see: Bennigsen, A., Lemercier-Quelquejay, C. *Islam in the Soviet Union*. – New York: Praeger, 1967. – Pp.123-7; on *korenizatsiia* in Azerbaijan, see: Swietochowski, Tadeusz. *Russia and Azerbaijan. A Borderland in Transition*. – Columbia University Press, 1995. – Pp. 108-115.

seemed to reflect the current ideas of Mir Said Sultangaliev. A Volga Tatar Communist activist, well-known in Baku for his journalistic writings in the local newspapers, Sultangaliev believed that Muslims should attain socialism in their own ways and that Islamic notions of politics and society did not contradict Marxism. As the faith of the oppressed victims of imperialism, Islam could fit the Bolshevik vision of the East as the prime center of world revolution.

Initially, the Soviet regime's actions against Islam did not go beyond measures presented as part of the overall modernization, and these included expropriation of the charitable foundations, waqfs, the phasing out of the Islamic Shari'ah civil courts and maktabas (schools), or banning entirely the Ashura processions, their political potential clearly understood by the new regime. On the other hand, the policy of encouraging the self-assertion of an ethno-linguistic identity was regarded as the application of the divide and rule principle toward the Muslims. A point in case was the replacing of the Arabic alphabet with the Latin. This reform, that at one stroke broke the integrity of the literary heritage of the past, and there could be no doubt that the Islamic literature would not be republished in transliteration, was received by some as deepening the ethnic distinctions among the Muslims of the USSR.<sup>10</sup>

It met with opposition from the conservative elements as well as the revolutionary followers of Sultangaliev, who looked toward the liberation of the Muslim masses from the ruling nation. Even though some mosques had been closed down during the mid 1920's and the customary law, *adats* were banned in 1927; the all-out offensive against Islam was launched only toward the end of the decade upon the consolidation of Stalin's personal rule. Some encouragement also came from the forceful secularization policy currently under way in Kemalist Turkey, and there was, in addition, the tradition of native secularism. Soon, Azerbaijan would see the promotion of veritable cult of Akhundzade as the pioneer of philosophical materialism.

The anti-Islamic drive coincided with the forced collectivization of agriculture, and the countryside population experienced deprivation of property together with the all-out attack against their faith as well as customs and traditions. The campaign opened with the old battle-cry of the modernizing movement, the call for the emancipation of Muslim women. While the symbolic act of their liberation had become the discarding of the veil, the Soviet legislation imposed in the late 1920's severe punishment for such practices rooted in the native traditions as polygamy, marrying under-age women, bridal payment (*kalym*), abduction, as well as the blood ven-

10 For a recent comprehensive work on the Soviet alphabet reform, see: Baldauf, Ingeborg. *Schriftreform und Schriftwechsel bei den Muslimischen Russland und Sowjeturken (1850-1937). Ein Symptom ideen-geschichtlicher und kulturpolitischen Entwicklungen.* – Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1993.

geance. A law passed in 1930 qualified the killing of a woman as a counterrevolutionary act punishable by the death sentence.<sup>11</sup>

In the new political climate, the authorities began to agree to orchestrated popular demands for the massive closing down of mosques. Among the results was razing down of monumental works of architecture. Some party and government officials who became victims of the "Great Terror" were accused of having attended Friday mosque services or even assuming the functions of the despised mollahs. As the process gathered momentum, even insufficient ardour in the struggle against the religion, was the ground enough for punishment. National Islam was being uprooted along with national communism as a prime target of purges, but in the mid-1930's, the frequent accusation against the victims of the purges was phrased as Pan-Islamism, a reactionary, religion-based ideology serving the interests of foreign powers. The clerics, who symbolized the religious obscurantism of the past, were rendered harmless not only by terrorization, but also by acquiring the reputation of police informers. This circumstance kept the faithful from attending prayers in the few remaining mosques.

In general, the perception was formed that Azerbaijan had suffered greater repressions than its Transcaucasian neighbours because of identification with Islam. The long range effects of the brutal, persistent, and all pervasive campaign against Islam are still difficult to evaluate. By its nature, Islam is both a way of life and a religion. The visible manifestations of Islamic identity, such as observance of the Five Pillars of Islam, came into disuse, except for almsgiving. Likewise, seclusion of women ended with the banning of polygamy and the discarding of the veil. Women were given equal rights with men, and here the most impressive achievement became the wide access to education. All the same, Azeri marriages kept on being arranged, men seldom married outside of the community, and women hardly ever did. Azeris maintained strong kinship loyalties, which accounts for the significance of clans in the society. Until recently, they seldom migrated, especially to non-Muslim regions of the USSR, refused to eat pork, even if available, and only slowly succumbed to the attractions of alcohol. As late as 1950 the Minister of Internal Affairs reported that the absolute majority of the Muslim population, including numerous members of the nomenklatura, the ruling elite observed the practice of circumcision for their sons.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Baberowski, Jorg. "Stalinismus an der Peripherie: das Beispiel Azerbaidzan 1920-1941." *Stalinismus vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Neue Wege der Forschung*. Ed. by Manfred Hildermeier and Elisabeth Mueller-Luckner. – Munich: 1998. – P.315.

12 See: Ismailov, Eldar. *Vlast i narod. Poslevoennii stalinizm v Azerbaidzhane, 1945-1953 (The Authorities and the People. Post-War Stalinism in Azerbaijan)*. – Baku: Adilogli, 2003 (in Russian). – P.175.

As a religion, Islam clearly suffered from the repressions and atmosphere of terror. With the rites no longer observed in public, the religion was privatized, closed within the confines of family life, the most stable and conservative institution in Azerbaijan. Some scholars observed that women, who as a group were the beneficiaries of the earlier Soviet secularization drive, having acquired an equality of rights, more formal than real, subsequently assumed the role of the guardians of native traditions and these included the preservation of an elementary Islamic identity.<sup>13</sup>

Oftentimes, however, it was deemed too risky to pass the knowledge of the tenets of Islam to the younger generation, whose members grew up unable to say whether they were of the Shi'a or Sunni background. The widely circulating adage was: "Keep religion in your heart." These words echoed the spirit of an age-old response to religious oppressions. Indeed, the Soviet period brought the flourishing of the spirit of *taqiya*, the practice of dissimulation, including apostasy, sanctioned by the Quran, in answer to compulsion or threat.<sup>14</sup>

While the practice of *taqiya* in one form or another became a necessity of life everywhere under Communist totalitarianism, it had historically deep roots in Azerbaijan, the borderland region, which was the battlefield of sectarian struggles, the hotbed of heresies, the area of frequently changing sovereignties and centers of power. As in a demonstration of an ingrained impulse, the membership of the Godless Society shot up within a year from the modest number of 3,000 to more than twenty times of that number. By 1940, the statistical data recorded 3,200 cells and 129,622 members of this organization, which gave 2,567 lectures attended by 212,105 persons.<sup>15</sup>

The *taqiya* tradition together with the Shi'a teaching that the only true sovereign remains the Invisible Imam, and all other power is usurpation, also explains the relatively limited Azeri attachment to the institution of state, which, historically was often a foreign-imposed institution. The late 1930's, the high point of the Stalinist repressions, brought also advent of Azerbaijanism, a particularistic variety of na-

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13 For a further discussion see: Tohidi, Nayereh. "Guardian of the Nation. Women, Islam, and the Soviet Legacy of Modernization in Azerbaijan." *Women in Muslim Societies*. Ed. by Herbert Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi. – Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

14 For a recent work on the subject, see, Kohlberg, Etan. "Taqiyya in Shi'i Theology and Religion." *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Eds. Hans Kippenberg and Guy Stroumsa. – Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1995. – Pp.345-60.

15 Abasov, Ali. "Islam v sovremennom Azerbaidzhane: obrazy i realii." *Azerbaidzhan i Rossiya: obshchestva i gosudarstva* ("Islam in Modern Azerbaijan: Images and Realities." *Azerbaijan and Russia: Societies and States*). Ed. Dmitri Furman. – Moscow: Andrey Sakharov Foundation, 2001 (in Russian). – P.291.

tionalism intended to replace the traditions of links with the outside, non-Soviet world. Azerbaijanism spelled out not only the rejection of reactionary pan Islamism but also of Turkism, the identification with the Turkic speaking world, all the more so that Turkey ceased to be viewed as the friend of the USSR. The newly introduced form of national identity soon found an additional meaning during World War II with the entry of the Red Army forces into Iranian Azerbaijan. The temporary occupation prompted the dreams about possibilities of unity for the divided people.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the statistical successes in its anti-Islamic campaign, the Soviet regime chose to alternate the brutal repressions with periods of relative religious tolerance, such as the time of World War II, and a token of Moscow's new policy was the establishment in 1944 of the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Caucasus. The relaxation was all the more advisable in view of the signs that resentful Muslims were more likely than other Soviet citizens to switch over to the German side. Moreover, by this date the plans were under way to set up a pro-Soviet autonomous government in occupied Tabriz. Of the forceful anti-Islamic campaigns, the last one came in the post-Stalinist period of the Khrushchev years, no longer a part of bloody purges but rather of the broader policy of assimilating the Soviet nationalities to the Russian language and culture.

There followed intensification of scientific criticism of Islam as a foreign religion imposed on peoples of Transcaucasia by fire and sword. Of the Baku mosques that had survived Stalinism, all but two were closed down. In the late Soviet period there were in Azerbaijan 54 registered places of religious cult, of which 17 were mosques: 11 Shi'a, 2 Sunni, and 4 mixed in which Shi'a and Sunni successively performed the namaz. Among the total of 162 persons officially recognized as "religious activists", Muslim, Christian, and Jewish, around 100 were mollahs, of whose number no more than 16 had theological training, usually in the Tashkent Islamic University or the Bukhara madrassah (college), Mir Arab.<sup>17</sup>

Side by side of the structure of the official Islam, presided over by the Spiritual Board of the Caucasus, there existed popular Islam, especially noticeable in the southern, Shi'ite raions (counties) of Masalin, Bilasur, Jalilabad and Lenkoran known for the high levels of religiosity. Prayers were held secretly in private houses, or sometimes in holy places, the pirs. Some increase of religiosity was also observed

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16 For a recent work on the Soviet occupation of Iranian Azerbaijan, see: Hasanli, Camil. *Soyuq muharebenin baslandigi yer. Guney Azarbaijan, 1945-1946*. – Baku: Matbu Evi, 1999. Consult also: Fawcett-L'Estrange, L. *Iran and the Cold War. The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

17 Akhadov, Abdulla. *Islam v Azerbaidzhane (Islam in Azerbaijan)*. – Baku: 1998 (in Russian). – P.31.

in the northern raions of Kazakh, Evlakh, Devechi and Kusar, where historically Sunni were the majority or formed a large part of the population. Gradually, in the years of Soviet imperial decline signs of the religious reawakening began to grow, centred more on the popular than official Islam. In the late 1970's, according to Soviet sources, approximately one thousand clandestine houses of prayer were in use and some three hundred holy places of pilgrimages were designated. Among them were such famous shrines as Bibi-Eybat, Nardaran Piri, Et Agha Turbesi, Imamzade, Shaik Zahid, Khidir Zindeh.<sup>18</sup>

This growth could be viewed as breaking the ground for the opening of hundreds of mosques in the decade that followed. Although few observers agree on the depth and extent of this reawakening, Soviet surveys indicated that statistically, the level of religiosity was the highest in southern districts, and around Baku, i.e. in the solidly Shi'a parts of the country, and lower among the Sunni population. The Iranian revolution, a truly popular change of the Shah's regime into a militant Islamic state, caused fears of its reverberations in the neighbouring countries especially with the Shi'a population. Such considerations induced the United States to provide some support for Saddam Hussein in the war against Iran. The revolution created concern in Soviet Azerbaijan, where the authorities resorted to counterbalancing its potential religious impact by the nationalist slogans of a united Azerbaijan, echoing the World War II sentiments.

For many Shi'a Azeris, the echoes of the Islamic upheaval on the other side of the border could sound as foretelling the shakeup of the Soviet status quo, and it was becoming increasingly apparent that the religious revival would be intertwined with the change of the political climate. The "January Days" of 1990 that resulted in hundreds of Azeris killed or wounded by Soviet troops seeking to quell anti-Armenian riots in Baku, were followed by national mourning in the tradition of Shi'a funeral rites, 40 days after their deaths. This time the mourning was ordered by the government of the Soviet Azerbaijani Republic, and the country's Communist Party. Soon after the demise of the regime high ranking Azerbaijani officials, oftentimes former Communist public figures, began to appear at religious festivities or performing pilgrimage the holy places, and politicians as a rule were courting the support of believers.

The last Communist party head, Ayaz Mutalibov announced that he had always been a Muslim, and his archrival Heidar Aliyev after taking the presidency of the republic made the Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. As for the new political force of the

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18 *Ibid.* – P.30.

transition period, the People's Front of Azerbaijan, the one year long tenure of this post-Soviet regime was marked by the undoing of much of the Soviet anti Islamic legislative heritage. The Milli Majlis (National Council) that replaced the Supreme Soviet, passed on August 18, 1992, the law "On the freedom of religious faith," proclaiming the separation of religion from the state, mutual non-interference, and equality of all religions before the law. The legislation provided for recognition of religious organizations and their representatives. It allowed also for the subordination, in case of necessity, to religious institutions abroad, a point of special significance for the complex relationship with Iran, the historical homeland of the Azeri people where most of them still live, and the centre of the world Shi'ism.<sup>19</sup>

How successful has been the revival coupled with political change, from the perspective of more than a decade? The answer depends very much on one's standpoint: a former Communist party functionary may see the coming wave of fundamentalism; a visitor from the Iran is shocked by laxity and superficiality of Azeri clergymen. A neutral observer is apt to reach the conclusion that Islam survived under the Soviet regime, but the survival has exacted its price. The persistent propagation of atheism and secularism has left its mark among the different peoples and classes in Azerbaijan. The striking result in terms of individuals is how disjunctured or broken their knowledge is of the main line of thought and history of their religion. This was particularly evident among Muslim middle-aged and younger persons I interviewed. The anti-religion campaigns and classes were successful in neutralizing religion and making it ineffectual for most everyday purposes. Without mosques, without trustworthy clerics, religion was resorted to only in times of bereavement and difficulty.<sup>20</sup>

The same author remarks that because of the low level of general religious knowledge among many young and middle aged urban individuals, "it is almost folk Islam or what one might call secular Islam. People identified themselves as Muslims and as members of a Muslim nation, but in the same breath defended materialism, and the fact that there is no God."<sup>21</sup>

Old Turkish-Iranian rivalry in Azerbaijan re-emerged in the post-Soviet years, and here the current political developments affected the course of Islamic revival. With funds from Teheran mosques were restored, and to deal with the problem of low level of theological education, the future clerics were invited to study in Iran. As

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19 Safizadeh, Fereydoun. "On Dilemmas of Identity in the Post-Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan." *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Vol.3, no.1, 1998. – P.4.

20 *Ibid.*, p.4

21 *Ibid.*, p.4.

if replying to the Iranian challenge, the secular Turkey began also to build mosques and madrassahs enjoying more support from the Baku authorities than the Iranian activities. The Ankara or Istanbul-based religious foundations appreciated that Islam was an appropriate avenue to promote Turkish presence in Azerbaijan.

As for the religious contacts with Iran, political considerations loomed large in the background. The Teheran government was concerned about the nationalist disposition of Baku, and its possible repercussions in Iranian Azerbaijan, where despite integration of the local Azeris into the Iranian state, autonomist or even separatist sentiments could be awakened. The distrust of the independent republic of Azerbaijan was especially strong with regard to the People's Front regime of Abulfaz Elchibey, in power in 1992-1993.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran took an equivocal position, which in Baku was seen as in effect breaking the Islamic solidarity, even if a large number of Azeri displaced persons were given refuge on the Iranian side of the border. The Iranian assistance to the camps in republic of Azerbaijan was later rejected after it became apparent that missionaries were agitating among the refugees for adoption of more radical Islam. Furthermore, Teheran appeared to be supporting Russia in its policies toward Caucasia and the Caspian region against the generally pro-Western disposition of Baku. While the Republic of Azerbaijan was perceived as threatening to stir the Azeri national sentiments across the border, Iran continued to throw its weight in the matters religious of the neighbouring country, with the second largest Shi'ite population in the world.

Linked to the influence of Iran was the emergence of a political association, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, founded in 1991. Its membership soon reached an estimated number of 50,000, mainly in small towns and villages around Baku. The party called for closer ties with Iran, including oil concessions. In cultural aspect, it opposed the restoration of the Latin alphabet and called for the return to the Arabic, and even organized courses teaching that script. In 1995, the head of the party, Aliakram Aliyev and several other leaders were arrested and their organization denied re-registration on the grounds that it was receiving financial support from Iran and had some links to that country's special services. The party has continued, however, to exist under changed leadership, in a semi-legal status.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequently, all Islamic organizations, as well as mosques, were subordinated to the Muslim Spiritual Board. In 1996, the Parliament adopted the law banning activities of foreign missionaries, and requiring that local religious communities register

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22 See: Abasov, Ali, *op.cit.*– P.297; see also: Motika, Raul. "Islamskie seti v Azerbaidzhane 90-kh godov" ("Islamic Networks in the Nineties"). Furman, Dmitri (ed.) *op.cit.* – P.320.

with centers of traditional religious organizations. These restrictions were justified by the need to prevent the exploitation of religious freedom for political purposes by foreign emissaries. As the traditional groups, enjoying full religious freedom were recognized Shi'a, Sunni, Russian Orthodox, and Jewish.<sup>23</sup>

The 1995 Azerbaijani constitution allowed persons of all faiths to practice their religion and at the same time reaffirmed separation of the state and religion. Adopted under the auspices of Heidar Aliyev's regime, this point of the constitution has not met with reservations of any major opposition party. Indeed, their diverse programs agree in upholding separation of religion and state. Clearly, the intelligentsia upholds its secularist tradition, even though some opposition groups have cooperated with the Islamic party. The secularist character of the constitution provoked, however, reactions across the border in Iranian Azerbaijan. In response to the publication of the draft of the constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Friday worshipers in Tabriz protested against the clause on the separation of religion and state and the fact that the constitution did not declare Islam as the official religion of the republic. Reportedly, the people of Tabriz called upon their "dear Azeri brothers" to reject the constitution. On the occasion, voices were raised again that if the two Azerbaijanis were to unite, "it is they who should come back to Iran."<sup>24</sup>

The official position was indicated in the remarks of Ayatollah Mohsen Shabestary, of May 1996, who used the reference to the old Turkish-Iranian rivalry, with the implicit sectarian differences: "the Azerbaijan Republic once was ours. So, if there is any talk of unification of the two Azerbaijanis, it is they who should come back to Iran....Some agents of world arrogance are trying to damage our national unity by spreading secessionist sentiments in our region. Unfortunately some of their mercenaries in Tabriz repeat these words, and talk of Pan-Turkism. The policy of the Islamic Republic is to avoid such polemics. We do not want to create a hue and cry. But if we are faced with these satanic plots, we should remind everyone, including the people of the Azerbaijan Republic, that have lost some Azeri cities, and we could one day claim them back."<sup>25</sup>

In Baku, despite the principal secularism, as an author remarked that "with the collapse of the political and social system came a crisis of meaning and identity.

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23 See: US Department of State. Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Azerbaijan.

24 Shaffer, Brenda. *Borders and Brethren. Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*. – Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002. – P.187.

25 "Ayatollah Shabestary Addresses the Seminary Students in Tabriz." Sobz, May 28, 1996, cited in Human Rights Watch/ Middle East, Vol.9, No.7 (E), September 1997. – P.27.

Observers have noted the growth of participation in small study groups on religion, the urban elite and secularized women with polished nails and western attire talking about their daily prayers, or the striking similarity in the narrative of some Azerbaijani people's religious experience with that of "reborn" experiences here in the United States. People are rediscovering Islam readopting it, transforming it, and using in ways that suits them."<sup>26</sup>

Islamic intellectuals, the term describing mainly scholars in the field of oriental studies try to impart to Islam in Azerbaijan modern and reformist qualities, especially with regard to interpreting the Shariah in the light of contemporary society's needs. On the other hand, a group of women called for restoring polygamy or temporary marriage, so that they could enjoy the happiness of motherhood in the society with the shortage of males because of the emigration or the Karabakh war. Another group sued for the right to wear Islamic headscarves in passport photos, and in 1999 the court decided in their favour. There was nothing in the law, the judges ruled, that prevented the women from wearing the headscarves in the official photographs.

The signs of religion-based feminism, as much as the growth of Islamic associations among the poorer sections of the population, are symptomatic of a wider issue: in the condition of post-Soviet transformation with the attendant disruptions. Islamic revival assumes additional character of social protest of the underprivileged. If the roots of the radical Islam reach the religious spirit of communality and mutual support, the present day social and economic realities leave their strong impact. In Azerbaijan, as in the whole post-Soviet space, where the minimal system of social security has largely broken down, there is vast reservoir of discontent among the impoverished groups of population, including the refugees from the Karabakh war. The benefits of the oil wealth do not filter down across the layers of the more privileged, who often are regarded not only as corrupt but also irreligious. For all the secularism of the political elites, the overwhelming majority of Azeris are known to identify themselves as Muslims, even though few of them observe the requirements and prohibitions of Islam. One set of figures recently made available, estimates the proportion of most ardent believers at less than a tenth of the population, slightly more than the number of declared atheists, with the balance falling into the category of those who consider Islam above all as the way of life or an attribute of their group identity. An Azerbaijani response to the trend toward nationalizing Shi'ism and enmeshing it with the statehood, visible not only in Iran but also in Iraq and Lebanon,

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26 Safizadeh, *op.cit.* – P. 10.

has been national Islam, a variation on the theme that had emerged already in the early 20th century. Regardless of the degree of individual religiosity Islam is recognized as an integral part of national identity.<sup>27</sup>

National identity in a borderland, implies self-assertion, but vis-à-vis whom? The answer most obviously is in the face of outsiders of Christian and European background, and the articles in pro-government and independent newspapers alike linked Christian missionary activities with the interests of Russia, or Western powers... But another target of the press criticism were foreign-backed Muslim missionaries depicted as a threat for stability and civil peace, or as part of an Iranian scheme to influence and eventually absorb Azerbaijan..

With regard to other Muslims nations, Azerbaijan began to stress a specifically native character of its Islam, in an attempt at emancipating itself from outside, notably Iranian centres. National Islam, is viewed as a part of the long historical process of emancipation from the religious domination by Iran. At the same time national Islam stresses the need for the unity of Shi'ite and Sunnis, which entails avoiding politically divisive, rigid, or uncompromising positions. The 1999 sectarian riots in the mosque of the town of Goychai are seen as intended to undermine the spirit of Azerbaijani Islam by foreign meddlers. More violent were the disturbances at the town Nardaran, resulting in loss of life, at the hands of the government forces. The cause of the violence was officially termed as dissatisfaction with the successes of the state secularist policy.

More than the fear of the spread of Islamic militancy from Iran, there appears another threat, coming recently from a northern direction, Chechnya and Dagestan. The brand of Islamic militancy in these two countries was called by the Russian media somewhat imprecisely "Wahhabism." This term refers to the puritanical and conservative movement that had put down roots in the Arabian Peninsula, but belongs to the Sunni rather than Shi'a branch of Islam. The most obvious connection with Saudi Arabia was the financing of the missionary activities in the North Caucasus and Central Asia with petrodollars. A special concern in Azerbaijan is that a group receptive to the Wahhabi agitation may become the Lezgins, an ethnic minor-

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27 For data on religiosity in Azerbaijan, see: Faradov, Tair. "Religiosity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: A Sociological Survey." International Institute for the Study of Islam in Modern World (ISIM), Newsletter, August 2001. – P.28; Motika, Raoul. "Foreign Missionaries, Home Made Dissidents, and Popular Islam. The Search for New Religious Structures in Azerbaijan," unpublished paper presented at the conference "The Twelver Shi'a in Modern Times," Freiburg, October 4-7, 1999. – P.2. Other set of data indicating a greater degree of religiosity is provided by Abasov, *op.cit.*– Pp.306-307. For a discussion of nationalizing Shi'ism, see: Oliver, Roy. "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran." *Middle East Journal*, vol. 53, no.2, spring 1999. – Pp.201-212.

ity of some quarter of a million, straddling the border with Dagestan. The Lezsgin community has the record of raising some autonomist and even separatist claims in the first years of the post-Soviet period..

Meanwhile, the day to day realities of the relationship between and varieties of Islam and political life, including international politics keep imposing themselves, as indicated in a semi-official report in a Baku newspaper. The acting head of the government Religious Affairs Office declared that some religious communities functioning in Azerbaijan are violating the law. They do not report to the Caucasus Clerical Office, disseminate religious literature of subversive nature among the population and promote discord among religious sects. The law enforcement has been called on to thwart the activity of foreign missionaries who under the pretext of humanitarian aid propagandize sectarianism in Azerbaijan introducing religious precepts of their respective countries. In particular, the Office mentioned the organizations from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. Of the brand of Islam whose spread caused special concern for the authorities was mentioned Wahhabism.<sup>28</sup>

Typically, the term Wahhabism associated now with the upheaval in the North Caucasus was singled out, although in the Soviet years it covered all foreign-linked fundamentalist activities. The threat on the part of the Shi'ite fundamentalism has not been the subject of official statements inasmuch as the Iranian theocracy does not appear to represent an immediate danger for stability of the republic of Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani authorities, invoked the Wahhabi danger to ban the opposition rally in Baku, and a number of persons were detained, some had to leave the country, and others were delivered into Russian hands. Even before the world wide antiterrorist drive initiated by the 9/11 catastrophe, Russia and Azerbaijan concluded an agreement on suppressing the flow of arms and militants across the frontier, strengthening the border controls, and arresting suspected supporters of the Chechen insurrections. As for the antiterrorist cooperation with Washington, it has apparently been underway for years, as indicated by President Clinton's thanks to Haidar Aliyev for the capture of several extremists in 1998.<sup>29</sup>

Even stronger indication that anti-Americanism had reached the ranks of radical Islamists in Azerbaijan, were the long prison sentences given in October after the World Trade Center disaster to the members of the local terrorist organization, Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) for plotting an attack at the USA embassy. These steps were in line with President Aliyev's declaration of wholehearted support for the global struggle against terrorism. With the beginning of the campaign

28 *AzerNews*, Baku, August 18-24, 1999.

29 See: US Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism – 2000*, Eurasia Overview.

in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan offered overflight rights to the United States, along with intelligence sharing and the use of the airbase in the Absheron Peninsula. Yet as post 9/11 tremors continue to roll across the Islamic world, the responses in a country that borders Chechnya, Iran, and Turkey may, in the long term, prove less predictable.

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As post-Soviet Azerbaijan is rediscovering its historical roots, this process includes return to Islam even though it still carries largely an ethno-cultural character. The Islamic revival, in itself a complex phenomenon, is marked by exercises in re-adaptation from a purely defensive practice of *taqiya* to the self-asserting national identity. In a country with secular traditions of the modern period, the educated elite and a large part of the urban population shaped by the Soviet experience, the probable model of the future evolution seemed to be closer to Turkey than to Iran, despite of the common historical heritage and the links of Shi'ism. Yet Turkey, after a number of past attempts, also turned openly toward an Islamic revival, implicitly questioning some of the Kemalist heritage. The 2002 Turkish electoral victory of the Islamist moderates as they declared themselves to be, carried the message that the first standard-bearer of secularism in the Middle East, is changing the attitude toward the heritage of history. In Azerbaijan, the quintessential borderland, the shape of Islamic revival will most likely be influenced by similar processes in the neighbouring countries.