

# Islamists in Azerbaijan: How Dangerous are they?

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**Abstract** *Although Azerbaijan is one of the most secular and strictly western oriented countries in the entire Islamic world, a tendency towards the formation of radical, Islamic groups can be observed here in the past ten years. This tendency may take on dangerous dimensions because: 1) The ruling authoritarian and immensely corrupt regime does not allow the traditionally democratic and pro-western parties any leeway for political activities, and 2) western governments support the ambitions of the Aliyev clan to maintain power due to their own interests in the country's energy resources. Therefore, the author expects similar political developments in Azerbaijan as in Arab dictatorships.*

## A BRIEF LOOK AT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ISLAMIZATION AND EUROPEANIZATION IN AZERBAIJAN

What may seem to have been incredible for many observers is increasingly becoming a reality: during the past ten or fifteen years there has been a tendency towards radical Islamization among various parts of the population of Azerbaijan, in particular within the younger generation. This is the case despite the fact that the country has traditionally and fundamentally differed from other Muslim countries precisely in this regard. This is evidently a contradiction, which can be quite plausibly explained by looking at the current developments in the country.

The claim that Azerbaijan is not a typical Islamic state is based on at least three very important factors. The first factor is secularism or a very secular attitude<sup>1</sup> throughout all strata of society. Since the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan in 1918, the Azerbaijanis have maintained a tradition of a laical state. While during the Second Republic, i.e. the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic (1920-1991), atheism was officially propagated, secular traditions were also apparent during this period.

<sup>1</sup> However, this attitude is the result of a coercive secularization process during the Soviet era. Originally however, Azerbaijan was also Islamicized by force.

The second factor is the unambiguous European and western orientation of the society. Both the overwhelming majority of the common citizens as well as the entire national elite, in particular the intellectuals, hold "westernized" or "Europeanized" attitudes. Along with that, the majority of and most important political forces and actors in the country can be characterized by a traditionally strict western orientation. Thus, the European-western model of society is regarded as a desirable objective in the entire country, spanning from the capital to the provincial villages. This is also confirmed again and again by diverse surveys. Accordingly, nearly 90 percent of the respondents would prefer to integrate their country into European structures than into the Islamic region.<sup>2</sup>

The third factor is the religious indifference of most citizens, or in other words a certain degree of frivolity in dealing with religious issues and thus an only loose association with Islam. Against this background, the majority of the population of Azerbaijan cannot

<sup>2</sup> According to the research results, only approximately 10 percent of those surveyed believed that the country's constitution should correspond with the norms of the Sharia. The extent to which this applies to the Azerbaijani society is reflected in data from surveys according to which Iran is only mentioned by four percent of the respondents as a role model for Azerbaijan. – see e.g. Mammedli (2011).

be regarded as religious in a strict sense. Even if most adult citizens are defined as “Muslims”, a very large share of them has little to do with the religion and hardly practice it in their everyday lives. That means that the religious affiliation of most Azerbaijanis tends to be merely a formal issue. It is simply accepted as a legacy of the older generations and/or further cultivated in a purely formalistic manner as a tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, for centuries there has been a strong tradition of efforts to reform Islam in Azerbaijan as well as a tradition of Islam critique. Even in the 7th century under the leadership of Babek Khurremi there was heavy resistance against the Arab conquerors and the coercively imposed Islamization. This battle lasted more than 20 years. Furthermore, the reform efforts were reflected in philosophical movements such as Hurufizm (F. Naimi, I. Naimi, 14th century) and Sufism (M. Fizuli 16th century and afterwards). Starting in the mid-19th century a large enlightenment movement was initiated in Azerbaijan, many advocates of which pressed for the modernization and Europeanization of the region and saw religious fanaticism as the main reason for the backwardness of the society. This Europeanization and enlightenment movement was founded by Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812-1878), the great Azerbaijani thinker, author and Islam critic, who has been frequently called the “Oriental Voltaire” or “Caucasian Molière”. (See Brans-tädter, Mirzayev 2012)

Akhundov completely changed the cul-

<sup>3</sup> The most recent research on this area also confirms that the number of religious believers in Azerbaijan, who more or less comply with the norms of Islam in their everyday lives, do not account for more than 5-7 percent of the entire population. See e.g. Yunusov, Arif (2007, 2010, 2012).

tural orientation of the Azerbaijanis – from the Islamic-oriental traditions to western values and ideals – above all through the secularization of public life in its entirety. He saw the main reason for the Europeans having achieved freedom of thought in the liberation of Christianity from the rule of the church and in the reformation. In his view, Islam, by contrast, had not changed for centuries and not adapted at all to the new challenges of life. Thus, he believed that Islam stood in the way of a progressive development of the Muslim peoples. For him, modernization signified, on the one hand, liberation from Islamic dogmas and, on the other hand, Europeanization.

Several of Akhundov’s successors indeed did enthusiastically adopt his idea of Europeanization and his Islam critique, but accentuated other aspects. For example, the founder of Pan-Turkism and the main ideologue of the First Azerbaijani Republic (1918-1920), Äli bÄy HüseinsadÄ was an admirer of Martin Luther and advocated a reformed Islam, but still also regarded it has an important component of the national identity. The latter presented a tripartite concept for the national development of the Azerbaijanis - *Turkization, Islamization and Europeanization* - which later became the state ideology of the First Azerbaijani Republic – the first in the entire Muslim world! (Mirza 2000) The values of western civilization (secularization, freedom, democratization, etc.) were spread among the population by his successors with great enthusiasm and determination, and in part also implemented and further developed.

During the Second Republic, i.e. in Soviet Azerbaijan, these ideas were for a large part also further spread among the masses of the population through the education system as part of cultural revolution. The result of this process was a consequently European, west-

ern oriented, secular society, which in the majority was only formally linked with its *quasi*-Muslim traditions. The contemporary Azerbaijani elite, the so-called *intelligenzija*, sees itself in the spiritual tradition of Akhundov and his secular successors. Moreover, since general Soviet education had reached all segments of society over a course of nearly 70 years, Azerbaijan achieved a much higher level of educational performance than most other Muslim countries (including Turkey). As is well-known the Russian or Soviet education system was originally based on the western secular education system.

Considering the above mentioned factors and conditions, the fears with regard to radical Islam in Azerbaijan are only more astonishing. However, this danger cannot be ruled out, as there are solid reasons for it at the moment.

## 2. RE-ISLAMIZATION TENDENCIES AFTER THE SOVIET ERA AND THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES

In Azerbaijan as well as all other post-Soviet republics a return to religion as an integral part of the national identity can be observed since the early 1990s. According to sociological surveys at the end of the 1980s, only approximately 50% of Azerbaijanis described themselves as religious believers, while in 2006 this figure had already increased to 72 % of respondents. (See e.g.: Mamedli 2011) However, one should not regard this trend as a true Re-Islamization, rather more as a transitional phenomenon among people between coercive Soviet atheism and the traditional religious and moral ethos. In other words, people are reluctant to reveal that they are not true believers or not real Muslims – just as in Soviet times many people did not dare to openly state that they do not believe in communist ideals.

Based on realistic estimations, the situation looks much different: in the early years after the collapse of the USSR, only two to three percent of Azerbaijanis were so called practicing believers. But just 20 years later, this number increased to over 20 per cent according to several studies. This is still a comparatively low number of devote believers, but the figure indeed has increased tenfold. (Yunusov 2012)

As in other “Muslim Republics” a form of “Re-Islamization” also has become apparent in Azerbaijan, which initially – despite the Shiite heritage – did not draw on particularly radical Islamist historical traditions or take on any radical political forms. Even though the extent of the so-called Re-Islamization process in Azerbaijan is small compared to other Soviet Republics (Northern Caucasus, Central Asia), one must bear in mind that the number of adherents of the Wahhabites and other radical-Islamic movements (an estimated 20,000) has continuously increased in the previous years.

There are several reasons why more and more people – in particular young people – have joined fundamentalist and radical-Islamic movements. Among the four most important causes are:

The enormous level of social inequality in society and the growing dissatisfaction among the population with the authoritarian and extremely corrupt Aliyev regime;

The abolishment of political freedom in the country and the marginalization of the traditional, democratic and western oriented opposition parties in the past 15 years, due to extensive repression by the government;

A deep disappointment over the betrayal of democratic values by the western governments, which openly support the authoritar-

ian regime of the Aliyev clan in Azerbaijan due to their own personal interests in energy resources.<sup>4</sup>

Discrediting of the official, Islamic institutions and their functionaries in the eyes of the believers.

Regarding the final point, it must be stated that the officially registered and state controlled “spirituality” evidently serves the regime and its own material interests. The machinations of the highly corrupt and usually untrained Mullahs are generally well known and disdained. Even the Head of the Muslim Administration of the Caucasus, Haji Allahshukur Pashazade, who has held this office since the Soviet era, is not a well-respected man. Most Azerbaijanis believe that he and his colleagues conduct dirty business under the disguise of religion. These official spiritual leaders thus are unable to serve the youth as a modern moral authority or role model.

By contrast, the new religious leaders of the Salafist/Wahhabite movement (e.g. Imam Qamet Suleymanov), who were well educated at foreign Islamic universities, approach people directly, discuss in an open and skilful manner not only their everyday matters, but

4 In the West, few doubts remain about the corrupt and authoritarian nature of Aliyev’s Regime, in which power was transferred in 2003 from the deceased father to son. (See, for example, reports on Azerbaijan from international human rights organizations). Nowadays, few Azerbaijanis also doubt that western governments primarily support this regime due to their interest in the energy reserves. The mere fact that all elections in Azerbaijan since 1996 have been broadly described by western governments and institutions as “advancements towards the democratization of the country” despite the widespread electoral manipulations is another cause of enormous disappointment.

also issues involving economics and world politics. They often live out attractive ideals from the Koran in a modern way. Through notions of “brotherhood” or “sisterhood” social networks are created which are aimed to facilitate a new solidarity based on the ideal of equality. This ideal is seen as a complete contrast to the moral decay of society, the immorality of the ruling class, and the “prostitution” of power. The moral atmosphere of the Wahhabite communities thereby has become a kind of “oasis” with increasing attractiveness. In addition, many of the new mosques quickly came under the influence of various radical, Islamist movements and therefore were closed by the government one by one (approx. 14 mosques in total).

Nevertheless, the politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan still cannot yet be regarded as a widespread trend. The Islamic Party, which was founded in the 1990s, is still a marginal phenomenon in the political landscape, whose leaders have been convicted and imprisoned time and time again on the same and largely implausible pretences (drug consumption, possession of illegal firearms etc.).<sup>5</sup>

5 For example, in January 2011 the head of the Islam Party Movsum Samedov and several other activities from the party were arrested and then convicted for up to 12 years, allegedly for the possession of weapons and due to their purported terror plans. However, nearly no one in Azerbaijan believes such public accusations, as it is well known that the reason for the arrests was a video of M. Samedov on YouTube, in which he expressed critique of President Iham Aliyev and appealed to the Azerbaijani people to fight the despotic regime. See here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXS8mMKhfZw> (consulted 11 February 2013)

### 3. DIFFERENT ISLAMIC PATHWAYS IN POST-SOVIET AZERBAIJAN

Since the end of the Soviet era, two different orientations of Islam can be observed in Azerbaijan:

a) the traditional or official Islam, whose institutions are supported by the state;

b) the radical or missionary Islam, whose members and structures are supported from abroad.

Besides the internal Re-Islamization process, a persistent penetration of Islam from abroad can be observed in Azerbaijan, as most of the radical Islam groups are exported from other Muslim countries. For example, the religious movement "Nurtshuluq" (followers of Fattullah Gülen) has entered Azerbaijan through Turkey. At the same time, Arab countries (in particular Saudi Arabia) and Persian Gulf countries have supported religious movements based on Salafism (Salafiyyun, or Wahhabim) and "Al-Dschihade", among others. It is even assumed that Al-Qaida has set up a "nest" for its operations in Azerbaijan.

Even beforehand, the country had been used by Al-Qaida as a "transit zone" or for the coordination of terrorist attacks in other countries. While using Azerbaijan as a "coordination point" and "secret haven", the terrorist network did not wish to undertake any noticeable activities in the country, rather the contrary by inconspicuously remaining in the underground and adhering to the state regulations for religious activities. However, there are indications that the organization is attempting to go on the offensive and thus carry out terrorist activities in Azerbaijan as well.

Why has such a re-orientation taken place? There are different answers to this question. One of the motives could be the issue of oil: by

expanding the transport routes (not only for Azerbaijani oil and gas, but also from Central Asian and potentially Russian sources) to the Mediterranean Sea and to Western Europe, Azerbaijan is becoming an undesired rival, which is increasingly proving to be a close ally of the Americans and an active member of the anti-terror coalition. Therefore, the Arab oil magnates could attempt to weaken Azerbaijan with the help of radical-Islamic organizations or to turn the entire region into a crisis zone.

#### 3.1 FOREIGN GROUPS OPERATING IN AZERBAIJAN

As one of the most significant regional actors, Iran also seems to be very interested in the destabilization of Azerbaijan and most of the following religious movements and groups come from Iran: "Sheychiye", "Jundul Mehdi", "Gum's Shiites", "Teheran-Jamaat" among others. It recently repeatedly and unequivocally warned that if Azerbaijan gave the Israelis and Americans the possibility to use Azerbaijani territory as a basis for an attack on Iran, it would immediately fire rockets at and completely destroy its neighbour. As already mentioned above, there were several deployments of Azerbaijani security services a long time ago during which numerous Islamic groups were liquidated, which held ties with the Iranian secret service.

The following Islamic Jamaats from the Northern Caucasus have also aimed to spread their operations in Azerbaijan: "Sharia-Jamaat", "Gulistan-Jamaat", "Shamil-Jamaat" among others. Previously such radical underground groups were primarily able to establish themselves in Baku and its surroundings, but in the past few years they have spread across almost the whole country. However,

most missionary Islamic groups are based in four regions:

- Baku and its surroundings
- The northern regions, in particular Quba-Qusar (North-East) to Zaqatala-Balakan (North-West); most Sunni Muslims also live in these regions.
- Sumgait (previously a Soviet industrial city)
- South-East, i.e. Talysh region (Lenkoran, Masally, Astara, Yardimli etc.)
- Ganja (traditionally strictly Shiite)

As a rule, these Islamic movements and groups are also financially supported by their respective countries of origin. The latter are regarded by the government as the most dangerous risk groups and combatted with all means.

#### 4. THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM: SUCCESS OR HYPOCRISY?

Azerbaijani governmental representatives relevantly frequently report about the strong and successful measures to fight terrorism, which they regularly carry out in the country. The focus of such reports is usually on the arrest of members of various Islamist and terrorist groups. These drastic measures have become more systematic and continuous since 2006. Several court trials have already taken place, in which dozens of such groups have been convicted due to their allegedly planned terrorist activities.

Time and time again, the representatives of the security agencies describe the highly dramatic and sensational special operations, which the special units of the secret service have carried out against the radical Islamic terror groups. References are frequently made to internationally well-known terrorist and radical groups such as "Al-Qaida", "Al-Jihade", the "Wahhabites", "Hesbollah", "Jeishullah",

"Hisbu-tahrir", "Forest Brothers" among others.

For example, in late October 2007 the Azerbaijani Ministry for National Security announced that the secret services have succeeded in foiling the plans by Wahhabists to commit acts of terror against the embassies of the USA and Great Britain as well as offices of BP and Statoil among others. There was talk of large-scale raids, round-ups of weapons, numerous arrests, heavy exchanges of fire and in some cases even the liquidation of armed terrorists. Such events purportedly took place in the entire country, but were most prevalent in the capital Baku and its surroundings as well as the large industrial city Sumgait. The arrests of the Wahhabists even affected the army. There were reports on the arrest of 15 officers from the Ministry of Defence and ten participants in a course of the Military Academy, who were suspected of being members of Islamist underground organizations.<sup>6</sup> The climax of these operations was allegedly the arrest of a well-known member of the terrorist group Al-Qaida, Abu Jafar. He is said to have come to Azerbaijan from Saudi Arabia several years ago together with other voluntary Arab Jihad warriors, in order to find recruits for Jihadist groups, which were operating in various conflict-ridden areas of the Caucasus (in particular Chechnya).

<sup>6</sup> "Jihad is my goal in life!" proclaimed the supreme lieutenant Kamran Asadov (born in 1975), an officer in the Azerbaijani army, in court. He thus showed no remorse, nor did his 19 collaborators. By contrast, they swore that they would continue their battle against the "Kafirs", the non-believers, until the "end of their lives". They also described the Sheikhülislam, the official religious leader of the Caucasus, as a "Kafir". Such open and combative hate rants by the members of the above mentioned radical group are a relatively new phenomenon in Azerbaijani society.

#### 4.1 THE “FOREST BROTHERS” AND THE ATTACK ON THE WAHHABIST MOSQUE “ABU-BEKIR”

On 17 August 2008, there was a bomb attack on the “Abu-Bekir” mosque in Baku. This mosque was built several years before with the financial support of Arab sponsors and served as a central meeting point of the Salafist (Wahhabist) community under the leadership of Qamet Suleymanov. He was the imam in the mosque and received his religious training in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s. Subsequently, the Wahhabists were declared responsible for this attack, during which two people were killed and 19 injured, and 20 people in total were put on trial.

This group called itself “The Forest Brothers” and consisted of two sub-groups, which called themselves “Sumqait-Jamaaty” and “Guba-Gusar Jamaaty”. Thirty-one members of a radical-Islamic group were convicted in court and sentenced to three to fifteen years in prison in June 2010. The group, which was supposed to be set up by Azer Misirkhanov (nickname: “Abdulla”), had planned to blow up the Baku-Novorossiysk oil pipeline. Azer Missirkhanov was previously killed by the US military in Afghanistan.

#### 4.2 MASSIVE ANTI-TERROR ACTIVITIES IN THE RUN-UP TO THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST

The preventive anti-terror measures, which the Azerbaijani security services had already initiated in early 2011 on a large scale, intensified in 2012 in advance of the European Song Contest (ESC): in the previous year more than 70 Islamists and/or alleged members of terror organizations were arrested and convicted in various regions of the country, while some were even liquidated during the special

operations.

On 7 April during one of these operations in Ganja, the second largest city in Azerbaijan, a heavy exchange of fire occurred between members of the special unit of the Ministry of Security and fighters from the so-called “Forest Brothers”. During the operation, at least two people died, the leader of this underground organization Vugar Padarov (nickname: “Busra”), and an officer from the Ministry of Security. It has been reported that Vugar Padarov, who had become the leader of the organization in summer 2011, and several of his fellow combatants previously had participated in the Islamic resistance movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There they purportedly fought against western forces and then later against the Russian military together with rebels in the northern Caucasus. In early 2012 they came to Azerbaijan to organize “Jihad” in their homeland. It is assumed that they have more recently gained combat experience in Dagestan under the leadership of the emirs of the “Caucasus-Emirate” such as Israpil Velijanov (nickname “Gassan”) and Ibragimkhalil Daudov (nickname: “Salekh”). However, one should point out here that the members of the Forest Brothers organization arrested in Gänçä are not from this city, but from other areas such as Zaqatala, Balakan, Qakh, Scheki, Ujar, Qusar, and Sumgait. In spring 2012 numerous raids and arrests were also carried out in the capital Baku.

There is almost no doubt that a real danger of terrorist attacks existed during the ESC: according to several sources of information both northern Caucasian rebels (“Caucasus Emirate”) as well as Iranian and other Islamic organizations had set plans to carry out terrorist attacks during the ESC event in Baku. (Pravda.ru 2012, Rosbalt.ru 2012)

## 5. HOW GREAT IS THE DANGER OF RADICALIZATION?

As mentioned in the beginning, the prospects for a fundamentalist Islamist movement would appear to be weak in Azerbaijan. Currently, there is no basis for radical Islam or Islam in general to dominate the political identity of the Azerbaijanis, as Islam as a religious doctrine or fundamental Islamism is very weakly rooted in Azerbaijan in comparison to other Muslim countries. Thus the chances of an "Islamic state" being established here are extremely weak. However, several experts are warning of a rapidly growing number of supporters of radical Islam in Azerbaijan. (Yunusov 2012)

There are still many reasons for optimism. Nevertheless, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility of explosive developments that pave the way for fundamentalist tendencies. If the number of religious groups for whom Islam not only constitutes a religion, but also a political alternative for the country continues to grow, the emergence of a protest movement under the banner of Islam is only a matter of time. The only alternative against such possibilities is doubtlessly a true democratization of the country and at the same time reform-oriented policies in all areas of society. For many years already, Aliyev's authoritarian regime has attempted to imitate democracy in Azerbaijan, in order to somehow placate his western allies. However, it has become clear that the hopes placed in Aliyev Junior – for example that he keeps his promise and slowly pushes the country towards reform and democratization – have been disappointed. In light of the influx of "petro dollars" amid the enormous price increases for crude oil, there appears to be no necessity to further pursue the previous politics of "democracy imitation". In other

words, the ruling class has nearly effortlessly benefited from the fake economic success of the oil-based "rentier state". Thus the ruling elite have opted for a new strategy: the overt transition to an authoritarian regime as exists in most other Arab countries. In such countries it is commonplace for the rulers to manipulate the issue of Islamization and to signal to the western democratic allies (in particular the USA) that if they lose power, radical and fundamentalist Islamists will come to power. Evidently, the Azerbaijani "democracy imitation regime" has opted for a model which has been practiced for decades in Arab countries with authoritarian regimes *à la Mubarak*, with whose family the Aliyev clan previously held very close ties. Thus as long as the above mentioned factors persist and as long as the politics of the regime and the western countries towards the regime do not change, the danger of a radical Islamization of Azerbaijan continues to exist.

We are now all witnesses of the events to come ...

*Translated from the German by Michael Dobbins*

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