

American Foreign Policy Council

AZERBAIJAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 8,303,512

Area: 86,600 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Azeri 90.6%,
Dagestani 2.2%, Russian 1.8%,
Armenian 1.5%, other 3.9%

Religions: Muslim 93.4%, Russian
Orthodox 2.5%, Armenian
Orthodox 2.3%, other 1.8%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$43
billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)

Azerbaijan's strategic location in Eurasia makes it an attractive target for radical Islamic organizations seeking to destabilize the North and South Caucasus. Since its independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has been targeted by several organizations inspired or directed by Iran, utilized by groups involved in terrorism in the Russian republics of Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, and exploited by transnational organizations as a base for external jihadist activities, including the movement of people, money, and contraband through the Caucasus. Azerbaijan's government has actively opposed these elements, charting some notable successes in recent years.¹

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Contemporary Islamist activity in Azerbaijan has taken three dominant forms over the past decade-and-a-half.

The “Iranian hand” and Hezbollah

Azerbaijan’s relations with Iran are complex. Azerbaijan has strong commercial relations with the Islamic Republic, and a quarter of Iran’s population – including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself – is ethnically Azeri. Iran resents seeing oil- and gas-rich Azerbaijan prosper, and simultaneously fears that a strong Azerbaijan could prompt the empowerment of ethnic separatist movements inside Iran.² Thus Tehran has employed Shi’a Islam as a tool to destabilize its northern neighbor. In that task, Iran had to overcome Azerbaijan’s religious traditions, which are more tolerant than those in Iran and have been further diluted by more than seven decades of Soviet rule, leaving the country vulnerable to the influence of aggressive Iranian Shi’a proselytizers.

Baku has repeatedly accused Tehran of interfering in its internal affairs, with some merit. According to Azeri officials, Iran was behind protests that took place in mid-2002 in the suburbs of Baku, and has financed separatist movements on Azeri soil, among them the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, which was banned by authorities in Baku in 2003. These attempts at subversion led then-President Heydar Aliyev to publicly allude in mid-2002 to “outside forces” that were seeking to transform Azerbaijan into an “Islamic state.”³

That effort has evolved in two stages. The first took place after the fall of the Soviet Union, when Iranian clerics flocked to Azerbaijan as part of an effort to promote the Islamic Republic’s political and religious ideology. Their goal was to subordinate Azerbaijan’s brand of Shi’a Islam to the political (*velayat-e-faqih*, or “rule of the jurisprudent”) and spiritual (*marja-al-taqlid*, or “source of emulation”) leadership of Iran’s Supreme Leader. This bold strategy meant reopening the Shi’a-Sunni rift in Azeri society – a tactic that provoked considerable resentment among Azeris.⁴

Tehran’s current strategy is more refined. After a period of relative political inactivity during the 1990s, Iran has once again commenced a political/religious campaign inside Azerbaijan. While

efforts at ideological subversion still persist,⁵ the current focus is on the promotion of the viewpoints of sympathetic Shi'a figures, such as the late Grand Ayatollah Fazil Lenkerani. This has aided in a "renaissance" of Shi'ism in Azerbaijan, with growing adherence among Azeris, particularly Azeri youth.⁶

A major terrorist plot on Azerbaijani soil involving Iranian operatives was uncovered in 2006, when 15 Azeris who had received training from Iranian security forces were charged with plotting violence against Israelis and Westerners.⁷ Surveillance initiated as a result of that case contributed to the discovery in 2008 of a plot to bomb the Israeli Embassy in Baku. The plot was uncovered following the assassination in Damascus, Syria of Imad Mughniyeh, the chief operations officer of the Hezbollah terrorist organization. Hezbollah blamed Israel for the death, and in response to the killing – working in tandem with Iran's intelligence service – reportedly mobilized a secret cell.⁸ In May 2008, several weeks prior to the planned attacks, police in Baku captured two Hezbollah militants from Lebanon in a car containing explosives, binoculars, cameras, pistols with silencers and reconnaissance photos. A number of Lebanese, Iranian and Azerbaijani suspects, however, escaped by car into Iran.⁹

Currently two Lebanese citizens who held false Iranian passports at the time of arrest are charged with espionage, preparation of terrorist acts, drug trafficking and arms smuggling, while four citizens of Azerbaijan involved in this conspiracy are accused of state treason, as well as preparation of terrorist acts.¹⁰ On July 8, 2009, one of them gave evidence to authorities revealing his contacts with Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹¹ In early October 2009, the court sentenced two Hezbollah militants to fifteen years imprisonment.¹²

Khawarij ("expelled") Members of the Abu Bakr community and the Forest Brothers

The Abu Bakr mosque in Baku is the focal point for the country's Salafi community, and has been seen as a hotbed of Muslim radicalism, terrorism and extremism. The majority of the members of this community, however, are not considered violent, and the mosque's discourse is concentrated mainly on religious values

and morality. However, there are the extremist (“expelled”) members (*khawarij* in Arabic) who have undertaken violent action to demonstrate their opposition to the current leaders of the Muslim community. The *khawarij* minority believes that it is permissible to rebel against the government and regard as infidels those Muslims who do not share their views.¹³

The imam of the Abu Bakr mosque, G. Suleymanov, is reportedly loyal to the Azeri government and actively opposes “armed *jihad* against the infidels.”¹⁴ On August 17, 2008, a grenade explosion inside the mosque killed two people and left 18 wounded, including the *Imam* – effectively shuttering the house of worship.¹⁵ (A Baku court subsequently ordered the mosque to reopen, but thereafter reversed its decision.¹⁶)

The following month, Azerbaijan’s Ministry of National Security released a public statement on the attack. In it, authorities alleged that Ilgar Mollachiyev, an Azeri citizen associated with extremist activities in the Russian region of Dagestan, together with his brother-in-law Samir Mehtiyev, had masterminded the attack. Mollachiyev, Mehdiyev, and their accomplices had illegally crossed from Dagestan into Azerbaijan and settled in the capital, Baku, and in the city of Sumgayit. There, they plotted to revive the defunct Forest Brothers armed group, which had been disbanded by authorities in 2007. Their aim was the disruption of socio-political stability in Azerbaijan.

Another leader of this ring is a Saudi citizen, Nail Abdul Karim al-Bedevi. He, together with 17 other individuals charged with setting up an illegal armed group linked to al-Qaeda, was issued a jail sentence in July 2008.¹⁷ Subsequently, the case against the new, reconstituted “Forest Brothers” group has been taken up by Azerbaijan’s Court of Grave Crimes, where it is now underway.¹⁸

The “Forest Brothers” case is instructive, insofar as it demonstrates the extent of foreign influence in the growth of Salafi Islam in Azerbaijan. Construction of the Abu Bakr mosque was financed by the Azerbaijani branch of a Kuwaiti society called The Revival of Islamic Heritage. Imam Suleymanov, meanwhile, is a graduate of the World Islamic University of Medina.¹⁹ This is a typical pattern throughout the former Soviet Union, where the lack of local higher religious education and funds allows Arab organizations engaged in

da'wa (proselytization) to put down roots and expand their influence. The impact, however, should not be underestimated; eight thousand people – most under 35 years old – regularly attended Friday prayer at the Abu Bakr mosque. The total number of the Salafi Muslims, including those in Northern Azerbaijan, bordering Dagestan and Chechnya, is estimated at around fifteen thousand.²⁰ In other words, around one-third of Salafi Muslims in Azerbaijan attend this one mosque.

Gulf States and the Wahhabi connection

The Wahhabi sect of Islam is considered one of the most anti-status quo movements in Azerbaijan. A subset of the broader Salafi fundamentalist movement, Wahhabism is hostile toward Shi'a Muslims, toward the West, and toward secularism generally. It is pervasive in the north of Azerbaijan. Wahhabi activities are usually financially and organizationally linked to the Saudi government or Saudi Islamic charities, to some Kuwaitis, or other natives of Gulf States.²¹

A number of Saudi charities have been implicated in the support of radical Islamic activities in Azerbaijan. The Saudi charity Al-Haramain, which has supported extremist religious groups in Chechnya and Dagestan, was shut down by Azerbaijani authorities in the early 2000s.²² Similarly, the Jeddah-headquartered International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) is active in Azerbaijan, involved in the distribution of food and provision of medical care through a network of camps and clinics.²³ In the early 2000s, IIRO is known to have provided the Palestinian terror group Hamas with some \$280,000 – money which observers say can be traced back to members of the Saudi royal family.²⁴ Recent events in Azerbaijan suggest that Gulf State support for Sunni radicals in the former Soviet republic remains strong – among them attempted attacks targeting the U.S. and British embassies, as well as the Baku offices of several major oil companies, which have been traced back to Wahhabi organizations sustained by foreign support.²⁵

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The majority of the Azerbaijan's 7.5 million person population considers itself Muslim. Of that number, some 70 percent are Shi'a,

and the rest Sunni. Sunni Islam is dominant in the northern and western parts of Azerbaijan, bordering the Russian Caucasus, while central, eastern and southern parts of Azerbaijan, which borders Iran, as well as the capital city of Baku, are traditionally Shi'ite.

The number of devout followers of Islam has increased significantly since the country's independence in 1991. This trend, however, has tended to follow nationalistic lines. During Soviet times, the USSR's official atheism prompted a large segment of Azerbaijan's population to perceive Islam as a part of national identity, rather than a religious belief.²⁶ With independence, this sentiment has reemerged with a vengeance, utilizing the comparatively newfound freedom to publicly express one's faith.

In recent years, however, both internal and external drivers have led to a radicalization of the Muslim religion in Azerbaijan. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Persian Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait alike have used the growth in Islamic fundamentalism there to influence the domestic and foreign policy of Azerbaijan, and have contributed to the expansion of radical Islam in the former Soviet republic.

Here, Azerbaijan follows a pattern familiar in post-Soviet authoritarian countries: domestic problems, such as corruption, poverty, and official repression, coupled with a general disillusionment with the West,²⁷ elevate radical Islam as a channel for expressing opposition to the government. So, paradoxically, has the promotion of human rights by Western nations, which has allowed radical Islamic ideas to proliferate under the guise of freedom of religion.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Preserving the separation of state and religion and defeating the threat posed by terrorism are vital national priorities for the Azeri government. The speedy growth of religious activity by Muslim/Arab, Iranian, and Turkish missionaries in the early 1990s generated concern from authorities in Baku. In response, Azerbaijan's parliament in 1996 adopted an amendment to the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief which banned the activities of "foreigners

and persons without citizenship” from conducting “religious propaganda.”²⁸

The following year, the government also required all religious communities to renew their registration. The establishment of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations in 2001 was another step by which the government sought to control the activities of foreign missionaries.²⁹ These measures were intended to help contain the spread of radical Islam in the country, though some Islamic communities voiced concerns that such actions had the effect of curtailing religious freedoms. There is some merit to these claims; the threat of Iranian-style Islamic revolution is used to justify state registration of religious organizations, control the import of religious literature, and keeping religious leaders away from political life.³⁰

Azerbaijan has taken steps to identify and counter terrorist financing flows by distributing lists of suspected terrorist groups and individuals to local banks. These efforts, however, thus far have fallen short of meeting international standards. At the end of 2008, the government was working on a draft law on money laundering, aimed at creating an anti-money laundering and counterterrorist finance regime, a Financial Intelligence Unit, and other measures, which will make Azerbaijan compliant with international standards.³¹

Combating organized crime, in particular illegal arms and drug trafficking, is an integral part of the war on terrorism being waged by Baku. Azerbaijan focuses on implementation of the United Nations *Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* and its associated *Protocol on The Illegal Production and Turnover of Firearms*. Azerbaijan likewise is a party to the international Chemical and Biological Conventions.³² In recent years, Azerbaijan has intensified its fight against illegal drug trafficking, which flows through Iran, the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Europe. In 2007 alone, the activity of five transnational and 18 national organized criminal groups was foiled. As a result, 496,857 kilograms of narcotics, 328,154 kilograms of hashish, as well as submachine guns and cartridges, were seized. These seizures led to

the initiation of 22 separate criminal cases, involving a total of 82 persons, including 11 foreigners.³³

The United States and Azerbaijan have cooperated closely in the realm of counterterrorism. Azerbaijan has supported U.S. and Coalition military operations in Afghanistan by granting overflight rights and approving numerous landings and refueling operations at the Baku airport. The two sides additionally have been involved in information-sharing and law-enforcement cooperation. Azeri soldiers have served in Afghanistan since November 2002, and Azerbaijan recently augmented this contingent, bringing the total number of personnel to 90.³⁴ Azeri cooperation with the United States through the framework of export control and related border security and Cooperative Threat Reduction programs is aimed at fostering its capacity to secure its borders against terrorist infiltration for the trafficking of people and materiel.³⁵

ENDNOTES

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