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The Revival of Islam

How Do External Factors Shape the
Potential Islamist Threat in Azerbaijan?

FUAD SHAHBAZOV

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CONTENTS

Introduction **5**

The Soviet Model of Islam in the South Caucasus **7**

Islam Returns in Modern Azerbaijan **9**

The State Returns Control over Islam **12**

The Struggle with Radical Shi'a Influence **16**

Azerbaijani Foreign Fighters: Threats to Stability **19**

Conclusion **23**

ABSTRACT

Considerable scholarly work on the post-Soviet region has focused on the various regional conflicts and security challenges, but rarely on the roots of the growing Islamism factor as a new source of threat. Following the demise of the Soviet Union, with its forcibly imposed atheist agenda, the majority of Muslim countries in Central Asia and the North Caucasus witnessed growing Islamic sentiments that led to a long-term, violent Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus and, to some extent, in Central Asia. However, unlike other Muslim countries in the post-Soviet space, Islam plays a minimal role in Azerbaijan. The country has maintained its unique secular model mainly due to the firm “secular nationalism” ideas put forward by local intellectuals since the 19th century. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand the historical evolution process of Islamic thought in Azerbaijan, underline the role of certain external actors in promoting radical Islamic ideology, and understand how they pose an existential threat to national security and identity.

Keywords: *Extremism in the Caucasus, foreign Islamic organizations, Islamic revivalism in Azerbaijan*

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of socialist ideology and the Soviet Union's subsequent breakup undoubtedly provided a significant victory for the West over the communist threat. However, that victory changed the nature of security problems in an explicitly unstable post-Soviet region, particularly in the Muslim countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus region. The most important consequence of de-Sovietization for landlocked Central Asian countries and the multi-ethnic Muslim Caucasus has been the rediscovery of a rich Islamic heritage and identity, on one hand, and the major split in the *ummah* (community) between Sunni and Shi'a—the two major branches of Islam—on the other. The re-engagement processes with Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus (both northern and southern parts) have differed significantly owing to their varied historical, social, and economic backgrounds. Thus, Islam's social and political impact in the North Caucasus (today's Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia in Russia) must be noted. This may be explained by the presence of robust Sufi (mystical Islam) traditions that withstood the long-term Soviet atheist propaganda.¹

In contrast to the northern Caucasus states, re-Islamization has been less intensive in the South Caucasus, especially in Azerbaijan. Historically, compared with other Muslim nations in the Caucasus, Azerbaijani society has experienced lower engagement with Islam. This was shaped by the legacy of the forced modernization policy of the Russian Empire, along with the existence of a multi-ethnic society, including Polish, Russian, Jewish, Armenian, and Georgian communities living in the major cities; the emergence of a local enlightenment movement (*maarifçilik*); and the oil boom at the end of the 19th century. The prominent members of the enlightenment movement in Azerbaijan mostly embraced a “secular nationalism” ideology, established national newspapers, charitable organizations, and harshly criticized ignorance, religious fanaticism, and the chauvinistic policy of Tsarist Russia. Moreover, the lengthy period of oil-related urbanization attracted a flood of Western companies to the country, which led to a rapid Westernization of local society at the beginning of the 20th century. A modernization policy with atheist rhetoric was adopted during the Soviet years. In this regard, society's transition to a secular political regime was not a new phenomenon for Azerbaijan. Under the strict control of the Communist

¹ Galina Yemelianova, “Sufism and politics in the North Caucasus,” 2010. Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity, pp: 661-688

regime, the nation's understanding of Islam shifted to one based on cultural and social factors rather than spirituality. The Azeri model of secularism is, in fact, indigenous to the country, with no similar counterpart in other former Soviet Muslim countries whose forcibly imposed secular traditions during the Soviet era have been significantly challenged by the Islamic revival since the Soviet Union's demise.²

Following the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, Azerbaijan—a secular Muslim country within a politically sensitive neighborhood—regained its independence. Nevertheless, with the collapse of the Iron Curtain, Azerbaijani society was faced with a growing Islamic revivalism challenge originating mainly from the North Caucasus region, with its ongoing Islamic-based insurgency amid rising conflict in Chechnya in the mid-1990s. Moreover, former President of Azerbaijan Abulfaz Elchibey's decision in 1992 to sign law No. 281 on freedom of religious belief enabled all believers to freely disseminate the principles of their faith and create religious communities and educational institutions, causing a flood of diverse religious groups from Turkey, Iran, and the Persian Gulf into Azerbaijan. The local government's decision to pass this decree on religious freedom explicitly contributed to the growth of religious extremism in the country. Since 2013, the number of jihadists from the former Soviet republics of Russia, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia has increased rapidly as the devastating sectarian war in Syria and the geopolitical turmoil in Iraq have become magnets for young sympathizers of radical Islamic ideology. The growing threat of radical Islamism pushed the Azerbaijani government to take adequate measures to counter religious extremism by tightening its grip over religious communities and organizations.

This study provides a comparative analysis of Islam's historical role in Azerbaijan, overviewing the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. It also examines the growing role of radical Islamic thought in the fragile South Caucasus region, which was shaped by influential external factors. The essay will answer questions about how Islam gained new impetus in Azerbaijan during the independence years, and which factors led to the popularization of radical Islamic thought in Azerbaijan. The study also traces the essential methods and means available to Azerbaijan, with its secular political regime, to prevent homegrown religious extremism.

² Altay Goyushov, "Islamic revival in Azerbaijan," 2008. Hudson Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.hudson.org/research/9815-islamic-revival-in-azerbaijan>

THE SOVIET MODEL OF ISLAM IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

The Sovietization of Azerbaijan would have a powerful impact on the nation and shape its development over the next seven decades. Initially, Sovietization did not appear to carry disastrous consequences. According to Cornell, “the 1920s were characterized by the policy of *korenizatsia*, best translated as “nativization,” which meant central support for the consolidation and nation-building of the USSR’s many nations.”³ Thus, under the new nationality policy imposed on all constituent republics, Azerbaijan continued to develop. In the very beginning of the Bolshevik occupation period, some prominent Azerbaijani intellectuals and modernist *Jadid reformers* under Nariman Narimanov’s leadership were allowed to teach secular subjects in the national schools of Soviet Azerbaijan. While secular schools in Soviet Azerbaijan enjoyed some freedom at the beginning of the 1920s, the local religious schools and clerics were subjected to aggressive forms of persecution and taxation. High taxes on religious buildings and clergy were meant to cripple the religious bodies financially.⁴ As a result, nearly all religious missionaries and schools became illegal in the Muslim Caucasus, and only registered schools were allowed to teach Islam. Hence, in these schools, education was based mostly on oral teaching methods, including two official Islamic institutes in the Soviet Union, the Miri-Arab *madrassa* (religious school) in Bukhara and the Imam Ismail Al-Bukhari institute in Tashkent.⁵ However, the numbers of students in these schools were limited owing to the local Communist parties’ strict control.

Many spiritual leaders and clerics had been executed in Stalin’s murderous purges across the Soviet Union in 1937, with mosques and shrines being destroyed. Unlike his predecessor Vladimir Lenin, who pursued a relatively liberal nationality policy, Stalin’s purges encompassed not only clerics but also prominent members of the national secular intelligentsia. Almost the entire intellectual class of Azerbaijan was destroyed between 1936 and 1939. In the 1940s, with the eruption of World War II, the situation explicitly changed. The ruling Communist party thought that religion might play a useful role in

³ Svante Cornell, Halil Karaveli, Boris Ajeganov, “Azerbaijan’s Formula: Secular Governance and Civic Nationhood,” *Silk Road Paper*, November 2016, Pp: 38.

⁴ Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, “A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Anti-Religious Policies,” 1987. New York St. Martin’s Press. Pp: 136.

⁵ Emmanuel Karagiannis, “Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb Ut-Tahrir,” December 2009, Routledge. Pp: 23-24.

mobilizing people against the expansion of Nazi Germany. Therefore, Stalin ordered a cessation of the persecution of Muslims, establishing state-supervised “Religious Councils” instead. Thus, in 1943 the *Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan* was opened in Tashkent, and the *Spiritual Administration of the Caucasus Muslims* was re-established in Baku in 1944.⁶ In reality, these new religious organizations were mostly symbolic bodies with no real power in religious affairs. The policy of persecuting religious Muslims in the Caucasus and Central Asia was further altered shortly after the end of the war. After Stalin’s death, Nikita Khrushchev’s “thaw” to some extent relaxed the hard stance on Islam and pious Muslims in the Caucasus, while in Central Asian countries, practicing the majority of Islamic rituals became harder. In Azerbaijan, the state’s power and authority over religion were still unquestionable. Throughout the years, the state apparatus created an extensive network of state-trained *mullahs*, part of which was linked to the organs of state security.⁷ Thus, the close relations of representatives of Islam with those of the Communist atheist agenda undermined their political and spiritual credentials among Muslims, which became a crucial factor in Azerbaijan’s de-Islamization by the end of the 1980s. Nasrin Aleskerova’s investigation suggests that only 18 registered mosques and 53 registered religious communities (including non-Islamic ones) existed in Azerbaijan in 1985, including one Baptist community, three synagogues, and three orthodox and two Armenian churches.⁸

Islam in the Soviet Union gained a new impetus with the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which triggered the more devoutly religious Muslims in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, leading them to sympathize with the Afghan Mujahideen movement. Nevertheless, unlike other Muslim regions of the Soviet Union, this did not cause deep concern in Azerbaijan. The reason was that, although the increased interest in religion established itself in the second half of the 1980s in Azerbaijan as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, its ethnocultural identity was relegated to the symbolic aspects of social life. Although the vast majority of Azerbaijanis identified themselves as Muslims, “only a tiny share of them, generally less than a quarter of those who

⁶ Caucasus Muslims Board, “Islam in Azerbaijan during the Soviet Union (USSR),” Retrieved from <http://qafqazislam.com/index.php?lang=az§ionid=100&id=161>.

⁷ Martha Brill Olcott, “In the Whirlwind of Jihad,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012. pp. 66-67.

⁸ Nasrin Aleskerova, “Ислам в Азербайджане: история и современность.” Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2005. Retrieved from <https://ge.boell.org/en/2005/01/16/islam-v-azerbaydzhan-istoriya-i-sovremennost>

considered themselves Muslims, had even a basic understanding of Islam's pillars," according to Soleimanov and Ehrmann.⁹

Unlike other Muslim nations in the USSR, Azerbaijan witnessed a gradual resurgence of nationalist ideology rather than Islamism. The tendency of promoting a sense of Azerbaijani identity was supported by the then-leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev. Further, it led to the development of a more nationalistic-Turkic identity rhetoric at the beginning of the 1990s. Therefore, the definition of the religious identity and its structure in the 1980s and 1990s in Azerbaijan seemed more complicated than other Muslim post-Soviet republics. Notwithstanding, it is necessary to underline that Azerbaijan has long been a Shi'a-dominated Muslim country. However, there is also a sizable Sunni community in the northern part of the country. Estimates vary about the exact numbers of Shi'a and Sunni Muslims in the country today. According to a survey conducted by the well-known Pew Research Center in 2009, "65–75% of Azerbaijan (about 6 million) identify themselves as Shi'a Muslims."¹⁰ In the case of Sunnism, two main *madhhabs* (schools of jurisprudence) are historically distributed in Azerbaijan: Shafi'i and Hanafi. In modern Azerbaijan, the Hanafi madhhab gained more followers and became the main Sunni branch, while the Shafi'i madhhab appeared to be prevalent mostly in the northern parts of the republic. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the difference between madhhabs has not been a severe factor in determining religious identity in Azerbaijan.

ISLAM RETURNS IN MODERN AZERBAIJAN

The end of rule by Moscow in 1991 was a turning point in Azerbaijanis' relationship with Islam. The subsequent Islamic revival all around the country is not only an internal development but also something resulting from influences of neighboring countries such as Iran, Turkey, and some Arab countries.¹¹ Hence, direct and face-to-face contacts of Azerbaijani people (mostly a new, younger generation) with various Islamic ideologies and Islamic

⁹ Emil Soleimanov & Maya Ehrmann, "The Rise of Militant Salafism in Azerbaijan and Its Regional Implications," Middle East Policy Council, Fall (3) Volume XX, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://mepc.org/rise-militant-salafism-azerbaijan-and-its-regional-implications>

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," October 2009. Retrieved from: <http://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idatcs/00011909:cbf45d797f6515d212cec2ec5ef6fb5f.pdf>.

¹¹ Bayram Balci, "Shia-Sunni Sectarianism in the Middle East and Its Echo in Azerbaijan." Carnegie Moscow Center", June 2014. Retrieved from: <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/56032>.

scholars from different Muslim countries have contributed to the diversification and enrichment of Islam in Azerbaijan. The growing influence of the Islamic revival in Azerbaijan was made possible through the development of nationalism. After regaining independence from the USSR, Azerbaijan, like other post-Soviet countries, was plagued by territorial conflict. Indeed, the bloody conflict with Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh (1989–2020) prompted the rise of “Muslim identity” among Azerbaijani believers. When the Azerbaijan Popular Front rose to power in 1992, both nationalism and the emerging Islamic identity were leading forces that mobilized society. However, the political elite and the government of President Abulfaz Elchibey attempted to promote Islam mainly as a cultural factor and a religious element in social life. Elchibey’s administration had come to power with a pan-Turkic ideology and a pro-Western orientation, with the aim of distancing Azerbaijan from Russia and instead establishing a deep cooperation with Turkey. Nevertheless, during the lone year of the pro-Turkish Elchibey government, one of the most prominent Islamic revivalist challenges was the large footprint established by Turkey’s non-governmental Islamic funds and organizations in Azerbaijan.

The growing presence of external Islamic funds led to further politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan. Political Islam has been more diverse in Azerbaijan than the Central Asian countries, however, consisting of three main groups: Iranian-oriented Shi’as; Salafis, adherents of a so-called pure Islam; and Nurcular groups, adherents of a more progressive Islam. Turkish Islam is based on the more moderate Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. It tends to put more emphasis on *Qiyas* (analogy) and *Ra’y* (personal opinion) than an emphasis on Hadith choices and the deductions drawn from them.¹² Turkish religious activities in Azerbaijan are carried out primarily through two channels: governmental and non-governmental. Starting from 1996, Turkey’s *Diyanet İsleri Bakanligi* (Directorate of Religious Affairs under the Government of Turkey) launched a scholarship programme for Azeri students who wanted to study theology in Turkey. In the case of non-governmental organizations, a Turkish-born movement, *Nur* or *Nurcular*, was the second channel for promoting Turkish Islam. It is a less radical and aggressive brand of Islam compared with radical Shi’a and Salafi branches. Unlike other Islamic groups, Nurcular has positioned itself away from any kind of political rhetoric, concerning itself mostly with promoting Muslims’ ethical and moral

¹² Ahmad Hasan, “Early modes of Ijtihad: Ra’y, Qiyas and Istihsan,” *Islamic Studies*, Vol: 6, No: 1, 1967. Pp: 50-52

obligations. Its audience has been the well-educated (mainly Western-educated) younger generation. As part of its exportation mission, Nurcular used to operate several mosques in the country and also featured prominently in the theology faculty of Baku State University. The center of pro-Turkish religious communities became the *Shahidlar* (Martyrs) and *Ilahiyat* (Theology) mosques attached to Baku State University's Department of Theology. In these mosques, prayers were conducted by Turkish religious facilitators and, in the case of the *Shahidlar* mosque, by the Diyanet representative.¹³

The Nurcular movement became very popular among Azeri youth from the 1990s to the 2000s as it was not too conservative and offered a more social perspective to its loyal adherents. However, the deepening conflict between the Turkish government and the homegrown movement—now associated with its dominant offshoot known widely as the *Gülen* movement and culminating in its alleged involvement in a failed coup in July 2016—shattered the movement's image as avowedly non-political and led to mass closures of Nurcular schools. Some Naqshbandi Sufi orders were also among the Turkish religious representatives in Azerbaijan at the end of the 1990s. Notably, these included those of the religious leaders Osman Nuri Topbaş and Suleyman Tunahan. One of the only Turkish organizations with an openly religious profile was the Azerbaijani Youth Aid Foundation, created by the former. This foundation assisted internally displaced people of Nagorno-Karabakh and contributed to the construction of the Zaqatala branch of Baku Islamic University and its mosque.¹⁴ Ultimately, the government's efforts to ban foreign missionaries did not work in Turkey's case, as the cultural and linguistic closeness between the Azerbaijani and Turkish nations made Turkish Islam easily adaptable for many in the population.

¹³ Sofie Bedford, "Turkey and Azerbaijan: One Religion-Two States?", Routledge Publishing, June 2016, Pp: 10. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/25875225/Turkey_and_Azerbaijan_One_Religion-Two_States_In_Murad_Ismayilov_and_Norman_A._Graham_eds._Turkish-Azerbaijani_Relations_One_Nation_-_Two_States

¹⁴ Bayram Balci, "Turkey's religious outreach in Central Asia and the Caucasus," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/01/27/turkey-s-religious-outreach-in-central-asia-and-caucasus-pub-54357>

THE STATE RETURNS CONTROL OVER ISLAM

Until 1993, the local elite in Azerbaijan was, on the whole, well-disposed to the return of Islam to the public sphere and turned a blind eye to the proselytizing activities of foreign Islamic missionaries. In 1993, after President Heydar Aliyev came to power, the matter of Islamic revivalism was moved to the top of the domestic policy agenda. Aliyev's policy of pragmatic nationalism mainly relied on the promotion of a secularist model of government, including "prevention of the process of the politicization of Islam; the tightening of state control over the Islamic sphere; and the re-institutionalizing of official Islam, represented by its Soviet-era leader of the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), *Shaykh-ul-Islam* Haji Allahshukur Pashazade."¹⁵ The CMB promoted the existence of a unique national "Azeri model of Islam" that is non-political, far from any radical ideology, and features a peaceful coexistence between Shi'a and Sunni communities.¹⁶ Thus, under the leadership of the *Shaykh-ul-Islam*, the local Islamic and political establishment attempted to harness the growing Islamic revival and make it compatible with the secular nature of Azerbaijan.

However, Azerbaijani society witnessed the growth of a new brand of Islam in the early 2000s: *Salafism*. In general, Salafism is divided into four main groups, but in Azerbaijan, scholastic (*al-salafiyyah al-ilmiyyah*) and loyalist (*al-salafiyya ahl al-wala*) Salafism are more prevalent, while the jihadist (*al-salafiyyah al-jihadiyyah*) and activist (*al-salafiyyah al-daawiyyah*) currents are not widespread.¹⁷ Salafism was introduced in Azerbaijan mainly by missionaries funded by Arab countries, including Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The spread of Salafism began in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s and was connected mainly to the local branch of the Kuwait-based *Revival of the Islamic Heritage Society* (RIHS), established in Baku in 1993. However, in 1998, the organization's most notable and charismatic leader, Sheikh Salim Zakharna, was expelled from the country for "promoting religious fanaticism and hatred," and the Baku branch

¹⁵ Galina Yemelianova, "Islam, Nationalism, and State in the Muslim Caucasus," *Caucasus Survey*, 1 (2), 2015: Pp: 8–9. Retrieved from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23761199.2014.11417291>

¹⁶ Sofie Bedford, "Turkey and Azerbaijan: One Religion-Two States?," Routledge Publishing, June 2016, Pp: 8. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/25875225/Turkey_and_Azerbaijan_One_Religion-Two_States_In_Murad_Ismayilov_and_Norman_A._Graham_eds._Turkish-Azerbaijani_Relations_One_Nation_-_Two_States

¹⁷ Hassan Mneimneh, "The Spring of a New Political Salafism," Hudson Institute, 2011. Retrieved from: <https://www.hudson.org/research/9896-the-spring-of-a-new-political-salafism->

was closed in 2001.¹⁸ At the beginning of the 2000s, there were 61 mosques in the country under the direct leadership of this organization.¹⁹ Another reason that Islamic revivalism has been gaining ground in Azerbaijan is the increasing number of young Azerbaijani people studying religion abroad, namely in Iran, Turkey, and the Arab Gulf countries. Data from 2018 shows that 431 Azerbaijani students were sent abroad for education by the Caucasus Muslims Board, whereas 319 students were studying religion at Baku Islamic University and 758 graduated from Baku State University's Theology Department.²⁰

In addition to mosques, both Shi'a and Sunni Islamists in Azerbaijan set up different organizations, including political parties such as the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, societies such as *Tawbah* (Repentance), *Gardashlik* (Brotherhood), and *Fazilat* (Virtue), and extremist groups including the *Jeyshullah* (soldiers of Allah) and the Forest Brothers.²¹ Among these, the Jeyshullah organization—affiliated with Islamists in Chechnya—was the most radical and aimed to spread jihadist Salafism by calling on its adherents “to fight foreign religious missionaries and non-Islamic religious groups.”²² The group's leader, Mubariz Aliyev, and other members were arrested in 2000 and sentenced to life imprisonment.²³ However, these radical groups were mostly marginal and did not have strong support in local society, therefore they did not pose a real threat to national identity. In contrast to the organizations mentioned above, the Sunni Salafi community of the Abu Bakr mosque in Baku—led by charismatic Imam Gamat Suleymanov—adopted a more subtle strategy, focusing less on politics and more on personal values and habits such as clothing, lifestyle, and individual or family morals. Indeed, the Abu Bakr mosque leadership was, until 2006, promoting more of a restoration of

¹⁸ Altay Goyushov & Elchin Askerov. “Islam and Islamic education in Soviet and independent Azerbaijan” S. 2015. London, Routledge. Pp: 32-35

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gündüz İsmayılov, “Azərbaycanda Dini məsələ: Təhdidlər və hədəflər ideoloji, milli, ictimai təhlükəsizlik müstəvisində.” Bakı, 2016. Pp: 99-103

²¹ Yemelianova, “Islam, Nationalism, and State in the Muslim Caucasus,” Pp: 8-9.

²² Anar Valiyev, “The Two Faces of Salafism in Azerbaijan,” *Terrorism Focus*; Volume: 4; Issue: 40. December 2007. Retrieved from: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-two-faces-of-salafism-in-azerbaijan/>

²³ Ibid.

“Islamic values” and strengthening of “the role of religion in daily life” than a change in government.²⁴

Of more significant concern, a schism occurred inside the Abu Bakr community when some more ideological members began to suggest the existence of a “state discrimination policy” that favored Shi’a over Sunni Muslims. In reality, the Azerbaijani authorities’ official religious policy has remained above the Shi’a–Sunni division and has rarely favored one religious group over another. In early 2005, some Baku Salafi community members openly resisted the leadership of Imam Suleymanov, who called on his followers to refrain from any political activity and cooperate with the state. As a result, local radical Islamists accused the imam of cooperating with the state against them and went underground. Thus, Imam Suleymanov labeled them *Kharijites* (those who seceded) and divided them further into two main categories: *Takfir Jamaat* (Muslims accused of apostasy) and *Jihad Jamaat* (Jihadists).²⁵ These Islamists claim that *Allah* (God) is their only authority and that it is necessary to wipe out the *kafir* (infidel) along with the illegitimate government in Azerbaijan by a full implementation of Sharia law. The followers of this discourse are willing to achieve an Islamic state through violence and destabilization. In fact, political activity is another significant factor for believers in Azerbaijan; even though believers’ participation in government is restricted, it can still be dangerous if they attempt to interfere in state affairs.

Moreover, the mosque has been labeled as a center for the recruitment of foreign fighters heading for Afghanistan, Iraq, and Chechnya, and hundreds of radical Salafists who attended the mosque have been arrested over the years for plotting terrorist attacks and even a coup d’état.²⁶ Indeed, the real impact of radical Sunni Islamists in Chechnya and Dagestan needs to be considered as the flood of refugees from Chechnya in the 1990s fueled religious extremism among Azerbaijanis. The main extension of Chechen extremism in Azerbaijan is believed to be the Forest Brothers, a radical Salafist organization set up by Azer Miskhanov and consisting of two groups: Sumqait-Jamaat and Quba-

²⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG), “Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State.” March 2008, Europe Report N°191. Pp: 10-11. Retrieved from: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/191-azerbaijan-independent-islam-and-the-state.pdf>

²⁵ Giorgi Omsarahsvili, “Salafism in Azerbaijan.” David Publishing. Philosophy Study, 8 (1), 2018. Pp: 31.

²⁶ European Foundation for Democracy, “Secularism in Azerbaijan and the Threat of Radicalization in the region,” Counter Extremism Project, June 2015. Pp: 49–51. Retrieved from: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/Secularism_in_Azerbaijan_June%202015.pdf.

Qusar Jamaat.²⁷ Members of this terrorist group have been deemed responsible by the State Security Service of Azerbaijan for an attack on the Abu Bakr mosque in 2008, in which two people were killed and 18 injured.²⁸ Simply put, the presence of certain non-traditional groups is articulated by the government as a significant threat to the national security of Azerbaijan. Throughout these years, the Azerbaijani government pushed for categorization of the religious sphere characterized by a division between so-called radical and moderate Islamic ideologies as well as small communities. The authorities quickly categorized all foreign religious groups as radical, which they defined as having any association with political ambition, Sharia law, ignorance, and militant and anti-secular worldviews. This category also encompassed several charity organizations, funded by the Arab Gulf monarchies and Iran, suspected of propagating radical ideologies among the poorly educated and socially insufficient rural population.²⁹

Understanding the Islamic revival and its prevalence in Azerbaijan requires an acknowledgement of the aforementioned external factors in the greater Caucasus region. Azerbaijan's Sunni *jamaat* (community) cooperates closely with the North Caucasian *jamaats*, especially those linked to the so-called Caucasus Emirate, a militant Islamic organization. At the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, Azerbaijan faced the problem of a *jamaat* that sympathized with the militarized North Caucasian resistance movement, which threatened to cause a flare-up in the conflict between local Shia and Sunni communities.³⁰ However, nowadays, Salafis in Azerbaijan prefer to avoid direct physical confrontation with the state; instead, they focus mostly on disseminating religious propaganda. Unlike moderate and apolitical Salafi groups, some small radical groups and individuals are attempting to formulate alternative means of promoting their ideas of pure Islam that challenge the state's authority over religion.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Today. Az, "Forest Brothers Group Accused in Terrorist Attack on Abu Bakr Mosque Go on Trial," June 2009. Retrieved from: <http://www.today.az/news/society/53421.html>.

²⁹ Galib Bashirov, "Islamic discourses in Azerbaijan: the securitization of 'non-traditional religious movements,'" *Central Asian Survey*, 37 (1), 2018. P: 35.

³⁰ Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Azerbaijani Jamaat Cooperates with Caucasus Emirate." *Jamestown Foundation: North Caucasus Weekly*, 13 (8), April 201. Retrieved from: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijani-jamaat-cooperates-with-caucasus-emirate/>.

THE STRUGGLE WITH RADICAL SHI'A INFLUENCE

In investigating the repercussions of Turkish, Arab/Gulf, and Northern Caucasus influences inside Azerbaijan, it is worth noting another crucial regional factor: Iran. Since Azerbaijan regained its independence, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been active in promoting Shi'ism in the country. While the Popular Front was in power in Baku, Iran felt threatened by the increasing nationalism and pro-Turkic rhetoric of President Elchibey's government. Consequently, bilateral relations remained tense until President Aliyev came to power in 1993. The activities of pro-Iranian affiliates—mosques such as the *Juma Mosque Community*, its Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, and *mullahs*—were initially conducted openly in southern regions and the villages surrounding Baku, such as Nardaran, the sole stronghold of conservative Shi'a Islam. Both the leadership and members of the Juma Community declined to acknowledge the Caucasus Muslim Board's moral authority over pious Muslims and Islamic communities. The same position towards the CMB was also stressed by some Salafi groups in Azerbaijan, which accused the state institution of “abuse authority” and “false interpretation of Islam.”³¹

After the opening of the border with Iran, many young Azerbaijanis from particular regions went to Iran (specifically to the city of Qom) to study *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and Islamic law. Hence, in 1992, some students of Iranian madrasas founded the small, leftist Islamic Party of Azerbaijan under the leadership of Haji Alikram Aliyev. From the very beginning, the Islamic Party openly positioned itself as pro-Iranian, and even proclaimed the state of Azerbaijan as an Islamic Republic of Iran which created a considerable break with moderate Muslims in Azerbaijan. Therefore, the Islamic Party did not manage to become a dynamic socio-political force or a serious factor, neither in the country nor the region. Moreover, the party's bellicose anti-US, anti-EU, anti-Zionist statements, and harsh criticism concerning the secular political regime in Azerbaijan, forced the government to dissolve the party in 1995 and arrest pro-Iranian agitators.³² The first Islamic Party of Azerbaijan did not become a driving force of the Shi'a community, though since the early 2000s there has been a strong revival of Shiism among the younger

³¹ Sofie Bedford, “Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan: Repressions and Mobilization in a Post-Soviet Context.” Stockholm University, 2009. Pp: 96-97

³² Radio Free Europe, “Doctor Samadov,” January 2015, Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20150105124052/http://www.azadliq.org/content/article/2272091.html>

generation of Azerbaijanis. Another tool that Iran uses to advance its influence in Azerbaijan is opening and funding madrasas for young children. These madrasas primarily work with children who want to learn to read the Qur'an. However, aside from teaching children how to read Arabic, these particular madrasas also disseminate literature that glorifies Iran and its theocratic regime. According to one study, "in 2002, the Azerbaijani government shut down 22 of these madrasas, which had been operating in the country without proper documentations for over six years."³³ While some of these madrasas were funded by the Iranian government and considered *Khomeinist* schools, others were run by well-known *Maraji*, a title given to the highest-level Shi'a legal authority.

Although Iranian-linked groups promote their idea of the "necessity of education" through these schools, the local Shi'a groups in Azerbaijan represent mainly the lower-middle classes. In contrast, their rival Salafis represent more successful groups in terms of education and social status. The Iranian brand of radical Shi'a ideology is more prevalent than ever in the southern part of the country dominated by ethnic Talish people—particularly in the cities of Jalilabad, Masalli, Astara, and Lankaran as well as the villages around Baku—owing to the tactful methods of pro-Iranian *mullahs*. This tendency has enabled various Shi'a groups to spread relatively freely in certain parts of Azerbaijan. In this respect, the violent riots in Nardaran in 2015 involving radical Shi'a adherents of the pro-Iranian Muslim Unity Movement, must be noted as an excellent example of an attempt by external groups to inflame confessional tensions in Azerbaijan.³⁴ It is noteworthy that this incident created a public mistrust of Iran among secular segments of the Azerbaijani population. Following the bloody events in Nardaran, however, another mass riot occurred in Ganja, Azerbaijan's second largest city, for which 77 people were charged relating to the attacks.³⁵ Although there was not sufficient evidence regarding the involvement of radicalized Shi'a adherents in the riot, the Azerbaijani Parliament blamed radical Islamists and introduced specific changes to the law on freedom of religion. According to the new changes, Azerbaijani citizens who studied religion abroad were

³³ Svante E. Cornell, "The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan," Silk Road Paper, October 2006. Retrieved from: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30278/17_Politization_Islam_Azerbaijan.pdf.

³⁴ Turan Agency, "Sentence on Nardaran Events Politically Motivated," 2018. Retrieved from: <http://www.contact.az/ext/news/2018/1/free/Social/en/68017.htm>.

³⁵ Eurasianet, "Azerbaijan: One year on, Ganja events remain unexplained," August 2019. Retrieved from: <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-one-year-on-ganja-events-remain-unexplained>

forbidden to conduct ceremonies and rituals relating to Islam in public.³⁶ Consequently, local Shi'a communities that represent the majority in Azerbaijan are becoming more politicized compared with Sunni communities. The burial sites of Shi'a scholars and well-known religious leaders in the suburbs of Baku have become sources of inspiration, and serve as significant factors in the political beliefs of young Shiites. Notwithstanding, local Shi'a communities are still far from being a dominant political force in the country, as there is a lack of well-educated and charismatic religious leaders who can gather all Shi'a believers under one umbrella. Another reason for local Shi'a organizations' political ineffectiveness is that they are financially and technically dependent on foreign missionaries who are alien to local Shi'a people. Iran's *velayat-e-faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) concept resonated poorly among secularly-educated young Azerbaijanis, thus revealing the schism among local Shi'a parties. The doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* was put forward by Ayatollah Khomeini after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. According to Khomeini's famous book *Velayat-e Faqih*, imams are allowed to hold leading government positions, a *faqih* (a jurist, an expert on *fiqh*) is the only legitimate ruler in an Islamic government, and he must run the government in accordance with *Sharia* (traditional Islamic law).³⁷

Iran has not ceased its efforts to promote the dominance of Shiism in Azerbaijan but has begun formulating alternative ways of disseminating their particular model of Islam that challenges the hegemonic discourse. Despite the government's efforts to minimize the impact of foreign missionaries and preachers, their influence on religious life has been increasing. The factors mentioned above—secular-educated youth and secularism based on major political forces—can overshadow Islamic revivalism in Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, since 2005, another rising phenomenon has become a severe challenge for the state: foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq.

³⁶ Strateq.az, "Xaricdə Dini təhsil alan şəxslər bu qanun pozarsa, bir ilədən azadlıqdan məhrum ediləcəkdir," 2018. Retrieved from: <http://strateq.az/din/236267/xaric%C9%99-dini-t%C9%99-hsil-alan-s%C9%99-xsl%C9%99-r-bu-qanunu-pozarsa-bir-il%C9%99-d%C9%99-k-azadliqdan-m%C9%99-hrum-edil%C9%99-c%C9%99-k.html>

³⁷ Baqer Moin, "Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah," Thomas Dunne Books, New York, 1999; Pp: 78-80

AZERBAIJANI FOREIGN FIGHTERS: THREATS TO STABILITY

Religious education and training abroad occasionally lead to contact with radical religious groups and communities. The majority of young Azerbaijanis who convert to radical Islamic ideology come from modest socio-economic backgrounds, and very few have a meaningful religious education. Unlike Muslims in Central Asia who were practicing Islamic traditions confidentially during the Soviet era and then attended religious schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan in the early 1990s, young Azerbaijani people were relatively inexperienced and religiously uneducated.³⁸ Therefore, joining the so-called *jihad*s across the Muslim world was not as attractive for secular-minded Azerbaijanis. However, the emergence of several sectarian wars in the Middle East and the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) subsequently encouraged dozens of sympathizers from Azerbaijan and other former Soviet states to join radical Islamic organizations. The bloody and endless civil war in Syria and the long-standing turmoil in Iraq have been attractive and popular destinations for jihadists.

Additionally, in the early 2000s, several Azerbaijani citizens joined the so-called holy war in the North Caucasus (primarily in Dagestan and Chechnya) against Russia, considering it their only chance to stand alongside their Muslim brothers and return to pure Islam. Thus, in 2001, by President Heydar Aliyev's decree, the State Committee on Religious Affairs was set up to counter homegrown Islamism and the threat of illegal religious propaganda.³⁹ The committee's main objectives were to supervise religious activities and literature and limit religious communities' financing from abroad. The decision was entirely rational, as some of the Azerbaijani jihadists residing in Chechnya and Afghanistan, including Vugar Padarov and Elmir Nuraliyev, were assembling an armed group to bring jihad to Azerbaijan. Both Padarov and Nuraliyev had been fighting illegally in Chechnya against Russian troops and desired to establish an "Azerbaijani Emirate."⁴⁰ However, Azerbaijan's State Security Service carried out a counter-operation against the group in which

³⁸ S. Cornell, F. Starr, Z. Baran, "Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU," Silk Road Paper, 2006. Pp: 19-20

³⁹ E-qanun.az, "Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dini Qurumlarla İş üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi haqqında Əsasnamənin təsdiq edilməsi barədə Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Fərmanı," 2001. №544. Retrieved from: e-qanun.az/framework/4392

⁴⁰ Trend News Agency, "Ustanovlena svaz' obezvrezhennoy v Azerbaydzhane vooruzhennoy gruppirovki s 'Al-Kaidoy,'" 2012. Retrieved from: <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2016040.html>.

Padarov, the group's leader, was killed and Nuraliyev taken into custody. Later, it was revealed that the group had close ties with the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization.⁴¹ In addition to the State Committee on Religious Affairs, the government keeps an eye on illegal religious activities, self-appointed mullahs, mosques, and propaganda through the aforementioned Caucasus Muslim Board. All *akhunds* or *imams* (clerics) and mosques in the country are under the direct control of the CMB.

Estimates regarding the number of fighters from the Caucasus and Central Asia traveling to Syria and Iraq vary widely. Russian security officials indicated that, as of September 2015, an estimated 2,500 Russian nationals were fighting alongside ISIS.⁴² The influx of these jihadists was a boon for ISIS, as the vast majority of foreign fighters from the Caucasus region had of course sworn allegiance (*bay'ah*) to then-leader Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. After the proto-state had fallen and lost all captured territories by March 2019, and with the subsequent death of al-Baghdadi in a U.S. special operations raid a few months later, some foreign jihadists from these areas returned home and joined underground radical Islamic groups.⁴³ However, a study carried out by the Pew Research Center suggests that rising interest in religion in the former Soviet countries has not necessarily translated to an increase in outward religious practices of individuals, such as praying regularly or frequently attending mosque or church services.⁴⁵ In fact, another study commissioned by the United Nations Office for Counterterrorism has found that most of the jihadists hailing from post-Soviet countries have a poor understanding of even the basic principles of Islam and cannot recite the well-known religious tenets.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² International Business Times, "Security Service at Moscow Airport Details Siberian Man Suspected to Join ISIS in Syria," 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.ibtimes.com/security-service-moscow-airport-detains-siberian-man-suspected-join-isis-syria-2111685>

⁴³ Voice of America, "Abu-Bakr al Baghdadi killed in Idlib," 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/al-baghdadi-killed-idlib-hotbed-terror-groups-foreign-fighters>

⁴⁴ Mark Kramer, "The Return of Islamic State Fighters," PONARS Eurasia, 2015. Retrieved: http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm381_Kramer_Aug2015.pdf.

⁴⁵ A. Cooperman, P. Connor, E. O'Connell, "Russians return to religion, but not to church." Pew Research Center, 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/02/10/russians-return-to-religion-but-not-to-church/>

⁴⁶ Azamat Sakiev, "Guest warriors: The phenomenon of post-soviet fighters in the Syrian conflict," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2020. Vol 2. Pp: 191-192

Terrorism and radical Islamism have long been marginal issues in Azerbaijani society, but when the number of Azerbaijani citizens fighting in Syria increased, the government began to take action publicly. The fact that the return of battle-hardened jihadists would cause significant problems for society forced the state to take the issue very seriously. Even though the number of Azerbaijani fighters in Syria and Iraq is fewer than those of Central Asian nationalities, they still pose a serious threat to national security. The first concrete case was identified in 2012 when photographed identification documents belonging to Zaur Islamov, a 37 year-old man from the northern city of Qusar—which borders Dagestan—were posted on the online forum *Shabka Ansar al-Mujahideen* (Mujahideen Supporters' Network).⁴⁷ As of 2014, “reportedly around 100 Azerbaijanis have been killed in Syria,” although the participation of many fighters is never recorded.⁴⁸ Such cases arise even though the government took steps to counter religious propaganda in the country by closing local branches of various so-called “charitable” organizations funded mainly by certain Arab countries. According to earlier reports, in August 2000, the office of *Hayat al Amal al-Khayirria*, a UAE-based organization, was closed for “stirring up religious conflicts in Azerbaijani society,” while another such organization, *Jamiyyat Sunduq l’anat al-Marda* (Kuwaiti Patients’ Helping Fund Society), was closed in 2002 after being accused of “having links with terrorist organizations.”⁴⁹

Although the northern cities of Azerbaijan that border Dagestan—including Qusar, Zaqatala, Oghuz, and Khachmaz—are the leading regions for local jihadists who fought in Syria, other cases such as the eastern city of Sumgayit should not be exempted. There are indications that Sumgayit has been one of the main centers of radical Islamic agitation, even though local shops and restaurants sell alcohol and residents dress casually. According to police reports, “This smokestack city of 400,000, some 35 kilometers outside of Baku, is a major source of Azerbaijani Muslims who [went] to fight, and often die, in Syria’s civil war.”⁵⁰ Between 2011 and 2014, “about 40 Sumgayit residents have left Azerbaijan for Syria and Afghanistan, and almost half of them have been killed, according to a survey of Azerbaijani police

⁴⁷ Jihadology.net, “Azerbaijani Foreign Fighters in Syria,” 2014. Retrieved from: <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/28/guest-post-azerbaijani-foreign-fighters-in-syria/>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Shahin Abbasov, “Azerbaijan: Sumgayit Becomes Font of Syria-Bound Jihadists,” Eurasia.net, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://eurasianet.org/s/azerbaijan-sumgayit-becomes-font-of-syria-bound-jihadists>.

departments by the local news agency Vesti.az.”⁵¹ This was a consequence of the radicalization of youth in cities such as Quba, Qusar, Zaqatala, and Sumgayit, made possible through the illegal dissemination of radical Salafist propaganda. The lack of appropriate religious education and understanding of Islam, coupled with the state’s ineffective propaganda against radical Islamism, has been the primary catalyst for local jihadists.

The main questions regarding the foreign fighters from Azerbaijan are, who are they? And what is their motivation to join Islamist organizations? Like some other young Muslims worldwide, Azerbaijani jihadists are profoundly inspired by the growing Islamic revivalism across the MENA, North Caucasus, and Central Asian regions, and a majority of them now consider themselves deeply religious. Moreover, the different stories of Azerbaijani fighters killed in Syria reveal their diverse backgrounds. Among them is Rahman Shikhaliyev, a resident of Sumgayit and professional boxer, killed by the Free Syrian Army in 2014.⁵² Those fighters who managed to leave the battlefields in Syria and Iraq following the defeat of ISIS perhaps decided to change the physical location of their jihad, or simply to return to their countries of origin, becoming a genuine national security threat either way. Today, most of those who went to fight in Syria and Iraq have been deprived of citizenship as part of the Azerbaijani government’s policy to counter religious extremism. Some of those who returned from Syria and Iraq were immediately arrested by the security forces.

In 2017, the former chief of the State Security Service, General Madat Guliyev, disclosed the number of Azerbaijani jihadists fighting in Syria. According to him, about 900 citizens from Azerbaijan were fighting illegally in the Syrian conflict. In 2016 alone, 84 of them were prosecuted, and 54 were deprived of citizenship.⁵³ As of 2018, 300 Azerbaijani citizens had been killed in Iraq and Syria, 92 arrested for illegally traveling to conflict zones, and 260 citizens involved in battles had been deprived of citizenship.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² APA News Agency, “Azerbaijani Mujahid killed in Syria Identified,” 2014. Retrieved from: <http://en.apa.az/azerbaijani-news/developments/azerbaijani-mujahid-killed-in-syria-identified-exclusive.html>.

⁵³ Turan News Agency, “About 900 Azerbaijanis joined terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq”, 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.turan.az/ext/news/2017/3/free/Social/en/60495.htm>.

⁵⁴ Defense. az, “300 Azerbaijani citizens killed in battles in Iraq, Syria”, 2018. Retrieved from: <http://defence.az/en/news/123887>.

The recruitment of young jihadists from Azerbaijan does not seem very hard for agitators from the former post-Soviet space or Turkey. Many Azerbaijanis speak Russian and Turkish very well, which means there is no limit to the spread of Islamic materials and propaganda online. Another worrying factor for Azerbaijani authorities is that most young fighters are traveling to Syria through Turkey. However, pro-government religious communities—both Sunni and Shi'a—strictly condemn the jihadi activity as illegal, as provocative actions of uneducated young people traveling to Syria and Iraq have had a noticeable negative impact on the image of Muslim communities in Azerbaijan. The Chairman of the CMB, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazada, issued a *fatwa* in January 2014 saying that “We are dissatisfied with calling acts of our countrymen, who joined armed conflicts in other countries, as jihad, their physical destruction as martyrdom.”⁵⁵ Simply put, the most prominent preachers in Azerbaijan tried hard to persuade local youth that the battles being fought in Syria and Iraq were not considered jihad, and that foreign citizens should not fight for it.

CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to shed light on the rise of Islam in Azerbaijan owing to external influencers' actions. The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not instigate political Islam in Azerbaijan as it did in other Muslim countries, and in the face of a growing Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus, Azerbaijani society has largely maintained secular values. Nevertheless, according to various reports and research studies, the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism is present in Azerbaijan and has been growing steadily. The lack of necessary knowledge of religion and Islamic traditions has provided an ideological vacuum for religious groups from different countries to fill. The Islamic revival in Azerbaijan involves adopting a “new model” of Islam, rather than returning to the roots. The rising influence of various Islamic movements, such as Salafism or the Nurcular movement, is a relatively new phenomenon for the country, but it has made inroads into society. Although these movements have gained some influence over young Azerbaijanis, society, in general, is still less engaged with Islamism compared with other Muslim countries and societies.

⁵⁵ APA News Agency, “Caucasian Muslims Board Issues Fatwa on Azerbaijanis Leaving for Other Countries to Fight,” January 2014, https://apa.az/en/azerbaijan_religion_news/xeber_caucasian_muslims_board_issues_fatwa_on_-206229.

This essay has shown that the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism in Azerbaijan is spurred exclusively by foreign missionaries, funds, and mosques attempting to force a return to traditional Islamic values. Hence, the growing influence of Islamic revivalism has become a real and potentially dangerous challenge for the authorities, who have placed Islam under the strict control of governmental institutions. In this regard, the government is attempting to foster continuing peaceful cohabitation between the different communities in Azerbaijan. This policy positions Azerbaijan as one of the rare Muslim countries where different religious communities coexist. Moreover, radicalized young Azerbaijanis now face a serious problem with the lack of substantial support from external sources in the North Caucasus and Iran, as the government has increased surveillance of suspicious religious groups. Moreover, in light of the growing radical Islamic ideology and terrorist attacks in the Middle East and Europe associated with Islamic revivalism, highly secular Azerbaijanis prefer to distance themselves from what they call “radical Islam” and “jihadism.”

In recent years, the Azerbaijani government’s counter-terrorism methods have been effective due to mutual cooperation with regional and Western states in fighting religious extremism. Nevertheless, as a former-Soviet Muslim country with a vulnerable geographical location, Azerbaijan faces a variety of challenges, and certain countries do not hide their intentions to destabilize it through various means, including radical Islamic groups and illegal propaganda. The absence of necessary humanitarian and religious education programs to decrease the youth’s vulnerability to radical propaganda aids uncontrolled mosques, illegal religious communities, and radicalized groups across the country in recruiting new jihadists—both Sunni and Shia’. Hence, the development of a foundational Islamic education through relevant state institutions such as the Ministry of Education, State Committee on Religious Affairs, and the Caucasus Muslim Board could help fill that vacuum.

THE AUTHOR

Fuad Shahbazov is a Baku-based policy analyst who mainly focuses on regional security, energy diplomacy, and military issues. He obtained an M.A. in Political Science from the University of Bologna. Previously, he has been a Research Fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies in Azerbaijan and a Programme Assistant at the European Policy Centre in Brussels. In 2018, he was a Visiting Scholar at the Washington D.C. based Daniel Morgan School of National Security.

Contact information: f.sahbazov@gmail.com



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