

Aliyev plays the “Islamic card” against Paris

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On 08.03.2024 speaking at the conference “Embracing Diversity: Tackling Islamophobia in 2024” in Baku, Ilham Aliyev leveled accusations against France. According to the Azerbaijani leader, in parallel with neocolonialism, official Paris pursues a policy of xenophobia and oppression towards Muslims, organizes various anti-Islamic deeds. According to Aliyev, mosques, Muslim cultural centers, and cemeteries in France are regularly vandalized, and citizens professing Islam are persecuted.

Aliyev’s rhetoric indicates that the political and diplomatic conflict between Paris and Baku, which erupted in late 2023 and was accompanied by the mutual expulsions of diplomats and “spy scandals”, continues to gain momentum. In February 2024, passions seemed to have subsided, leading some experts to suggest that after a period of public confrontation and demonstrative actions, the parties nevertheless preferred to curb their emotions and were trying to steer the situation in a more constructive direction through the format of undisclosed contacts. Moreover, in practical terms, Paris and Baku are united by a significant amount of mutual interests, and, above all, in the economic sphere, including the contracts of the French *Total Energies*, which is far not the last among the shareholders of the export energy sector of Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, Aliyev’s speech demonstrated that passions not only are high, but are at risk of moving into a more complex dimension. More precisely, this is exactly what Baku is striving for, trying to give the confrontation with Paris not a political, but a purely religious and civilizational background.

Aliyev’s speech, however, showed that not only have the emotions not subsided, but they threaten to take a more complicated turn. More specifically, it is Baku that is trying to give the confrontation with Paris a purely religious-civilizational rather than a political character.

Aliyev clearly feels uneasiness and irritation in connection with the activation of the FR on international platforms regarding Baku’s policy of destroying the Armenian heritage and millennia-old layers of Christian culture on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, while Paris in its campaign does not link and integrate the barbarism in Artsakh in the context of inter-religious confrontation but emphasizes the inhuman and predatory nature of the Aliyev regime itself, Aliyev personally voices mirror accusations against Paris while trying to attribute the nature of the global anti-Islamic struggle to the «crimes» charged against Paris.

Thus, Baku is once again trying to play the “Islamic card” in order to turn the global Muslim *Ummah* against France. This is despite the fact that Azerbaijan itself has not the best reputation in the Islamic world for a long time. And it is not only because that the emphatically secular and nationalist regime in Baku persecutes Islamic communities and groups within the country. It is also about the Aliyev regime’s demonstrative support for Israel in the context of the recent events in Gaza. After all, Azerbaijan was practically the only namely Muslim country in the world that welcomed Tel Aviv’s actions and provided it

with at least economic aid during the phase of large-scale hostilities against the Muslim Palestinian people.

Accusations against France and denunciations of its “anti-Islamic nature” are ridiculous, especially when they come from the mouth of the head of Azerbaijan. If we make even a trivial comparison of facts on how much money Christian France and Islamic Azerbaijan have allocated to meet the social needs of the disadvantaged residents of Gaza or, for example, the starving Rohingya Muslims, and which of the above-mentioned antagonistic countries and how many times has raised on international platforms with political initiatives in support of these oppressed and persecuted groups, the results will definitely not be in Baku's favor.