

# American Foreign Policy Council

# AZERBAIJAN

## QUICK FACTS

Population: 9,590,159

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): \$68.8  
billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2013)

*The former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan is strategically located astride the oil-rich Caspian Sea and borders Russia's restive Muslim region of Dagestan, making it an attractive target for radical Islamist organizations seeking to destabilize the North and South Caucasus. It has a population of roughly 9 million, 95 percent of whom identify as Muslim. Eighty-five percent of those Muslims adhere to the Shi'ite sect of Islam, with the remaining 15 percent of them Sunni. Azerbaijan has deep historical, cultural, and religious links to majority Shi'ite Iran, which borders Azerbaijan to the south, though political ties between the two Shi'ite nations are often strained.*

*Moreover, since its independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has been targeted by several organizations inspired or directed by Iran, and has been utilized by groups involved in terrorism in the Russian republics of Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. It has also been exploited by transnational organizations as a base for*

*external jihadist activities, including the movement of people, money, and contraband through the Caucasus. However, the secular government of Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, has actively opposed these elements, charting some notable successes in recent years.*<sup>1</sup>

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Starting in 1991, post-Soviet Azerbaijan has undergone an Islamic revival influenced by both homegrown and foreign actors. The revival has caused an “Islamization” contest between groups seeking to establish influence over the country’s predominantly ethnically-Turkic Shi’ite population.<sup>2</sup> The competition is playing out between Shi’ite and Sunni leaders, including different Sunni movements—among them the Shafi’i and Salafi (Hanbali) trends introduced by the Arab world, as well as Turkish Hanafi activists and organizations.<sup>3</sup>

### *The “Iranian hand” and Hezbollah*

Azerbaijan has a complex and tenuous relationship with neighboring Iran. Azerbaijan has strong commercial relations with the Islamic Republic, and nearly 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 its own borders.<sup>4</sup> Tehran has therefore tried to leverage Shi’a Islam as a tool to destabilize its northern neighbor. To accomplish that task, Iran must 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.

Baku has repeatedly accused Tehran of interfering in its internal affairs—with 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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 pro-

voked considerable resentment among Azeris.<sup>6</sup>

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,<sup>7</sup> the current focus is on the promotion of the viewpoints of sympathetic Shi'a figures, such as the late Grand Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani. This has aided in a "renaissance" of Shi'ism in Azerbaijan, with growing adherence to the faith among Azeris, particularly Azeri youth.<sup>8</sup>

A major terrorist plot on Azerbaijani soil involving Iranian operatives was uncovered in 2006, when 15 Azeris trained by Iranian security forces were charged with plotting violence against Israelis and Westerners.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

Two Lebanese citizens holding false Iranian passports at the time of arrest were charged with espionage, preparing terrorist acts, drug trafficking and arms smuggling; four Azeri citizens involved in this conspiracy were accused of state treason and preparing terrorist acts.<sup>12</sup> On July 8, 2009, one of them gave evidence to authorities revealing his contacts with Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>13</sup> In early October 2009, the court sentenced two Hezbollah militants to fifteen years imprisonment.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, Azerbaijan's government jailed 17 members of another group alleged to be linked to al-Qaeda, sentencing them to between five years and life in jail.

In the spring of 2012, just before the Eurovision contest, security services in Azerbaijan arrested 22 people. A statement from the national security ministry claimed that the individuals were hired by Iran to carry out terrorist attacks against the United States and Israeli embassies and Western-linked groups and companies. The ministry further alleged that the suspects, all citizens of Azerbaijan, had been trained in Iran by that country's Revolutionary Guards. This followed the apprehension, in January 2012, of two individuals accused of plotting to kill two teachers at a Jewish school in Baku, and the

subsequent February 2012 arrest of members of another suspected terrorist group believed to be working for Iran's secret services.<sup>15</sup> Most recently, in December 2012, as part of the ongoing anti-terrorism efforts of the Azeri government, four foreign-trained Islamists were sentenced to up to 14 years in jail for treason, plotting terrorist attacks, and arms smuggling. The suspects in this case were once again linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guards.<sup>16</sup>

*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 Sunni Salafi community, and has been seen as a hotbed of Muslim radicalism, terrorism and extremism. The majority of this community's members, however, are not considered violent, and the mosque's discourse concentrates mainly on religious values and morality. Nevertheless, there are 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.<sup>17</sup>

The *imam* of the Abu Bakr mosque, G. Suleymanov, is reportedly loyal to the Azeri government and actively opposes "armed *jihad* against the infidels."<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> (A Baku court subsequently ordered the mosque to reopen, but thereafter reversed its decision<sup>20</sup>).

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, had masterminded the attack together with his brother-in-law Samir Mehtiyev. Mollachiyev, Mehtiyev, and their accomplices had illegally crossed from Dagestan into Azerbaijan and settled in the capital (Baku) and the city Sumgait. There, they plotted to revive the defunct Forest Brothers group, a militant organization that is active in Russia's Caucasus region but which was disbanded by Azeri authorities in 2007. Their aim was the disruption of socio-political stability in Azerbaijan.

Another leader of this ring was a Saudi citizen named Nail Abdul Karim al-Bedevi. Together with 17 other individuals charged with setting up an illegal armed group linked to al-Qaeda, he was sentenced to jail in July 2008.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, the case against the new, reconstituted "Forest Brothers" group was taken up by Azerbaijan's Court of Grave Crimes. The "Forest Brothers"

could more accurately be called the *Sumgait Jamaat*, as the group was originally formed in Sumgait and then expanded to other regions of Azerbaijan.<sup>22</sup> The group was accused of attending training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2009, 16 members of the movement were convicted and sentenced to jail terms for forming a radical religious group and illegal possession of weapons and drugs. In 2010, 31 alleged members of a Sunni Islamic insurgent group accused of terrorist activities in the North Caucasus and Azerbaijan were similarly put on trial.<sup>23</sup>

Azerbaijan has continued fighting this strain of terrorism. The Turan news agency, citing a source in law enforcement<sup>24</sup>, reports that in 2012 operations in the Northern and Western regions of Azerbaijan were aimed at identifying persons linked to the terrorist group “Forest Brothers,” which is connected with radical Wahhabi followers in the North Caucasus.<sup>25</sup> The Ministry of National Security reported that 17 members of an armed group were arrested during several operations against the “Forest Brothers” conducted in the mountainous areas along the country’s border with Russia. These individuals were accused of planning a series of sabotages and terrorist acts aimed at disrupting social stability and creating panic.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Dagestan and the Salafists*

Salafists, who until recently have remained relatively peaceful, currently pose a significant threat to Baku. The Salafist movement came to northwest Azerbaijan from Dagestan in the mid-1990s, following the first Chechen war. At present, there are an estimated 10,000-25,000 Salafists living in Azerbaijan. Five to seven thousand Salafists attend Friday prayers at the Abu Bakr mosque in Baku. Although Salafism is an ultraconservative interpretation of Sunni Islam, many Salafists are not violent. At the same time, radical Salafists are ready to use violence and political destabilization to establish an Islamic state.<sup>27</sup> Understanding the threat from radical Salafists requires an understanding of Dagestan, the source of their continuing immigration into Azerbaijan. Salafis in Azerbaijan primarily recruit followers from the northern ethnic minority communities, including those of the Lezgins, Avars, and Tsakurs. Indeed, the terrorists who perpetrated the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombing—Dzhokar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev—were Avars on their mother’s side. Salafi teachings in Dagestan have been thriving since the 1990s, along with that region’s expanding insurgency.

A number of Sunni Azerbaijani citizens, primarily Avars and Lezgins, are reported to have participated in the North Caucasus insurgency.<sup>28</sup> There are also many dozens of Sunni fighters from Azerbaijan who took arms against the regime of Bashar el-Assad in Syria.<sup>29</sup>

Azerbaijan is concerned that the upcoming 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia may lead to an increase in attacks in coming years. Historically, significant influxes of Dagestani militants in Azerbaijan have occurred after periods of combat between these militants and Russian security forces.<sup>30</sup> To ensure security for the Games, Russia will increase its efforts to battle militants in the Caucasus, especially in Dagestan.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Revival of Islamic Heritage*

Construction of the Abu Bakr mosque was financed by the Azerbaijani branch of a Kuwaiti society called The Revival of Islamic Heritage. Gamet Suleymanov, the *Imam* of the Abu Bakr mosque, is a graduate of the World Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia.<sup>32</sup> 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 of them 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.<sup>33</sup>

### *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 Kuwaitis, or to other natives of Gulf States.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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 help.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Gülen Movement*

The Turkish Nurcu network, led by the “Gülen” or “Hizmet” movement of controversial Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, is the most influential of the Sunni movements. The faith-based and well-resourced educational network is very active internationally, particularly in the Turkic-speaking states of the former Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> The Gülen movement began operating in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s and made a conscious effort to reach a broad and diverse range of the population. Its leadership was especially interested in recruiting the country’s elite to attend Gülen’s education institutions.<sup>40</sup> To facilitate its entry into the country, the movement emphasized its common Turkic cultural connections over its Islamic missionary activities.<sup>41</sup>

Azerbaijan became the first country outside of Turkey where the Gülen movement opened its schools. With Heydar Aliyev’s support, the movement promptly broadened its activities by building a network of educational institutions, social media, and businesses to further promote its teachings

The Gülen movement avoids arguments over Islam and “Muslim rights,” and has been deemed by some in Azerbaijan to be “un-Islamic.” The movement was accused by both Azeri secularists and Shi’a activists of promoting a concealed Turkish-Sunni political agenda against local Shi’ism.<sup>42</sup>

Currently, there are fourteen Gülen educational institutions in Azerbaijan, including the Qafqaz University, a private school, twelve lyceums (high schools), and also regional centers. One of the main achievements of the movement is its ownership of television and radio channels. Nobody, aside from the ruling elite, has as much influence over the Azerbaijani media as does the Gülen movement. This is noteworthy as it is highly unusual for an entity with both foreign and religious roots to operate media outlets in a secular and highly centralized country such as Azerbaijan.<sup>43</sup>

Recent years have marked change in Azeri attitudes toward the Gülen movement. The administration of the current president, Ilham Aliyev, is becoming more cautious about the organization.<sup>44</sup> The rise to power of an Islamist-oriented government in Turkey has only increased concerns in Azerbaijan. As a result, in 2009-2010, Azerbaijani media broadcasted a number of anti-Nurcu reports.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, multiple Turks and Azeris were arrested for disseminating religious propaganda and extremism.

## **ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY**

The majority of Azerbaijan’s 9 million person population self-identifies as

Muslim. Of those Muslims, roughly 85 percent are Shi'a, and the rest Sunni. Sunni Islam is dominant in the northern and western parts of Azerbaijan bordering Russia's North Caucasus region; the central, eastern, and southern parts of Azerbaijan (which border Iran) and 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.<sup>46</sup> With independence, this sentiment has only grown stronger, as religious Azerbaijanis have taken advantage of the country's newfound personal freedom to publicly express their faith.

In recent years, however, both internal and external drivers have led to the radicalization of Islam in Azerbaijan. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Persian Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have used growing Islamic fundamentalism in Azerbaijan to influence the country's domestic and foreign policy. The Gülen movement has emerged as the most prominent trend in Azerbaijan's Islamic revival. The main reason for its influence is the movement's deep integration into society through businesses, charity, lobbying, and education. As the Gülen movement mainly targets the urban elite, it has not been as successful in the more conservative Shi'a areas of Azerbaijan or among the rural, poor population. The Spiritual Board of the Caucasus Muslims and *Sheikh-ul-Islam*, a well-established and politically strong institution, also constrain the actions of all Sunni Islamic trends in Azerbaijan, including the Gülen movement.<sup>47</sup>

The Soviet legacy of secularism still shapes the official culture and is a source of anti-Islamic feelings in Azerbaijan. As a result, the increasingly prominent role of Islam has revived an array of disputes over issues related to religion and public life and has emerged as a central theme in the discussion on "what kind of society Azerbaijan is to become."<sup>48</sup>

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,<sup>49</sup> elevate radical Islam as a channel for expressing opposition to the government. Paradoxically, the promotion of human rights by Western nations has also contributed to this phenomenon by advocating the religious freedom that allows radical Islamic ideas to proliferate.

## 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 among 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."<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup> These measures were intended to help contain the spread of radical Islam in the country, though some Islamic communities voiced concerns they 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 imports of religious literature, and keeping religious leaders away from political life.

In November 2010, the Caspian Sea littoral states (including Azerbaijan) signed a security cooperation agreement. Since 2011, working groups from these five countries have met to coordinate law enforcement efforts aimed at combating terrorism, smuggling, narcotics trafficking, and organized crime in the Caspian region. However, Iran's membership in this organization mocks the effort.<sup>52</sup>

Combating organized crime, in particular illegal arms and drug trafficking, is an integral part of the war on terrorism being waged by Baku. The government of Azerbaijan has had some success in reducing the presence of terrorist facilitators and hampering their activities. This has mainly been accomplished by tracking suspected groups and their supporters operating in Azerbaijan and actively implementing measures to strengthen border and naval security.

Under the U.S. Department of Defense's Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation Prevention Program, Azerbaijan has taken over the operation of seven radar stations along the Caspian coast used for maritime monitoring and anti-smuggling efforts. Some of the other measures include new portal monitors at the renovated Ganja international airport, the National Communication System pilot project, and new initiatives under the U.S. Department of Energy's Second Line of Defense (SLD) program to centralize information from portal monitors at various border crossings.

Azerbaijan is also working to implement 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 conventions on chemical and biological weapons. In recent years, Azerbaijan also has intensified its fight against illegal drug trafficking, which flows through Iran, the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Europe.

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.<sup>53</sup> 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.

Azerbaijan has also received favorable assessments from the U.S. State Department on its efforts to counter the financing of terrorist groups through anti-money laundering measures and other means, as well as its cooperation with international bodies in those areas. The State Department has expressed similarly positive views on Azerbaijan's cooperation with the United States in improving its counternarcotics programs through cooperation with programs such as the Defense Department's Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the Justice Department's Resident Legal Advisor.

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