



AZERBAIJAN

Quick Facts

Population: 10,205,810 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 86,600 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Azerbaijani 91.6%, Lezghin 2%, Russian 1.3%, Armenian 1.3%, Talysh 1.3%, other 2.4% (2009 est.)

Government Type: Presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$40.67 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated October 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Bordering both Russia and Iran, and with a close security relationship with both the United States and Israel, Azerbaijan occupies an important geostrategic position. As the former Soviet Union's only Shi'a Muslim majority country, the South Caucasus republic is even more unique. Azerbaijan's geographic location has led to a situation in which various domestic and international forces vie for influence; it has a population of over 9 million people, the majority of whom are closely linguistically and culturally related to the population of nearby Turkey, an extremely antagonistic relationship with neighboring Armenia, and proximity to restive Dagestan, a federal republic of Russia.

Since becoming an independent state in 1991, Azerbaijan has seen an upsurge in Islamist activity emanating from both Sunni and Shi'a organizations. Iranian-backed Shiite extremists have attempted attacks on targets deemed to be close to the U.S. and Israel, and Sunni jihadists have descended from hotbeds of radicalism in the North Caucasus. In addition, terrorist groups have attempted to exploit organized crime networks and smuggling routes to support their endeavors in the Middle East. The government of Azerbaijan, in its efforts to address the threats emanating from both Sunni and Shi'a radicals, has doubled down on secular governance.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Like many of the post-Soviet states with Muslim populations, Azerbaijan saw a rekindled interest in Islam following its independence in 1991. With an end to state-enforced atheism, the stage was set for domestic and foreign actors to vie for spiritual access to the country's predominantly Muslim community. That community is estimated to be two-thirds Shi'a and one third Sunni.¹ This ratio nevertheless is in flux, given the growing role of various Sunni movements—with Shafi'i and Salafi missionaries coming from the Arab world, and Hanafi activists emanating from Turkey.²

Shi'a Radicalism and the role of Iran and Hezbollah

Azerbaijan is situated at the vital geostrategic nexus of Iran, Russia and Turkey. The oil- and gas-rich country shares historical, linguistic and economic ties with all three of these regional powers. Azerbaijan has close ties to both the U.S. and Israel, relationships neighboring Iran regards with deep suspicion. Furthermore, a quarter of the Iranian population (including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself) is ethnically Azerbaijani. Azerbaijan, either by specific actions or simply through its very existence, has considerable potential to spark anti-Iranian ethnic nationalism in Iran's volatile northeastern provinces.³ In an effort to counteract the threat emanating from Azerbaijani nationalist movements, Tehran has sought to promote religious movements in Azerbaijan and empower Shiite clergy to oppose the Azerbaijani state. The nationalist and autonomist ambitions within Iran's Azerbaijani minority are a sensitive issue – one which to date has not received the attention it deserves. The Azerbaijani government has on several occasions alluded to efforts by Tehran to undermine its authority by stirring up religious unrest at home. Officials in Baku alleged in 2002 that Iranian funding and support had contributed to major protests in the Baku suburbs. In mid-2002, then-President Heydar Aliyev made reference to “outside powers” which wished to turn Azerbaijan into an Islamic state, unquestionably a veiled reference to Iran.⁴

In 2006, Azerbaijani authorities foiled a major terror attack involving Iranian operatives and directed at Israeli and Western targets.⁵ In the course of the investigation, 15 Azerbaijani citizens were found to have been trained by Iranian security forces. Follow-up investigations led to the prevention of a second attack in 2008 on the Israeli embassy. These plans appear to have been carried out by a secret cell operating on Azerbaijani soil, which had been mobilized by Tehran in collaboration with Hezbollah, in retaliation for the killing of Hezbollah military chief Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus. Prior to the attempted attack, Azerbaijani police apprehended two Hezbollah militants, while suspects of Lebanese, Iranian and Azerbaijani extraction fled across the border to Iran. During subsequent court trials in October 2009, evidence indicated that both Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps were linked to plot against the Israeli embassy.⁶

Further conspiracies were uncovered in 2012, in the run-up to the Eurovision song contest, when several attempted attacks against perceived pro-Western and pro-Israeli targets were foiled. First, in January of that year, two men were arrested on charges of plotting to murder two teachers at a Jewish school in Baku. Then, in February 2012, another cell, allegedly trained by the Iranian secret service, came to the attention of Azerbaijani state security.⁷ Soon afterward, 22 individuals were arrested on the grounds of planning attacks the embassies of the United States and Israel.

However, beginning in 2012, a rapprochement between Baku and Tehran led to a decrease of Iranian-linked subversive activity. The Obama administration's hostile attitude toward Azerbaijan and its parallel warming of relations with Iran led Tehran to decrease its pressure, and forced Baku to initiate its own outreach to Iran. Indeed, the Obama Administration strongly pushed for a Turkish-Armenian normalization process that ignored Azerbaijan's concerns over its unresolved conflict with Armenia. As Azerbaijan successfully contributed to halting that normalization process, relations between Washington and Baku soured considerably, with mutual public recriminations that risked undermining the strategic partnership between America and Azerbaijan. As a result, Baku sought to improve relations with other powers, including Iran. While Iranian representatives continued to put pressure on Baku over its close ties to Israel, the improvement of relations appeared to reduce state-sponsored Iranian Islamist activity.

By 2017, however, there were signs that the winds were shifting again. Azerbaijani authorities once more complained of increasingly hostile Iranian rhetoric toward the Azerbaijani government, targeted in particular at Azerbaijani pilgrims to holy sites in Iran.⁸ This rise in Iranian activity mirrored a growing warmth in U.S.-Azerbaijan relations, as ties between the two countries have moved toward normalization under the Trump presidency, and as the Saudi-Iranian rivalry across the region has picked up speed.⁹ Indeed, pro-Saudi news outlets have in recent years accorded increasing interest to Iranian activities in

Azerbaijan.¹⁰

In particular, the curious case of the town of Nardaran continues to trouble Azerbaijani authorities. Only a dozen miles outside the capital, the town has been a hotbed of Shi'a radicalism since the mid-1990s, when it gave birth to the defunct Islamic Party of Azerbaijan. Nardaran has long been known for the presence of extremist Shi'a activists and as a hotbed of anti-state Islamism. Following the arrest of over a dozen Islamist activists, including Taleh Bagirov, the leader of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) of Azerbaijan, clashes erupted in November 2015 between security forces and local protestors that left seven dead.¹¹ Among these were two police officers and five alleged Shiite militants. The confrontations were followed by series of raids. Security forces surrounded Nardaran and cut off all roads into and out of the district, in order to sweep for weapons and literature, in an effort to head off alleged terrorist activities.

In 2017, the commemoration of Ashura (the death of Ali's son Hussain at Kerbala in 680 CE) saw the gathering of exceptionally large crowds in Baku. This was interpreted as a sign of the greater reach of Iranian propaganda in Azerbaijan, something the government had privately complained about for some time. In response, the government took steps to limit the participation of children in Ashura and other religious rites.¹²

The "Khawarij" and the Forest Brotherhood

Azerbaijan's radical Salafi Sunni community has historically revolved around populations in the country's north, bordering Dagestan, and the Abu Bakr Mosque of Baku, which has been seen as a hotbed of terrorist recruitment and violent extremism. While the majority of the congregation is not violent, several prominently connected terrorists, including former Guantanamo Bay inmate Polad Sabir Sirajov, had close ties to the community and served as vectors of radicalization.¹³ These community members with extremist sympathies have broken with the leadership of the mosque, earning them the titles of Khawarij or "expelled ones."

These Khawarij believe they are justified in rebelling against the authority of religious leaders whom they view as having departed from a justified course of violence against civilians. One prominent example of such leadership is Gamat Suleymanov, the *imam* of the Abu Bakr Mosque, who has made statements against the use of violence against "infidels." Suleymanov was injured in a grenade attack on his congregation in 2008, an incident which killed two and left a further 17 people injured.¹⁴ The attack was likely carried out by the Khawarij, who did not take kindly to the *imam*'s conciliatory attitude. Following an investigation of the attack, the Azerbaijani government made a statement in which two Azerbaijani nationals, Ilgar Mollachiyev and his brother-in-law Samir Mehtiyev, both with ties to Sunni radicals in the nearby Dagestan Republic of Russia, were named as suspects.

Both Mollachiyev and Mehtiyev were alleged to have illegally entered Azerbaijan from Dagestan and been involved with setting up the foundations for terrorist cells in Baku and the coastal town of Sumgait. Baku accused the pair of attempting to reestablish the Azerbaijani branch of the "Forest Brothers," a militant group active in the Northern Caucasus that Azerbaijan banned in 2007. Mollachiyev and Mehtiyev were charged with creating an illegal armed group.¹⁵

Insurgency in Dagestan and the Northern Caucasus

Against the backdrop of the ongoing insurgency in the North Caucasus, which to date has claimed hundreds of lives among both civilians and combatants, Azerbaijan's government has in recent years increased law enforcement efforts along the country's northern border.¹⁶ In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet system, the North Caucasus became the scene of high levels of violence between Russian security forces and various opposition factions. Over time, resistance to Russian rule took an increasingly Islamist turn, with *jihadi* extremists coming to form the bulk of the resistance.¹⁷ While Chechnya has become the focal point of this conflict in the imagination of many observers, the violence has not been confined to that unhappy republic, and spread throughout the region. Dagestan became a major center of unrest, playing

host to the majority of clashes for several years.¹⁸ From 2012 onward, however, the exodus of fighters to the Syrian conflict led to a relative reduction of violence across the North Caucasus. As of yet, however, the apparent destruction of the Islamic State terrorist group in Syria does not appear to have led to the return of these militants in significant numbers.

Located at the eastern end of the North Caucasus, the Republic of Dagestan shares a long border with Azerbaijan. The patchwork of ethnic groups that made up the former Soviet Union means that both states share ethnic minority communities, including Avars and Lezgins. Members of both these ethnic minority communities with Azerbaijani citizenship have crossed the Azerbaijani-Russian border to partake in the ongoing Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus.¹⁹ While the grievances of these groups are primarily directed against Moscow, the rise of Islamic radicalism in the North Caucasus has made extremist groups in the region part of the global *jihadi* movement, and as of 2014 an estimated 1,000 of its members had already traveled to fight in Syria.²⁰

This has led to a far more significant and dangerous flow of people and *jihadi* ideology southward into Azerbaijan. Salafist ideological streams, funded in part by Islamic organizations in the Gulf States, began entering Azerbaijan from the North Caucasus in the 1990s.²¹ Conflict on Russian soil has also repeatedly led to an influx of Chechen and Dagestani fighters, seeking refuge and the opportunity to regroup in Azerbaijan. Most of those crossing into Azerbaijan from the North Caucasus are adherents of Salafism, and this fact, combined with the efforts of missionary establishments funded by the oil rich Arab Gulf States, has led to a situation in which there is a significant Salafist population in Azerbaijan—estimated as of 2015 to number about 15,000.²² In the capital, Baku, their focal point has been the Abubakr Mosque.

Though a majority of Salafists are not violent extremists but followers of the purist, nonviolent Salafi approach—such as the avowedly apolitical Imam Suleymanov—the potential for violence should not be underestimated. Much of Salafist thought is anchored in the belief that the Muslim community can and should be central to the structuring of government. Additionally, it rejects the tenets of multiculturalism and religious plurality. Considering the public priorities of Baku, that rejection sets its adherents on a collision course with state institutions.²³

The Gülen/Hizmet movement

Another example of an Islamist group which successfully established itself in post-independence Azerbaijan is the network of the influential, if increasingly controversial, Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen. Like other missionizing Islamic movements, the Gülen movement saw the end of Soviet state atheism as an opportunity to gain support and followers in the newly independent, and nominally Muslim, states of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Based in Turkey, Gülen's followers were able to leverage linguistic and cultural similarities with the Turkic populations of the former Soviet Union to establish networks of educational institutions in the 1990s to cultivate the new state elites.²⁴ This, in turn, provided them with a stepping stone to becoming a truly global movement, which is well-represented and headquartered in the United States.

Azerbaijan became the first state outside of Turkey to host Gülen schools. Well-funded, and garnering support from then President Heydar Aliyev, the movement quickly established itself on the Azerbaijani education scene, opening several high schools, a private school, the Qafqaz University and a host of regional centers to promote its activities. Mindful not to antagonize the Azerbaijani government, the movement emphasized shared Turkic identity and cultural values over religious tenets.²⁵

Despite this cautious approach, the Gülen movement has suffered significant setbacks in recent years. The Azerbaijani state has been increasingly focused on training its own population rather than having foreign groups do so. The collapse of the political alliance between Fethullah Gülen and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2014 further undermined the position of Gülen supporters abroad, with the Turkish government putting pressure on Baku to curb the activities of the movement in Azerbaijan. Following the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, which Ankara was quick to ascribe to the Gülenists, Turkish offi-

officials put enormous pressure on Baku to dismiss people in government who were believed to be too close to the movement.²⁶ Only a small number of officials were dismissed, but the Azerbaijani government began to curtail the influence of the Gülen movement, including taking control of the schools that the movement previously ran in the country.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The majority of Azerbaijan's population of 9.7 million inhabitants self-identify as Muslim, about two thirds of whom are Shiites.²⁷ Sunni Islam is most established in the northern and western regions of the country, especially among the ethnic minorities who live closest to the Northern Caucasus regions of Russia. However, it is gathering strength in the country at the expense of Shi'a traditions, something noted by observers and visible through the influence, not least, of Turkish schools and popular culture.²⁸ Azerbaijan's south and east, the areas closest to Iran, have historically been dominated by Shiite Islam, though decades of Soviet state atheism resulted in Azerbaijanis in Azerbaijan being generally less observant than their co-ethnics across the border. Under the nationalities policy of the early Soviet period, Azerbaijanis were encouraged to think of Shiism as a marker of national identity rather than a guiding principle of spiritual life.²⁹

However, following the end of the official state atheism, numerous Azerbaijanis have found new ways to express their religion. A new generation, for whom the Soviet experience is but a vague memory, has taken an interest in public expressions of religiosity. At the same time, both Shiite Iran and the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf have sought to encourage the revival of Islamic faith in Azerbaijan, and mold the religious experience of Azerbaijan's youth in a way that favors their own objectives and priorities.

Efforts to promote radicalism have, however, run up on the government's increasingly outspoken secularism, which is firmly entrenched in public discourse despite the quarter century since the demise of the Soviet ideology. The prominence of Islam has prompted debates about the role religion should play in the modern Republic of Azerbaijan, and there remains a deep-seated mistrust of Islamism among the Azerbaijani elite.³⁰ In a situation analogous to that of other post-socialist states with large Muslim populations, radical Islamism in Azerbaijan is fed by the quest for identity in a rapidly changing society, social ills such as corruption, and disappointment over the unfulfilled promises of modernization. Perhaps ironically, Azerbaijan has been subject to criticism from western governments and NGOs for its treatment of Islamist organizations within the country that have developed radical objectives in their criticism of the state.

Available polling suggests Azerbaijan is among the Muslim-majority societies least penetrated by Islamist ideology. For example, in a 2013 Pew poll, Azerbaijan had the lowest percentage of any country expressing support for *sharia* law, at eight percent. It also had the lowest percentage of respondents saying suicide bombing is justified (one percent), that religious leaders should have large influence on politics (two percent), and that tensions between devout and less devout are a big problem (one percent).³¹

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The major influx of Arab, Iranian and Turkish missionaries into Azerbaijan, tolerated at first in the early 1990s, increasingly became a concern for officials in Baku. Perhaps surprised by the rapidity and scope of these well-funded newcomers on the scene, the government opted for a more decisive course of action. In 1996, the Azerbaijani parliament passed an amendment to the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief which proscribed the participation of "foreigners" in the propagation of "religious propaganda."³² After deadly riots in the Baku suburb of Nardaran left one person dead and 16 injured in 2002, these measures were expanded to bar anyone who had received religious training abroad.³³

Further measures to curtail the recruitment efforts of radical Islamists included requiring religious

communities to refile their state registration and establishing the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations, which increased state control of religious institutions.³⁴ The state's efforts to curb the spread of radical Islam are also part of a larger initiative to combat Islamic terrorism. Azerbaijan's counterterrorism policy has included close cooperation with regional as well as international actors, specifically the United States. Baku granted overflight rights and permission for numerous refueling and supply landings to Coalition forces during the military intervention in Afghanistan. Azerbaijani troops themselves took part in operations in Afghanistan, helping in international attempts to stabilize the security situation in Central and South Asia.³⁵ Azerbaijani officials have also supported international law enforcement through information sharing and joint policing operations.

Following the drawdown of coalition troops from Afghanistan and the rise to prominence of the Islamic State, Baku has turned its attention to the struggle to contain terrorism emanating from Iraq and Syria. Azerbaijan's leadership has contributed to these international efforts by disrupting the flow of arms and supplies through its territory, by sharing information, apprehending suspected returnee foreign fighters and having state religious authorities, such as the Caucasus Muslim Board, counter the claims of the propaganda savvy organization.

A significant number of legal amendments added every year between 2009 and 2015 have been squarely aimed at tackling the extremist threat and preventing further radicalization. Among these, an amendment to the criminal code ensured that the punishment for "foreign fighters" traveling to Syria became a 15 year-long jail sentence. Similarly, the penalty for spreading religious propaganda has been increased to one to two years in prison.³⁶ Amendments added in 2014-2015 prevented clerics educated abroad (with the exception of those educated in state-approved educational institutions) from working in Azerbaijan, while a 2014 amendment led the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations to monopolize religious education for the conduct of rites. To fill the need for training clerics, the State Committee expanded its own role and conducted more than 30,000 trainings in 2015-16. However, the amendments were not applied retroactively, which means that any previous training that existing clerics may have received has not been invalidated. Whereas the official state estimate is that 1,800 individuals have already received religious education abroad, the real number is probably higher.³⁷

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