

# THE NATIONALIZATION OF THE ISLAMIC ORGANIZATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN MAKING AZERBAIJAN'S NATIONAL IDENTITY

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## FOREWORD

Although Azerbaijan is a secular republic with a constitution that guarantees its citizens freedom of faith,<sup>1</sup> the importance of Islam as a socio-political factor has increased since independence in 1992. In recent years, many demolished mosques and sacred places have been reopened, new mosques have been constructed, the youth want to study about Islam abroad, and foreign Islamic missionaries have become more active. A local journalist describes the revival of Islam as follows. "After the acquisition of national independence, almost all of the citizens want to keep some of the religious customs; from visits to the shrines of the most esteemed Imams, and swearing in by the Qur'an during inauguration, to the attendance of the believers among parliament members at religious ceremonies."<sup>2</sup> Every post-Soviet Muslim republic, sovereign as well as autonomous, had delicate problems with Islam even before the September 11 attack. The only difference between Azerbaijan and the other republics is that the majority of Azerbaijanis are Shi'a Muslims, while the population of the other republics is comprised mainly of Sunna Muslims. In this paper, I will try to make a short sketch of the role of Shi'a Islam in the state-building of the Republic of Azerbaijan and its place in the national historiography of this state.

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1 W. Butler, ed. and trans., *Constitutional Foundations of the CIS Countries* (The Hague, 1999), pp. 44-110.

2 E.A. Aleskerov, "Islam v Azerbaidzhane," *Zerkalo* (January 5, 2001).

## 1. NATIONAL IDEA OF AZERBAIJAN

### *1-1. The Azerbaijanness (azerbaidzhanstvo)*

As with the Turkic term “türklük” [turkishness] or the Arabic term “urūba” [Arabness], the term azerbaidzhanstvo implies some ethical, cultural or even physical superiority belonging to the Azerbaijani people and like, *rusaskaia ideia*, it has a vague socio-political sense of value that every Azerbaijani must fulfill. The doctor of philosophy, Ramiz Mekhtiev, published a four-page article titled “Statesman and Policy in Azerbaijan” in the governmental newspaper *Bakinskii Rabochii*.<sup>3</sup> He says the idea of Azerbaijanness was officially announced by President Heidar Aliev at the first World Conference of the Azerbaijanis on November 9, 2001. At that conference, the president stated that “The principal idea of the independent Azerbaijan is Azerbaijanness. Every Azerbaijani must boast of his national attributes; we must develop Azerbaijanness, its language, culture, national-spiritual value, customs, and traditions.”

Dr. Mekhtiev continues that Heidar Aliev realized this idea through his declaration of the adaptation of Azerbaijani as the state language, the use of the Latin alphabet to write it, and his appeal to the nation of Azerbaijan for the preservation of a national moral value.

As he was, and presumably still is, the head of the presidential administration; that is, the Secretary of the Security Council of Azerbaijan (*Rukovoditel' ispolnitel'nogo apparata prezidenta azerbaidzhanskogo respublika*), this idea of Azerbaijanness appears to be the official and national goal of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

### *1-2. Not the Iranian Mullas*

This politically sophisticated and theoretically vague conception of “Azerbaijanness” can be understood more clearly in an article by T. Sadykov.<sup>4</sup> At first, Sadykov denies the validity

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3 Ramiz Mekhtiev, “Politik i politika v Azerbaidzhane,” *Bakinskii Rabochii* (January 8-9, 2002).

4 T. Sadygov, “Problema natsional'noi identichnosti Azerbaidzhantsev: ‘poteriannyi’ narod,” *Zerkalo* (April 11, 2001).

of Pan-Turkism as a basis for the national strategy of Azerbaijan. Then he asserts that pro-Russian, pro-Iranian (Shi'ite), and pro-Western (democratic) orientations are all elements of Pan-Turkism. Thus, he annuls both the old slogan of the Musavat Party, "Islam, Turkism and democracy," and that of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan's, "Turkism, Islamism and economic self-decision." Sadygov concludes his short article by stating that, "The national idea must be in the first place Azerbaijani. And from there, within our father land, we can find ourselves, but the vividness of our answer to the call of history must not be dependent on the outside." It is neither Turkish Beys, nor Iranian Mullas, nor Russian Tovarishchi that they should rely upon. The problem is what they can find within themselves. As for language, since President Aliiev renamed the official language of the republic from Turkish to Azerbaijani, Azerbaijani linguists and philologists will find increasingly distinct characteristics and peculiarities in their language to explain why Azerbaijani is a separate language from Turkish. As for ethnic origin, neither Mekhtiev nor Sadygov link it to the Turkic peoples. It is clear that in Azerbaijan the aboriginal theory for the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijanis is still official. Thus, the Caucasian, Iranian and Turkic elements are combined to create the Azerbaijani Nation.<sup>5</sup> Being self-reliant, and not dependent on Turkey, is especially important for the present government because of the desire of some influential statesmen, like Vafa Guluzade or Vagif Gadzhibeili, for Azerbaijan to merge with Turkey's.<sup>6</sup>

It is commonly known that they share their language with the Turks and their religion with the Iranians. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, they have been able to separate the languages, in name at least. Then, how about the religion? They are

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5 The ethnic name for the Turks is not mentioned here as there are many non-Turkic Muslim minorities, such as the Lezgis, Avars, Kurds, Taleshes and Saingilo-Georgians in Azerbaijan.

6 R. Musabek, "Ob"edinenie Azerbaidzhana i Turtsii: Geopoliticheskaia, mehta ili begstvo ot real'nosti?" *Zerkalo* (June 24, 2000). As for the irritation that an Azerbaijani feels from his Turkish brothers, See Gerald Robbins, "Not a Persian Nor a Turk," *Freedom Review* 27 (March 1, 1996), p. 44 [www.scf.usc.edu. □baguirov/azeri/azerbaijan"3.htm].

Shi'ites, and so are the Iranians. There are two paths by which they can avoid the religious impact of the Iranian mullas. One is to underline the secular character of Azerbaijani society. Dr. Mekhtiev, a close adviser to the president, includes ethno-cultural, socio-political, and geopolitical elements into his Azerbaijanness. As a high official of a secular state, he does not dare to say anything about Islam. T. Sadygov wants a secular state also, but it is too late to exclude Islam from the political scene of the country. So they must proceed by the second path; to emphasize the unique characteristics of Azerbaijani Shi'ism.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. ISLAMIC FACTORS IN AZERBAIJAN

The socio-political factors of Islam are undeniable in the present Azerbaijan. As Kolesnikov notes, "Heidar Aliev stresses Islamic belief and the practice of prayer (*namaz*). On an official journey to Saudi Arabia in 1994, he performed a *little hajj* or *umra*, one of the varieties of pilgrimages to the sacred place of Islam, Qa'ba in Mekka, by Islamic regulation."<sup>8</sup> Although the republic of Azerbaijan has a secular constitution, the two main Islamic festivals of *ramazan* and *qurban-bairam* are now celebrated as national holidays,<sup>9</sup> and the official newspaper of the republic, *Bakinskii Rabochii*, publishes special issues on these occasions. To a questionnaire distributed by the daily newspaper *Zerkalo* about the significance of Islam to life, 44.8 % of respondents answered significantly, 46.8 % insignificantly and only 8.4 % did not choose to answer. This questionnaire for the readers of this newspaper was to be answered by E-mail. Thus, if distributed in rural areas or among people who have no access to E-mail, the percentage of respondents choosing the first category might have been much higher.<sup>10</sup>

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7 R. Motika shows a classification of types of Islamic belief in Azerbaijan.

8 L.F. Kolesnikov, "Gosudarstvennaia politika v otnoshenii religii i veruiushchikh v Azerbaidzhanskoi respublike," *Sovremennyi Azerbaidzhan* (Moskva, 2001), p. 207.

9 Ibid., p. 208.

10 R. Orudzhev, Kh.I. Islailova, "Vozmozhno li v Azerbaidzhane Islamskaia Revoliutsiia?" *Zerkalo* (February 13, 2001).

Islamist activities also attest in Azerbaijan. For example, the Islamic Party was organized in November 1991 at Nardaran, in the vicinity of Baku, and officially registered in 1992. The leader, Al-Akram Khadzhi (Aliakram Aliev), was a graduate of the philological department of a local university and worked as a porter at a food store. The philosophy of the party was that only Islam should play a constructive role in the country, and that the country could not avoid crisis without the principle of *sharia*. The Islamists are also against Pan-turkism because it hinders the unification of the Muslims. The party opened branches in many cantons and cities of the country in 1994, and it consisted of around fifty thousand party members. They then began training young Azerbaijani Islamists in Iran, resulting in a cautious reaction by the government. The party's registration was then annulled. In 1996, the leaders of the party were arrested and accused of being Iranian spies and were sentenced to 10 years' confinement in 1997. The organization was believed to be the foundation of the future Islamic revolution. In 1997, after changes in the law concerning freedom of belief, people without Azerbaijani citizenship were deprived of the right to distribute religious propaganda in the territory of the republic. It is said that about ten percent of the mosques in Azerbaijan were built using financial support from Iran.<sup>11</sup> On April 25, 2000, Baku's Sabil district office of the Party was attacked by the police, and all the belongings of the Party were confiscated by force, leading to a continued protest by Islamists.<sup>12</sup> At first, the party stood alone; then they began trying to cooperate with other organizations that were also denied registration by the Ministry of Law.<sup>13</sup> Another example of the activities of the radical

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11 "Iranskaia model' v SNG," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* (July 27, 2000).

12 Movsun, "Islamisty budut protestovat' samostoiatel'no," *Zerkalo* (May 9, 2000); Movsun, "Islamisty pribegnul k massovym protestam," *Zerkalo* (June 8, 2000); E. Garabalov, "Islamisty shturmuiut pomeschenie svoego vysshego shtaba," *Zerkalo* (June 22, 2000); Movsun, "Islamisty budut shturmovat' ploshchad' Azadlyg," *Zerkalo* (June 29, 2000).

13 "Islamskaia partiia pytaetsia konsolidirovat' 'nezaregistirovannykh,'" *Zerkalo* (August 2, 2000).

Islamists is the case of Jaish Allah, who killed a famous healer and his sons in 1999.<sup>14</sup>

A part of the Shi'ite population of Azerbaijan is under Iran's religious influence, and they don't like the Western orientation of the country. However, recently the government has felt that they are safe from the Islamists, so the Islamist leaders were released in 2002.<sup>15</sup> However, this summer a clash occurred between the villagers of Nardaran and the police, which resulted in one death, and the feelings of unrest still continues. The government announced that it was possible that the trouble with the villagers was instigated by foreigners. Since this incident, more attention has been paid to Islam.<sup>16</sup>

Except for the insurrection of Talysh in 1831, lead by the former Khan Mir Hasan,<sup>17</sup> there has been no serious rebellion against the Russians in Azerbaijan. Even during the days of the Tobacco Boycott movement and the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, there was no equivalent movement in Azerbaijan. Some

14 "Armiia allakha pred"iavlenna obvinenie," *Zerkalo* (September 6, 2000).

15 R. Murkadyrov, "Nardaranskoe sobytie i islamskii faktor," *Zerkalo* (June 16, 2002).

16 After the clash at Nardaran more attention had been paid to Islam [R. Nadiroglu, M. Jasharoglu, "MVD i Genprokuratura vozlagaiut otvetstvennost' na 'Religiozniy Sovet' Nardarana," *Zerkalo* (August 2, 2002)]. Even in May 2000, DUMK asked the Ministry of Education to introduce religious (Islamic) education at junior high schools, which is now under consideration [Dzh. Ibragimova, "Islam i srednee obrazovanie," *Zerkalo* (May 16, 2000)]. The Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and other opposition parties also demand religious education in secondary schools [REF/RL *Caucasus Report* 5:10 (March 14, 2002), <http://www.rferl.org/caucasus-report/2002/03/10-140302.html>].

In 1976, there were 16 registered mosques and a medrese in Azerbaijan, the number of mosques increased to 200 by 1992, and to about 1,300 with many religious schools and one university in 2002 [Raoul Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 115 (2001), pp. 111-124, [www.echess.frcentres/ceifr/assr/N115/006.htm](http://www.echess.frcentres/ceifr/assr/N115/006.htm)]. After 1992, about 150 mosques were built using foreign funds [REF/RL *Caucasus Report* 5:10 (2002.3.14), <http://www.rferl.org/caucasus-report/2002/03/10-140302.html>].

17 Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge/UK, 1985), p. 9.

authors attribute the reluctance of the Azerbaijanis to rebel against the Russian government to the Shi'ite doctrine of *taqiye* (the right to dissimulation and apostasy). Thus, Swietochowski writes, "Azerbaijani religious leaders found it political to hold thanksgiving prayers on the occasion of the Russian entry into Eruzerum" in 1878, and "the *Kaspiy* condemned the 1916 revolt of the Central Asian Muslims."<sup>18</sup> He reminds us of the popular saying under communist rule, "Keep religion in your heart," and he adds, "these words echoed the age-old native response to religious persecution. *Taqiya*, known also as *Ketman*, is the practice of dissimulation, including apostasy under compulsion or threat."<sup>19</sup> Switochowski explains the religious attitude of Azerbaijanis with the term of *taqiye*, but why does not he apply it to Iran. Imam Khomeini could also have kept his *ketman* without sacrificing many dear Iranian youths' lives in 1988-89. While, recently, some Azerbaijanis have argued that their religion is inherently different from that of Khomeini.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. THE SPIRITUAL BOARD AND THE STATE

#### ***3-1. Creation of national muftiyats in the Post-Soviet States***

Under Soviet rule, the religious activity of the Muslims was strictly controlled by the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (from 1944-65) and the Council for Religious Affairs (from 1965-1991) through the *muftiyats* or the Spiritual Boards of Muslims. After the fall of the Soviet government, the four Spiritual Boards of the Muslims of Russia, Central Asia, the North Caucasus, and the Transcaucasus were exposed to waves of change. Some of the chairmen were blamed because of their pro-Soviet attitudes and activities in the past.

In Central Asia, the Mufti, Shams al-Din Babakhanov, was expelled from his post and a rivalry rose between Tashkent and Almaty. In the North Caucasus, the Mufti was also expelled

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18 Ibid., p. 83.

19 Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan* (New York, 1995), p. 117.

20 By an informant, A. Mamedov.

from his post, and the board was re-constructed along republican lines with their national muftis. In Russia, Talgat Taj al-Din, the head of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the European part of the Soviet Union and Siberia (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man evropeiskoi chasti SSSR i Sibiri*), had strong opponents in Gabdulla Galijudin, Nurmukhammad Nigmatullin, Nafigulla Ashirov, Mukaddas Bibarsov and Abdul Vakhed Nijazov. In 1991, each of the subordinate muftiyats of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan were split into two and the disorder continued. Then, Gainut al-Din founded the counter Muftiyat of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Central Region of Russia (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man tsentral'no-evropeiskogo regiona Rossii=DUMTsER*), which covered all of Russia.

Thus, in Tatarstan, by the suggestion of the President of the Republic, Shamiev, the new national muftiyat, was established and the registration of Islamic organizations outside of this national muftiyat was prohibited by law. In other words, in Tatarstan, the state monopolizes the Islamic organization. On the other hand, in Bashkortostan, where Sheih Talgat still holds his position as the head of the Russian Muslims, the subordinate muftiyat of the Republic of Bashkortostan is not nationalized because, for the President of Bashkortostan, the prestige of Sheih Talgat as the head of the Russian Muslims is more useful than the establishment of an independent national muftiyat. In Azerbaijan, however, the situation is very different. The ruling head of the Spiritual Board, who had been leading the believers under Soviet rule, was able to overcome the crisis and maintain his post as before.<sup>21</sup>

### ***3-2. The Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Caucasus***

During the Soviet period in the Transcaucasus, the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Transcaucasus (DUMZ) was founded with its center at Baku. One of the most apparent differences between this spiritual board and the other spiritual boards is that,

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21 S. Kitagawa, *Russian Muslims' Attitude toward the Bombardments in Afghanistan*, MECAS series, No. 18 (brochure, 16 p.) (Sendai: Tohoku University, 2002).



here, the majority of the believers are Shi'ite Muslims. Thus, the head as Sheih al-Islam was a Shi'ite, and the second in charge was a Sunnate. In Azerbaijan, a rough geographical line of sectarian division is drawn along the line of the River Kur. The Northern districts of Shekki-Zakatala, Kubba-Kussar, and Shamakha-Qabala were predominantly Sunnate. The Southern districts of Nakhchevan, Karabakh, Apshelon, Gjanja, Mil, Mughan, and Lenkolan were Shi'ite.<sup>22</sup> At the turn of the sixteenth century at the rise of the Shi'ite dynasty of the Safavids, northern Azerbaijan, including Baku, was in the grasp of the local dynasty of the Shirvanshahids. The Shirvanshahids belonged to the Sunnate sect, and were the traditional enemy of the house of the Safavids. Ethnically, many of the inhabitants of these districts are Daghestanis. On the contrary, followers of the Safavids were ethnic Iranian peasants of the Talysh Mountains and Turkmen nomads of the Qarabakh-Arran plain.

Under the Tsarists' regime, both of the sects had their own judicial organizations (the Sunnates had 16 and the Shi'ites 20 after the reform of Khanikov,<sup>23</sup> or 16 Sunnate and 23 Shi'ite *qadiyats*) covering all of the Transcaucasus before 1917.<sup>24</sup> According to Bakikhanov, only the descendants of immigrants from Astrabad who settled around the river Samur, by the order of the Shah Tahmasb, were Shi'ites. All others were Sunnates.<sup>25</sup> The *uezd* of Baku, the majority of the *uezd* of Derbent, half of Shirvan, all the Salijan and a part of the Shekki and Qubba were Shi'ites; and half of Shirvan, the majority of the Shekki and Qubba *uezds*, the majority of Derbent, all the Tabasaran, Kjurin, and Samur (with the exclusion of the village of Minkindzhe), and all the Daghestan *uezds* were Sunnates. Among the Sun-

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22 Ali Abasov, "Islam v sovremennom Azerbaidzhane: Obrazy i Realii," *Rossia i Musl'manskii Mir* 10-11 (2001), p. 86.

23 A. Altstadt-Mihrani, "The Forgotten Factor: The Shi'i Mullahs of Pre-revolutionary Baku," in Ch. Lemerrier-Quellejay, G. Veinstein, S.E. Winbush, *Turco-Tatar Past Soviet Present* (Paris, 1986), p. 349.

24 Abasov, "Islam v sovremennom Azerbaidzhane," p. 87.

25 Bakikhanov, Abbas-Kuliaga, *Gjulistan-i Iram* (Baku, 1991), p. 22.

nates of Kjurin and Tabasaran, Derbent and all Daghestan were *shafites*, and the Qubba, Shekki and Shirvan were *hanafites*.<sup>26</sup>

Just before the Russian conquest, about half of the total number of Muslims were Sunnates and the other half were Shi'ites. It is now estimated that within the territory of the republic one-fourth of the Muslims are Sunnates and three-fourths are Shi'ites.

### ***3-3. The Sheih al-Islam and the State***

After the independence of Azerbaijan, the old DUMZ was re-organized as the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Caucasus (DUMK), and Allashkur Pashazade, the Chairman of the DUMZ, keeps his position. Being of Talysh origin, as implied by his family name,<sup>27</sup> he was born in 1949. He graduated from the Mir Arab religious school of Bukhara in 1971, then proceeded to the Tashkent High Institute of Islam. From 1975 to 1980, he worked as the secretary, and then in 1980 became the chairman of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Transcaucasus. In 1992, he was elected as the chairman of the High Religious Commission of the Peoples of the Caucasus.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Ibid., p. 26.

27 In regard to the system of recruitment of the cadres, Huseinova writes: "As a result, religion in the former Soviet republic has become a fiefdom, a clan affair complete with its own bureaucracy as well as its own jealousies and intrigues. The clan is dominated by mullahs from Lenkoran, in the southern tip of the republic, the homeland of Allahshukur Pashazade" [Irada Husseinova, "Azerbaijani Muslims Lose Faith," World News Archives (April, 2002), [www.thespa.com/1worldcommunication/worldnewsarchivesapril.htm](http://www.thespa.com/1worldcommunication/worldnewsarchivesapril.htm)].

28 Kolesnikov, "Gosudarstvennaia politika v otnoshenii religii...", p. 203; Even under Soviet rule, the Sheih al-Islam was to rule the Muslims of the three republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. The title of Sheih al-Islam was extended from the Transcaucasus (Zakavkaz) to the Caucasus (Kavkaz) as there are some Shi'ites in Daghestan and, due to economic problems in the Republic, about two million Azerbaijanis are living now in Russia. In this respect, the expansionary policy of the Spiritual Board is well founded. June 11, 2002, saw the opening, in Moscow, of the Agency of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Caucasia (DUMK) with the Sheih al-Islam. At the end of the ceremony the Sheih announced before the assembled journalists that this would be the spir-

This short description of his career shows that he was a typical religious bureaucrat of the Soviet times, and that the new Board's religious orientation is conservative.

In theory, he should cover all the Shi'ites in South Caucasus including Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and Daghestan, but, in fact, his parish coincides with the territory of Azerbaijan. Relations between the Spiritual Board and the Azerbaijani government are always on good terms. The Sheih serves the new government just as he did the Soviet government. For its part, the government rewarded him by allowing Islamic communities in the republic to register only within the framework of the Spiritual Board as allowed by the Law on Religion adopted in 1992 and amended three times in 1996 and again, most recently, in October 1997.<sup>29</sup>

In January 2001, during a TV interview, the Sheih al-Islam complained that in Azerbaijan there is no official *ramazan* festival. Another complaint of the Sheih al-Islam is the state control over religious matters. He says that, "in Georgia and Armenia, religion is separate from the state. They can open their own religious schools separate from the state system, but here I have to get permission from [Education Minister] Misiri Mardanov despite the fact that [Azerbaijani President] Heidar Aliev signed a decree. Who is responsible for implementing the laws? From head to foot, the Spiritual Board is under strict supervision. Every step is supervised, but why doesn't anybody ask the newcomers

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itual fireplace of the Azerbaijanis living in Russia, and the aim of the Muslim Agency was to construct comfortable conditions for the people coming from Caucasia who want spiritual support [*Zerkalo* (June 2, 2002)]. It is said that more than two million Azerbaijanis are living in Russia. On this occasion, the Sheikh visited Aleksii II and exchanged warm words. Pashazade told him that in Azerbaijan, where the Orthodox Christians and the Muslims, Russians and Azerbaijanis live in mutual esteem, widespread peace-promoting activities of the representatives of the Russian Church bring true love and thanks to Aleksii II [Muslim.ru.18 ijunja 2002g, <http://www.muslim.ru/mews.cgi?nid=92&nidp=7>].

<sup>29</sup> *Azerbaijan Daily Digest* (June 11, 2002), <http://eurasianet.org/resorce/Azerbaijan/hypermil/200202/0017.shtml>.

how they got a license for opening a Christian University? So when someone asks about our activity against missions, what should we answer? I do not want to blame the state leaders; they have announced their decisions. We are not satisfied with the activity of mid-level officials. Today, the state's attitude towards both the Spiritual Board and the freedom of conscience should be revised."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the Spiritual Board is strictly watched by the government, but, on the contrary, the foreign Christian missionaries, some of which are denied registration even in Europe for their sectarian natures, are factually free from supervision and have thousands of new converters in Azerbaijan. However, quite contrary to the second complaint, he also asked for governmental control over the activities of unregistered Islamic organizations funded by foreign countries. In 2001, a new committee, the State Committee for Relations with Religious Organizations, with Rafik Aliev, who is an organizer of the Center of Islamic Studies (*Tsentr islamovedcheskikh issledovaniï "Irshad"*),<sup>31</sup> as the chairman, started to renew permission for the activities of registered organizations. Jean-Christophe Peuch explains the relationship between the Sheikh and the Committee very clearly. "In line with the new registration requirement, all mosques will now be submitted to the single authority of the Baku-based Spiritual Board of the Caucasus Muslims."<sup>32</sup> It looks

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30 *Azerbaijan Daily Digest* (January, 2000), <http://eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200001/0013.shtml>.

31 G.V. Mikhailzade, "Preddverii Ashara," *Zerkalo* (April 3, 2001).

32 Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Azerbaijan. New Religious Policy May Target Iran, Arab Gulf States," *Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty* (August 23, 2001), [http://www.middleeastwire.com/iran/stories/20010823\\_2\\_memo.shtml](http://www.middleeastwire.com/iran/stories/20010823_2_memo.shtml)]; *Azerbaijan Daily Digest* (June 11, 2001), <http://eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/2000205/008.shtml>]. In March of 2001, 120 religious organizations in Azerbaijan were deregistered, of which 100 were Islamic. The registration of one hundred organizations was postponed. Before the introduction of the new law, there were 406 registered religious organizations [*RFE/RL Caucasus Report* 4:30 (August 16, 2001); *Keston News Service* (March 11, 2001)]. In January 2002, around 2,000 religious communities including 22 medreses built with Iranian funds, were deregistered and ordered to close by the Committee [*ANS TV* (January 21, 2002) cited by *REF/RL Caucasus Report* 5:10 (March 14, 2002), <http://www.rferl.org/caucasus-report/2002/03/10->

as if the government and the Board have been and still are on good terms, and are proceeding hand in hand.

The Spiritual Board monopolizes the religious authority and the law guarantees it, but the Board has no machinery for its enforcement. The Committee and the Interior Ministry need to regulate the activities of unregistered religious organizations and foreign missionaries. Thus, the relationship between the Spiritual Board and the State is complementary. The relationship between the Azerbaijani government and the Spiritual Board is more like the government of Tatarstan and the Muftiyat of the republic than the government of Bashkortostan and the Central Spiritual Board of the Muslims in Russia. Thus, the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Caucasus has a national Azerbaijani character.

#### 4. POSSIBILITY OF NATIONAL AZERBAIJANI SHI'ISM

##### *4-1. Sunni-Shi'ite Ecumenism*

Although the majority of both the Azerbaijanis and the Iranians belong to the one and the same Shi'ite sect of the Twelve

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140302.html].

The Spiritual Board of Caucasia is not free from scandals, too. A queer accusation against the Sheih al-Islam arose in 2001. Etibar Mansuroglu, the editor of an independent newspaper, "*Etimad*," published an article accusing the Sheih al-Islam of a secret deal with the Armenians. The editor was, in turn, accused by the Spiritual Board and the newspaper was ordered to close by the court [*Azerbaijan Daily Digest* (August, 2001), cited by: <http://eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijn/hypermail/200001800093.shtm>; <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/2000108/0063.html>]. Then, this year on May 4, one day before the Sheih al-Islam returned from abroad after four weeks of medical treatment, the former head of the Adjarbey Mosque, Alinovruz Ibragimov, wrote a letter to President Alijev complaining that the Sheik al-Islam had misappropriated funds and appointed illiterates as leaders of religious communities. The ex-head also asked for an investigation of the Sheih al-Islam's activities. According to some specialists, this may be a campaign to limit the power of the Sheih al-Islam [*RFE/RL, Caucasus Report* 4:30,16 (August 16, 2001)]. Anyhow, it is said that out of 500 mullahs throughout the country, only 50 have the necessary qualifications required for their service [*IWPR'S Caucasus Reporting Service* 27, <http://www.soros.org/caucasus/0039.html>].

Imams, contrary to the radical character of the Iranian Shi'ism, a conciliatory relation sometimes exists between the Azerbaijani Shi'ites and other religions or the government.

In Azerbaijan, it is attested that the Muslim population use their mosques in common and are not separated from each other. Mullas serve in both Shi'ia and Sunni rituals.<sup>33</sup> Dr. Abasov calls this tendency *ecumenism*. We are reminded of the failed attempt of Nadir-Shah Afshar to unify the Sunnates and the Shi'ites on the occasion of his coronation in 1736. According to his plan, the Shi'a would be treated as the fifth *mazhab* in the Sunnate judicial structure,<sup>34</sup> but this plan was defeated without any positive support from either side when he died in 1747.

Shi'ite hostility toward the Sunnates and the Ottomans continued until the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29 and the Caucasian War of 1853-55, when the Russian government mustered Muslim-Shi'ites volunteers in Azerbaijan.<sup>35</sup>

However, helped by the works of activists of enlightened thought, Pan-Islamism, Pan-Turkism, and socialism, such as Akhonzade (1812-1878), Agaev (1870-1938), Husainzade (1864-1941), Narimanov (1870-1925), and others, the ecumenical tendency has been enlarged, so that the first Republic of Azerbaijan enacted a secular constitution. The Shi'ites' attitude toward the Sunnates changed before that, in the second half of the nineteenth century in Azerbaijan. After the Soviet occupation, religious activity was suppressed so severely that in the 80's, Heidar Aliev, at an interview with Soviet journalists, asserted that the average Azerbaijani did not know to which group of Islam they belonged.

There also has been testimony that the Azerbaijani Muslims light candles at churches as well as Islamic sacred places, and the general attitude of the Caucasian Spiritual Board is reconciliatory and warm. In 2002, at a meeting with the head of

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33 Abasov, "Islam v sovremennom Azerbaidzhane," p. 86.

34 Hamid Algar, "Religious Forces in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Iran," *Cambridge History of Iran* 7 (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 706-709.

35 Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920...*, p. 7; Idem, *Russia and Azerbaijan*, p. 10.

the Russian Orthodox Church, Aleksii the Second, the Sheih al-Islam, announced that in Azerbaijan, where the Orthodox-Christians and Muslims, the Russians and the Azerbaijanis live in concordance and mutual respect, general peace activities of the representatives of the Russian Church caused the whole nation to feel real love and gratitude for Aleksii.<sup>36</sup>

It may be clear that in the South Caucasus, where an equilibrium existed between the Christians and Muslims, and between Shi'ites and Sunnates, the Shi'ites and others traditionally kept a mutually amicable atmosphere, but in Iran, the general attitude of the Shi'ite majority toward Christians and Sunnates cannot be called friendly. If something was changed during or after Russian colonialism, how was it done?

#### ***4-2. Taqiya***

Except for the insurrection of 1831, there have been no serious rebellions against Russian colonial policies.<sup>37</sup> Even during the days of the Tobacco Boycott movement and the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, there was no reaction in Azerbaijan. Dr. Ali Abasov writes of Russian Azerbaijan that the Islamic clergy did not play a role in political movements against imperialism or the monarchy as they did in Iran.<sup>38</sup> He said that, "in Azerbaijan, the peril to the colonialists that were waiting for them came from quite a different class of Azerbaijani society – one can say – from a direction that they were not expecting. Azerbaijan is an Islamic country that existed under direct European colonial rule longer than others and experienced a deeper European cultural influence than did the others. This tendency was especially characterized by the oil boom of the late 1800's and the early 1900's, which made Baku a huge industrial and

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36 *Novosti Soveta muftijev Rossii* (July 18, 2002), cited by Muslim.ru. about the traditional peaceful relations between the Muslims and the Armenians, See. S.A. Mamedov, *Istoricheskie sviazi azerbaidzhanskogo i armianskogo narodov: vtoraiia polovina XVII v. i pervaiia tret' XVIII v.* (Baku, 1977).

37 Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920...*, p. 9.

38 Abasov, "Islam v sovremennom Azerbaidzhane," p. 87.

cultural center. Just like other colonies, in Azerbaijan it slowly accumulated the layers of local elites who were necessary for the colonizers to rule a society culturally foreign to them with European education.”

Specialists in Islamic history explain this by the Shi‘ite doctrine of *taqiya* (the right to dissimulation and apostasy). Thus, Swietochowski writes, “Azerbaijani religious leaders found it political to hold thanksgiving prayers on the occasion of the Russian entry into Eruzerum.”<sup>39</sup> “*Taqiya*, known also as *ketman*, is the practice of dissimulation, including apostasy under compulsion or threat.”<sup>40</sup> They might be persecuted under Tsarism and communism, but as Dr. Abasov mentioned above, the Azerbaijani clergy did not play any leading role even under the first republic (1918-1920), which was the first Muslim republic in the world to have a secular constitution. Regarding this concern, Abasov’s progressive explanation is more understandable to me than that of Swietochowski because the Islamic revolution of Iran was accomplished in spite of fierce suppression by the Shah’s government, and in Azerbaijan there was no active approaches by the clergy to politics even after 1988. However, Abasov cannot explain the present situation in Iran and Azerbaijan. After decades of modernization, Iran has more of an intelligentsia and proletariat than Azerbaijan had at the beginning of the last century. Why didn’t the Azerbaijani Muslim intelligentsia and proletariat do what Iranian Muslim intelligentsia and proletariat did? Is there any theological or institutional difference between the two?

#### ***4-3. The Change from Akhbarism to Uslism in Iran and Iraq***

Just before the annexation of the Azerbaijani territory by Russia, an important change occurred in Iranian Shi‘ism in the late 18th and early 19th century. It was the change from *Akhbarism* to *Uslism*. By the 14th century, two mutually antagonistic judicial schools came into existence in Shi‘ism. In the 17th century, *Akhbarism* gained dominance under the Safavids due to

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39 Ibid., p. 83.

40 Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan*, p. 117.



the efforts of Mulla Muhammad Amin al-Astrabadi (d. 1624). Their principles were “the denial of the possibility of arriving at certainty through exercising reason (*‘aql*); the denial of the validity and the proof (*dalil*) of the Qur’an on the pretext that any understanding of the Qur’an lay exclusively in the hands of the Prophet’s *ahl albayt*, and that our duty is to consult the *hadith* of the *ahl albayt* [for its interpretation and understanding]; the assertion that *ijma‘* was the innovation of the Sunnis; the assertion that, of the four valid proofs (*adila*); i.e., the Book, the *sunna*, *ilma‘* and *‘aql*, only the *sunna* is able to lead to certainty; the assertion that all the *hadith* that appear in the “four books” are true and valid, and of categorical provenance [from the Imams] (*qat‘i al-sudur*).”<sup>41</sup>

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the Usli school had again become popular. One of their main theorists was Aqa Muhammad Wahid Baqer Behbahani (1705-1791). The Uslists preferred the *‘aql* to the *sunna* when the two were in contradiction. Common people, as *motaqllids*, are obliged to follow the judicial judgments of the *mojtaheds* or high lawyers. They began to claim that before the return of the Twelfth Imam, the lawyers (*foqaha*) must act for him. Then came the political idea of the late Imam Khomeini concerning “*velayat-e foqaha*” or the rule of jurists, which was the theoretical basis of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

The victory of *Uslism* caused the creation in Iran of an elaborate hierarchy of jurists with one or more *marja‘ taqlid* on its summit. The number of *mujtahids* increased from five at the beginning of the 19th century to one hundred at the end of the century.<sup>42</sup> Among them were the *Ayat Allahs*, the first of whom appeared at the end of the century, such as Mirza Hasan Shirazi (d. 1895), Sayyid ‘Abd Allah Bihbahani (ca. 1844-1910) and

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41 Murtada Mutahhari, “The Principles of Ijtihad in Islam,” *Al-Serat* X:1 [http://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/ijtihad.htm]; Algar, “Religious Forces...,” pp. 710-716.

42 W. Floor, “Changes and Development in the Judicial System of Qajar Iran (1800-1925),” in Bosworth, E. and C. Hillenbrand, eds., *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Change, 1800-1925* (Costa, Mesa/CA, 1983), p. 113.

Sayyid Muhammad Tabatabai (1843-1921). Later, the post of *Ayat Allah al-‘uzma* as supreme *marja‘ taqlid* was applied to Burujirdi (1875-1962) in 1949 and Khumayni (1902-1989) in 1963.<sup>43</sup> It was the uslid theory and the influence of *mojtaheds* over their *taqlid* that enabled the Tobacco Boycott movement of 1891-92, the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-08, and the Islamic Revolution of 1979. As Hamid Algar says, “the extensive role of the ‘ulama in the 19th century Iran would not have been possible without the triumph of the Usulis over the Akhbaris.”<sup>44</sup>

However, unlike the *Ayat Allah al-‘Uzma* of Iran, Sheih al-Islam of Azerbaijan cannot be an absolute interpreter of the Shi‘ite dogma nor the sacred law, and he cannot be a jurist-king instead of the awaited Messiah.

As for the practical differences between the Usulis and the Akhbaris on marriage, the former accepts the marriage of Muslim men with Christian or Jewish women only for the short term, the latter make it valid and lawful without any conditions. It may even be useless to add that the Usuli marriage regulations are absolutely unacceptable in present-day Azerbaijan where there is a considerably high rate of inter-ethnic marriages.

#### ***4-4. Religious Institutions in Azerbaijan***

In 1823, the post of Sheih al-Islam was founded in Tbilisi (Tiflis) and akhond Muhammad Ali Huseinzade was appointed to it. About this time, when the treaty of Torkmenchai was agreed on between Russia and Qajarid Iran, the Khannates of Erivan and Nakhchievan were seeded to Russia. In western Transcaucasia, Russia took Imeretia (1810), Guria (1828), Odishi (1854), and Abkhazia (1864), in which, during the years of Ottoman rule, a considerable part of the inhabitants were Sunni Muslims. Then in 1872, Shi‘ite and Sunnate spiritual boards (*Dukhovnoe*

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43 D.M. Maceoin, “Changes in Authority in Qajar Shi‘ism,” in Edmund Bosworth, Carole Hillenbrand, eds., *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural change 1800-1925* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), pp. 162-163.

44 Algar, “Religious Forces...,” p. 716.

*Pravlenie*) were founded and controlled by a sheih al-Islam and a mufti, and separate medresse or seminario were established.<sup>45</sup>

Hitherto unknown to us, the Muslim religious administration in the Transcaucasia was examined by Dr. Mostashari using biographical materials.<sup>46</sup> The Russian government wanted to create its own Muslim educational system to get rid of the foreign Turkish as well as Iranian influence. As shown in the plan made by Baron P.V. Hagn and E.A. Golovin,<sup>47</sup> the pro-Muslim policy of Governor-general Volontsov was planned by the famous orientalist N.V. Khanikov, and it was put into practice in 1849, guaranteeing full religious freedom to Islam, including the observance of elementary religious holidays. In addition, mosques, cemeteries, and the shrines of Muslim saints were protected by Russian law. In return, the Shi'ites of the Transcaucasia were required to abstain from contacting the Shi'ites under other governments without the knowledge of the higher religious administration. Shi'ites were required to respect churches and holy places of other religions in the empire, and to pray for the long life of the Emperor.<sup>48</sup>

The Russians monopolized religious education for Muslim clergy, but Altstadt-Mihrani writes that the Russian Muslim religious educational institutions were not adequate for training future members of the Shi'a clergy in the middle of the nineteenth century, and many youths chose to study abroad in Iran or Iraq. She continues; "to what could an *alim* from Russian Azerbaijan return if he went home? The Ecclesiastical Administration was an administrative straightjacket. Upper-level appointments, with their comfortable salaries and privileges, were few and unlikely to go to a foreign-trained candidate. Just as education within Azerbaijan tied ordinary mullahs to their homes,

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45 Abasov, "Islam v sovremennom Azerbaidzhane," p. 87.

46 Firouzeh Mostashari, *Tsarist Colonial Policy, Economic Change, and the making of the Azerbaijani Nations: 1828-1905*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1995, pp. 332-402.

47 Ibid., p. 354.

48 Ibid., pp. 457-458.

advanced education in Iran or Iraq brought all *tullab* into a new network which they were unlikely to leave.”<sup>49</sup>

Dr. Motika is quite correct in saying that “Shi‘ite Azerbaijan could not develop a religious hierarchy comparable to Iran or Iraq with Ayattollahs or even a *marja-i taqlid* (‘source for emulation’) at the top, a fact which in future will automatically lead to a growing orientation towards Qom, Najaf and other places of Shi‘ite higher learning.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the present Azerbaijani clergy is not a mediator between the hidden Imam and the mankind, and the Spiritual Board of the Azerbaijani Muslims is more an administrative than religious institution from Shi‘ism’s point of view.

## CONCLUSION

After independence, Islam became one of the most important factors in Azerbaijani politics. The Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Caucasus is counted as national, because it is privileged by the State to monopolize spiritual guidance within the Republic of Azerbaijan, although the Board has an international character covering the Shi‘ites of not only Azerbaijan, but also of Daghestan, Georgia and Armenia.

For some ideologues of the National idea, emphasis on the characteristics of the national Azerbaijani Shi‘ism is an indispensable part of national identity of the Azerbaijanis.

Western historiography shows that the difference between Azerbaijani Shi‘ism and that of Iran was caused during the 19th and 20th centuries by the Tsarists’ and the Soviet rule; in that the Shi‘ites of Azerbaijan could not involve themselves in the changes that occurred in Iran. Enlightenment and social growth during those two centuries are a part of the national historiography of this country, but the underdevelopment of the Uslid clerical hierarchy remains a unwritten page in the national historiography of Azerbaijan at present.

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49 Altstadt-Mihrani, “The Forgotten Factor...,” p. 352.

50 Motika, “Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan.”