

ԻՍԼԱՄԸ ԵՎ ԱԴՐԲԵՋԱՆԻ ԱՐՏԱՔԻՆ ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ

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Սեղմագիր

Ադրբեջանը իսլամի հարցում երկակի մոտեցում է դրսևորում: Երկրի ներսում իսլամի դավանումը ենթարկվում է ձևափոխումների և տեղավորվում պետական վերահսկողության շրջանակներում: Երկրից դուրս Ադրբեջանը հանդես է գալիս որպես իսլամական համերաշխության կողմնակից՝ փորձելով շահել իսլամական երկրների աջակցությունը: Այս ուսումնասիրությամբ փորձել ենք վեր հանել Ադրբեջանի իսլամական ներքին ու արտաքին քաղաքականությունը, այդ շրջանակներում կիրառվող մեխանիզմները:

ИСЛАМ И ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА

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Аннотация

В Азербайджане применяется двойной подход в сфере религии. Внутри страны ислам подвергается изменениям и ограничивается государственным контролем. За пределами страны Азербайджан выступает как сторонник исламской солидарности, стремясь получить поддержку от других исламских государств. В данном исследовании мы пытаемся рассмотреть внутреннюю и внешнюю исламскую политику Азербайджана и выявить используемые в этих рамках механизмы.

ISLAM AND THE FOREIGN POLICY OF AZERBAIJAN

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Summary

Azerbaijan employs a dualistic strategy in its religious sphere. Domestically, Islam is meticulously managed under state control, undergoing modifications and being constrained by national interests. Internationally, Azerbaijan positions itself as a champion of Islamic solidarity, seeking support from other Islamic nations. In our study, we aim to examine Azerbaijan's internal and external Islamic policies and uncover the mechanisms utilized within this framework.

Islam and Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy²

Introduction

The religious policy of the post-Soviet Azerbaijani authorities has undergone a series of transformations, as a result of which the state established almost complete control over the religious sphere. While trying to prevent political manifestations of Islam, the Azerbaijani government has integrated Islam into national “*values and customs*,” making it an inalienable part of Azerbaijani identity. This “form” of Islam, referred to as “*traditional Islam*,” is promoted by the authorities through training of their own personnel, imposing restrictions in the religious sphere, and suppressing any expression of dissent. Along with transformation of Islam domestically, the Azerbaijani authorities also play the factor of Islam internationally, mainly against Armenia.

The religious policy of Azerbaijani authorities

The approach of the Azerbaijani authorities to religion was different, especially during the initial stage of independence. The period before Heydar Aliyev's presidency is considered a time of religious freedom in Azerbaijan³. After the collapse of the USSR, the Law “On Freedom of Religion” was adopted, mosques were renovated, and new ones were built. Religious schools, madrasas, and the Faculty of Theology at Baku University were also established. Public interest in Islam increased significantly⁴. In the same period, preachers from Iran, Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, and Turkey expanded their activities in Azerbaijan⁵. Thus, Azerbaijani citizens, who had fragmentary knowledge of Islam due to the Soviet anti-religious policies, began to engage with and learn about the Islamic models of these countries. Initially, the activities of foreign preachers were encouraged as they brought much-needed financial resources to the newly independent and war-torn country⁶. However, the Azerbaijani authorities later deemed these activities dangerous due to the rise of political Islam and formation of opposition groups and banned them.

Heydar Aliyev initiated unique state-religion relations in Azerbaijan. Considering the growing interest in Islam, Aliyev declared himself a believer and engaged in various propaganda activities, such as establishing Islamic holidays as non-working days and performing a small “*Hajj*”– “*Umrah*”⁷. Presentation of Islam as a part of Azerbaijani identity and culture was set as a cornerstone of his religious policy. But, in turn, was accompanied by establishing control over the entire religious sphere.

¹ Iranist, Analyst of «Orbeli» Research Center, Graduate student of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the NAS RA. In 2013–2019 studied at Iranology Chamber of The YSU. In 2016–2018 worked for Razm.info specialized site. Since 2016 up to now has worked at the “Center for Public Relations and Information” SNCO.

² The original article (in Arm.) was submitted to the editorial office on 30.06.2024.

³ Юнусов А., Исламский фактор в Азербайджане, «АДИЛЬОГЛЫ», Баку, 2013, p. 132:

⁴ Юнусов А., op. cit. p. 130–132:

⁵ Pashayan A., Islam in Azerbaijan, “Noravank” Scientific Educational Foundation, Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA Yer. 2014, p. 87.

⁶ Юнусов А., op.cit. p. 136.

⁷ Ibid, p. 135.

As a result of this policy, relations between the head of the Caucasus Muslims' Board (CMB), Allahshukyur Pashazade, and Heydar Aliyev became strained in the late 1990s. Pashazade, who has led the Board since the Soviet era and was seen as an acceptable figure by Soviet authorities, faced a campaign aimed at strengthening control over the Board. He was accused of creating a dangerous religious situation in the country, corruption, and even contacts with foreign intelligence services. However, Pashazade eventually managed to prove his loyalty and reconcile with the authorities^{8,9}.

Despite the easing of tensions, the Azerbaijani authorities subsequently created additional mechanisms to maintain state control over the religious sphere and gradually diminish the powers of the CMB. In particular, the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (hereinafter referred to as the State Committee) was established in Azerbaijan in 2001. Unlike the Board, the State Committee also deals with followers of other religions. Over the years, the powers of this structure have gradually expanded.

The process of reforming Islam and strengthening state control, which began under Heydar Aliyev, gained new momentum under Ilham Aliyev. Judging by Aliyev's statements on Islam, the idea of *traditional Islam* is consistently promoted in Azerbaijan¹⁰.

Within this framework, Islam as a system of religious beliefs is subordinated and presented as an inalienable part of national values and customs. Traditional Islam does not favor any particular branch (madhab); instead, it seeks to eliminate these differences. Joint prayers by followers of the Shiite and Sunni schools of thought are encouraged within this ideology. Such prayers are organized, for example, in the Heydar Aliyev Mosque¹¹, the construction of which can be seen as a physical manifestation of the promotion of traditional Islam.

The Azerbaijani authorities interpret the promotion of traditional Islam in the context of combatting the Islamic extremism, but this is primarily aimed at protecting the authorities themselves. In the context of suppressing and silencing opposition political forces, Islamic parties and movements serve as one of the few means of expressing protest in Azerbaijan. Given the example of an Islamic republic in Azerbaijan's neighborhood, the authorities are keen to stifle any political activity of Islam and confine religion within the framework of national customs. "*Traditional Islam assumes that when a person becomes more religious, he does not lose his identity; he remains Azerbaijani,*" – explained a representative of the State Committee¹². The Committee is responsible for promoting the policy of traditional Islam, which demonstrates the state-level endorsement of this ideology.

Pressure

Development of Azerbaijan's own model of Islam has been accompanied by restrictions in the religious sphere and pressures against believers. The Law "On the Freedom of Religion," adopted in

⁸ Ibid, p. 136.

⁹ The tension between Pashazade and Aliyev senior was also commented as a result of the struggle of clans, as far as clans from Nakhijevan and those who came from Armenia ruled Azerbaijan, meanwhile Pashazade was from Lenkoran and Talysh by origin.

¹⁰ Bedford S., Mahmudlu C., & Abilov Sh., Protecting Nation, State and Government: 'Traditional Islam' in Azerbaijan, Europe-Asia Studies, 2021, p. 691.

¹¹ Gasimov K., The Bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan: State as the Principal Regulator and Interpreter of Religion", Central Asian Affairs 7, 1 (2020), p. 16.

¹² Bedford S., op. cit., p. 701.

1992, has been amended nearly 30 times to date¹³. One of the main amendments, adopted in 1996, imposed state registration on religious organizations, allowing the authorities to categorize them as “ours” and “theirs.” The activities of foreign preachers were also prohibited. Since 2004, the import of literature with religious content has been controlled. Importing books, audio, and video materials with religious content not approved by the State Committee was banned¹⁴. Permitted religious materials were to be sold only in special shops, and the creation of religious content was to be supervised by the Committee.

In 2007, the use of loudspeakers to call for prayer (azan) was banned in Azerbaijan, but the ban was partially lifted after protests by believers¹⁵. A decision was made to ban azan with loudspeakers in areas adjacent to public places¹⁶. However, two years later, such sounding of azan was banned again, and in some mosques, the azan was prohibited completely¹⁷. In 2009, another amendment to the “Law on the Freedom of Religion” stipulated that ministers of religion in mosques must be selected by the Board of Caucasus Muslims, informing the relevant executive authority. It was also forbidden for those educated abroad to perform Islamic rites and ceremonies; this was allowed only for Azerbaijani citizens educated in their own country. This decision led to a shortage of personnel, prompting a 2017 decision allowing Azerbaijani citizens educated abroad to conduct religious services, but only with the CMB’s permission. In 2021, the power to appoint imams in mosques was transferred from the CMB to the State Committee, further tightening state control¹⁸.

In 2010, the Azerbaijani authorities banned the wearing of the hijab in schools, sparking protests in Baku and in the country’s most religiously populated areas: Nardaran, Ganja (Gandzak), and Masali. The authorities suppressed the demonstrations and left the decision unchanged. These restrictions were combined with targeting various Islamic structures, with Shiites being the most targeted. This repression was primarily aimed at limiting Iran’s influence.

Tehran has always been active in spreading its religious and cultural influence over its northern neighbor. Iran opened 22 madrasas in Azerbaijan, all of which were closed in 2001. Tehran also opened a branch of the “Emdad Khomeini” charity fund in Azerbaijan, but it was closed in 2014. Other structures considered centers of Iranian religious and cultural influence have been closed during recent escalations in Iran-Azerbaijan relations. In particular, the office of the representative of Iran’s spiritual leader and the mosque attached to it were closed in 2021.

The Iranian influence in Azerbaijan first manifested itself through creation of various Shiite religious groups and development of a positive attitude toward Iran in regions densely populated

¹³ “Dini etiqad azadlığı haqqında” Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu, <https://e-qanun.az/framework/7649> (download date: 17.06.2024).

¹⁴ Pashayan A., Islam in Azerbaijan, “Noravank Scientific Educational Foundation, Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA, Yer., 2014, p. 59.

¹⁵ В Азербайджане запретили громкий азан, Кавказский Узел, (24.05.2024), <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/117026> (download date: 18.06.2024).

¹⁶ Азербайджанские власти сняли запрет на Азан, но контролировать его будут, kavkazcenter.com, (30.05.2007), <https://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2007/05/30/51198/azerbajdzhanskije-vlasti-snyali-zapret-na-azan-no-kontrolirovat-ego-budut.shtml> (download date: 18.06.2024).

¹⁷ В Баку запретили азан в мечетях, IslamNews, (03.11.2009), <https://islamnews.ru/V-Baku-zapretili-azan-v-mechetyah> (download date: 18.06.2024).

¹⁸ Vardanyan Zh., Shia believers: Azerbaijan's Iranian fear, «Droshak» N5, (24.05.2023), p. 9, <https://www.arfd.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/%D4%B4%D6%80%D6%85%D5%B7%D5%A1%D5%AF-%D5%A9%D5%AB%D5%BE-5-2023%D5%A9.pdf> (download date: 27.06.2024).

by believers. Azerbaijanis constitute the second largest group of tourists visiting Iran, with most of them going on pilgrimages to Shia shrines. In these regions, Iran's Shia clergy are considered authoritative in religious matters, and Islamic holidays are celebrated on the dates they set. Baku combats this influence through various methods, including the dismissal and imprisonment of imams.

One significant effort to neutralize Iranian influence was the special operation carried out in the Nardaran community, located near Baku. Known as the most religious place in Azerbaijan, Nardaran outwardly resembled Iran, with women wearing *hijabs* and *chadras* and streets adorned with religious posters. Protests against the country's religious policies traditionally originated in Nardaran, making it a “*state within a state*.” In December 2015, Azerbaijani security forces conducted a special operation to suppress the settlement, arresting hundreds of people. Religious banners and flags were removed, replaced by Azerbaijani flags, and a special regime was established. Following the operation, the policy of secularizing Nardaran continued, rendering it less rebellious.

Among the persecuted Shia structures were the “Islamic Party of Azerbaijan,” “Hezbollah,” “Clerical Council of Azerbaijan,” “Muslim Unity Movement,” and “Hussainites.” Many members and leaders of these groups were arrested for various reasons. As a result, “Hezbollah” and the “Clerical Council of Azerbaijan” nearly ceased to exist. The “Islamic Party of Azerbaijan” and the “Muslim Unity Movement,” both founded in Nardaran, were decapitated. Aliakram Aliyev, the founder and leader of the “Islamic Party of Azerbaijan,” was arrested in 1995 and sentenced to a long prison term in 1996. Mevsun Samadov, one of the subsequent leaders, was arrested in 2011 for criticizing the authorities and comparing President Ilham Aliyev to Sultan Yazid¹⁹. Ilham Aliyev, a namesake of the Azerbaijani president who replaced Samadov, was arrested in 2020 for mourning the death of Qasem Soleimani, Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' “Quds” division and calling him a “*shahid*”²⁰.

The “Muslim Unity Movement” was formed in 2015, but its leader, Taleh Baghirzade, was arrested shortly after its formation during the special operation in Nardaran. The “Hussainites” movement, formed in Iran in 2015, consisted mostly of Azerbaijani citizens who had received religious education in Iran. Led by Tohid Ibrahimbeyli and Orkhan Mamedov, the movement participated in the war against the “Islamic State” in Syria alongside pro-Iranian forces. The group is considered terrorist in Azerbaijan, which regularly calls on Iran to arrest and extradite its members living in the country, but Tehran refuses to comply²¹.

Azerbaijani repression also targets ordinary believers, whom the authorities label as a “*fifth column*” and arrest on charges of spying for Iran, treason, attempting to establish a religious state in Azerbaijan, or drug smuggling. The persecution of Shia believers especially intensified during the periods of tension in Iran–Azerbaijan relations, both before and after 2020. In the fall of 2021,

¹⁹ Yazid ibn Muawiah killed Imam Hussain, grandson of prophet Muhammad.

²⁰ Vardanyan Zh., Iran's reactions to the imprisonment of a Shia figure in Azerbaijan: Shiism in Tehran-Baku relations (in Arm.), Armenpress.am, (11.03.2020), https://armenpress.am/arm/news/1008196.html?fbclid=IwAR30IeD7ye_oPgcQ8gyzJsN8Bw-jdNvhKcT3hqVFiIQ5GsBKphev3ANDCH8 (download date: 04.05.2023).

²¹ Vardanyan Zh., Shia believers: Azerbaijan's Iranian fear, “Droshak” N5, (24.05.2023), p. 9, <https://www.arfd.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/%D4%B4%D6%80%D6%85%D5%B7%D5%A1%D5%AF-%D5%A9%D5%AB%D5%BE-5-2023%D5%A9..pdf> (download date: 27.06.2024).

religious websites such as *Shia.az*, *Islaminsesi.az*, *Deyerler.az*, *Maide.az*, and *Ahlibeyt.az* were blocked in Azerbaijan on charges of “propaganda for Iran²².” Most of these sites remain blocked.

Arrests of Shias and pressure on them continued in 2022 and 2023. Following the armed attack on the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran on January 27, a new wave of repression began. On January 31, Baku security forces conducted a special operation at *Salamnews* and *Interaz TV* channel, arresting seven believers for “propagating Iran.” The arrests continued in the following days and months, with 312 believers arrested between January 31, 2023, and June 25, 2024. This number, however, may be higher as it was compiled from Azerbaijani social platforms, and the actual arrests have not ceased.

Although Shiites were the primary targets of repression, Sunnis also faced persecution, especially after the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001. Following the September 11 attacks, several arrests were made on charges of links with “al-Qaeda²³”. In 2008, the Azerbaijani authorities closed the largest Sunni mosque, the Abu Bakr Mosque, built in 1997 with funding from a wealthy Kuwaiti. Kamet Suleymanov, elected Imam without the approval of the Caucasus Muslim Board, gained significant recognition, turning the mosque into an important Sunni (Salafi) center, which concerned the authorities. In 2008, a radical group, “Forest Brothers,” carried out a terrorist attack at the mosque, which the authorities used as a pretext to close it²⁴. The process did not stop there; in 2009, mosques were forced to re-register, and those that did not meet the requirements were threatened with closure. Subsequently, places of worship, both Sunni and Shiite, were closed in various cities for various reasons²⁵.

The religious policy of the Azerbaijani leadership was also influenced by the “Arab Spring.” As a result of enrollment of Azerbaijani citizens in the “Islamic State” (IS) terrorist group, religious restrictions were tightened. According to 2017 data, about 900 Azerbaijani citizens joined IS²⁶. During this period, Shiites also increased their activities, formed their own cadres, and joined the war against IS with pro-Iranian groups (such as the aforementioned “Hussainites”). In response, the government began arresting all those who had participated in hostilities abroad. In December 2015, the law “On Combating Religious Extremism” was adopted, which also included deprivation of citizenship for participants of military operations abroad²⁷.

Although the Azerbaijani authorities justify these repressions and arrests as necessary to combat extremism, the problem is that many arrests are politically motivated. In the absence of press freedom, it is difficult to discern who the real extremists are and who were arrested for political activities.

²² Vardanyan Zh., The course of a new Baku-Tehran tension (in Arm.), Orbeli.am, (02.11.2021), <https://shorturl.at/8BU5R> (download date: 27.06.2024).

²³ Gasimov K., The Bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan: State as the Principal Regulator and Interpreter of Religion”, Central Asian Affairs 7, 1 (2020), p. 10.

²⁴ Pashayan A., Islam in Azerbaijan (in Arm.), «Noravank» Scientific Educational foundation, Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA, Yer., 2014, p. 114–118.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 58.

²⁶ DTX rəisi: “Son 5 ildə 900-ə yaxın azərbaycanlı İŞİD-ə qoşulub”, report.az, (24.09.2017), <https://report.az/hadise/son-5-il-erzinde-900-e-yaxin-azerbaycanli-i-si-d-e-qosulub/> (download date: 25.06.2024).

²⁷ “Dini ekstremizmə qarşı mübarizə haqqında” Qanun qəbul edilib, Azertag.az, 04.12.2015, <https://azertag.az/xeber/dini-ekstremizme-qarsi-mubarize-haqqinda-qanun-qebul-edilib-908183> (download date: 25.06.2024).

Promotion of religious education

In the policy of promoting traditional Islam, significant importance is placed on establishing religious educational institutions and training local personnel to maintain Islam within the framework of state propaganda. Active efforts have been made in this direction, especially over the last 10 years. This sector is fully controlled by the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations. In 2018, the Institute of Theology was opened in Azerbaijan, replacing the Faculty of Theology at Baku University. The opening of this institute was justified by the faculty's inability to provide the necessary personnel.

The Institute of Theology prepares specialists not only in Islam but also in other religions²⁸. *“Azerbaijan is a multi-confessional country, so we need personnel not only for Islam but also for other religions. According to the Azerbaijani law, people working in religious institutions must be Azerbaijani citizens and be educated in Azerbaijan,”* said Mubariz Gurbanli, head of the State Committee²⁹. In addition to the institute, efforts are also underway to open secondary professional institutions.

As of 2017, there were only three religious schools, or madrasas, under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Azerbaijan: the Islamic College of the Aliabad community in Zaqatala district, Shaki Islamic College, and the “Shabnam” Girls’ College in Baku³⁰. In the same year, by Ilham Aliyev's decree, eight madrasas were established and given the status of colleges. However, in the newly opened madrasas, there were no admissions in 2017 due to incomplete preparation of teaching staff and buildings³¹. It is unclear whether admissions were organized in these colleges in subsequent years, but in 2024 it became evident that all ten colleges were closed, and admissions were organized only at the Baku College, the construction of which was announced in 2023. This college, like the Institute, is under the control of the State Committee, whereas the previously established colleges operated under the CMB, which likely contributed to their closure. *“The activities of all similar colleges have been terminated. Only one college will function: the Baku Theological College, where admissions will be carried out by the State Examination Center. In this regard, it can be said that a new approach to the activity of colleges in our country will be regulated this way: admission will be conducted only in the colleges established by the state,”* said MP Jeyhun Mammadov³².

Successful graduates of the Baku College are expected to continue their education at the Institute of Theology. Education at both the college and the institute is not based on a specific madhab (school of thought). Students receive general knowledge about Islam, which aligns perfectly with the framework of traditional Islamic ideology.

²⁸ Azərbaycan İlahiyyat İnstitutu yaradılıb, Modern.az, (02.09.2018), <https://modern.az/tehsil/156706/azerbaycan-ilahiyyat-institutu-yaradilib/> (download date: 15.06.2024).

²⁹ Мубариз Гурбанлы о закрытии Бакинского исламского университета, trend.az, (27.09.20218), <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2957263.html> (download date: 27.06.2024).

³⁰ QMİ sədrinin müavini: “Mədrəsələrin kollec statusu alması tələbələrin sayına müsbət təsir göstərmiş”, (30.10.2017), https://musavat.com/news/qmi-sedrinin-muavini-medreselerin-kollec-statusu-almasi-telebelerin-sayina-musbet-tesir-gosterib_479223.html (download date: 27.06.2024).

³¹ Azərbaycanda yeni yaradılan İslam kollecləri bu il tələbə qəbulu apara bilməyib, Report.az, (18.09.2017), <https://bit.ly/2VAy0Mu> (download date: 15.06.2024).

³² Bu il yalnız Bakı İlahiyyat Kollecinə qəbul aparılacaq – QMİ-nin dini məktəbləri..., tns.az, (16.05.2024), <https://tns.az/cemiyet/8920-bu-il-yalniz-baki-ilahiyyat-kollecine-qebul-aparilacaq-qmi-nin-dini-mektebleri/> (download date: 15.06.2024).

To encourage religious education, teaching in the institute and the college is not only free, but students are also provided with scholarships. “*There are positions for which a secondary religious education is sufficient. For example, a secondary religious education is enough to hold positions such as clergyman and muezzin. Thus, graduates of Baku Theological College will become muezzins and performers of religious rites in the future. If any of these graduates want to become an imam, they will certainly apply to the Azerbaijan Theological Institute for higher education,*” said Mubariz Gurbanli at the opening of the college³³.

Personnel of the religious educational institutions in Azerbaijan are still insufficient, especially given the situation where clergymen in mosques are dismissed on the pretext of being “*Iranian spies.*” As mentioned earlier, in 2022, the authority to appoint clergymen in mosques was transferred from the Caucasus Muslim Board to the State Committee. By 2023, the chairman of the committee announced that 118 people had been dismissed within a year of taking office. “*The Iranian regime tried to infiltrate its people into the mosques of Azerbaijan. It is trying to spread its model of state religion in Azerbaijan. To carry out propaganda in Azerbaijan, Iran also conducted campaigns on social networks. Extensive efforts have been made to prevent and counter such destructive activities,*” Gurbanli stated³⁴. As part of the political goal of eliminating any Iranian “*influence*” in religious matters, clerics who hold Islamic rituals and holidays on dates approved by the Iranian side are also dismissed from their jobs in Azerbaijan³⁵. Under these conditions, since 2023, Azerbaijan has also begun to involve women in leading religious ceremonies in mosques to fill the shortage of personnel³⁶. Colleges and institutes are also coeducational. Thus, Azerbaijan is implementing the practice of involving women in religious services, which is not commonly accepted in Islamic countries.

In addition to academic education, the authorities allocate funds to the State Committee for organizing courses in the regions and supporting religious communities. On November 27, 2014, Ilham Aliyev signed a decree providing financial support to religious communities to further strengthen efforts on “*promotion of religious education and national values.*” According to the decree, 2.5 million manats (3.1 million dollars at the exchange rate of 2014) were allocated to the State Committee from the reserve fund provided for in the state budget³⁷.

After this decision, the State Committee held various meetings with communities in the regions, financed them, and organized courses titled³⁸:

³³ Mübariz Qurbanlı: Əsas məqsəd Azərbaycanda dini təhsilin bütün pillələrini yaratmaq və keyfiyyətini qaldırmaqdır, scara.gov.az, (18.12.2023), <https://scara.gov.az/az/xeber/ictimaiyyetle-elaqeler/musahibeler/mubariz-gurbanli-esas-meqsed-azerbaycanda-dini-tehsilin-butun-pillelerini-yaratmaq-ve-keyfiyyetini-qaldirmaqdir> (download date: 15.06.2024).

³⁴ Иранский режим пытался внедрить своих людей в мечети Азербайджана – Мубариз Гурбанлы, [trend.az](https://www.trend.az), (06.04.2023), <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/3731775.html> (download date: 15.06.2024).

³⁵ یرکناری امام جماعت مسجد شهر ایمیشلی در جمهوری آذربایجان, [Qafqaz.ir](https://bit.ly/42japei), (07.05.2023), <https://bit.ly/42japei> (download date: 15.06.2024).

³⁶ Daha 5 qadın dini ayin icracısı məscidlərə təyinat alıb, report.az, (14.04.2023), <https://report.az/dini-xeberler/daha-10-qadin-dini-ayin-icracilari-mescidlere-teyinat-alib/> (download date: 15.06.2024).

³⁷ Azərbaycanda dini icmalara maliyyə yardımı göstərilməsi haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Sərəncamı, [President.az](https://president.az), (27.11.2014), <https://president.az/az/articles/view/13554> (download date: 15.06.2024).

³⁸ Bölgələrdə dini maarifləndirmə ilə bağlı tədbirlər keçirilib, scara.gov.az, (29.09.2015), <https://scara.gov.az/az/xeber/ictimaiyyetle-elaqeler/bolge-xeber/bolgelerde-dini-maariflendirme-ile-bagli-tedbirler-kecirilib-1> (download date: 15.06.2024).

- “The Values of Traditional Islam”
- “Islam is a Religion of Peace and Brotherhood”
- “Believers are the Guardians of Our National and Moral Values”
- “Protect the Believers from Extremism”
- “Early Marriage and Its Consequences”
- “Drug Addiction and Its Harms”
- “Youth and National Moral Values”

To propagate traditional Islam, in 2017, Aliyev signed a decree creating a fund for the promotion of moral values, which also organizes educational courses in the regions and finances municipalities³⁹.

Thus, the religious sphere has come under state control in all directions. The reduction of the CMB’s powers is part of this policy. The most important functions, such as the registration of religious communities, the authority to appoint clerics in mosques, and the organization of religious education, have been transferred to the State Committee, which is headed by a member of the ruling party “New Azerbaijan” (“Yeni Azerbaijan”). This indicates that no matter how loyal the CMB is to the authorities, it is still considered a religious structure and therefore untrustworthy.

This is evidenced by past problems between the government and the CMB, as well as recent tensions in 2021. The head of the CMB, Allahshukur Pashazade, stated in 2021 that the fatwa of Iran’s spiritual leader⁴⁰, which claimed that “*Karabakh is an Islamic land*,” played an important role in Azerbaijan’s victory in the war. Although this phrase is widely attributed to the spiritual leader of Iran, there is virtually no evidence to support it⁴¹.

However, Pashazade’s statement was met with great dissatisfaction in Azerbaijan, and state propaganda media launched a campaign against him. Later, Pashazade made statements favorable to the government and, against the backdrop of Iran-Azerbaijan tensions, made strongly anti-Iranian statements that contradicted his previous narrative. This, however, did not stop the process of transferring the powers of the Caucasus Muslim Board to the State Committee.

The trends of Sunniization in Azerbaijan

There is no clear data on the proportion of Shiites and Sunnis in Azerbaijan. According to 2015 data provided by the head of the CMB, Allahshukur Pashazade, 65% of the population are Shiites, and 35% are Sunnis⁴². The latter primarily reside in the northern regions of the country. The lack of recent data on the ratio of Shiites to Sunnis makes it difficult to assess the pace of the spread of Sunnism in the country. However, various Sunni currents have spread in Azerbaijan, especially since the republic’s independence from the USSR. The geopolitical situation has also influenced this process. The presence of the Islamic Republic in Azerbaijan’s neighborhood and the worsening

³⁹ Mənəvi Dəyərlərin Təbliği Fondunun yaradılması haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin fərmanı, e-qanun.az, (10.10.2017), <https://e-qanun.az/framework/36620> (download date: 15.06.2024).

⁴⁰ The verdict of the highest spiritual leader in Islam regarding some event or phenomenon.

⁴¹ جمله « قره باغ، خاک جهان اسلام است» از مقام معظم رهبری نیست Azariha.org, (04.04.2016), <http://azariha.org/679/> (download date: 25.06.2024).

⁴² Allahşükür Paşazadə: “Azərbaycanda 35 faiz sünni, 65 faiz isə şiə məzhəbinə mənsub insanların yaşadığı ehtimal edilir”, Report.az, (14.02.2015), <https://report.az/dini-xeberler/allahsukur-pasazade-azerbaycanda-35-faiz-sunni-65-faiz-ise-sie/> (download date: 25.06.2024).

relations with this neighbor have manifested in Azerbaijan as oppression of Shiite believers. Conversely, closer relations with Turkey have facilitated the spread of “*Turkish Sunni Islam*” in Azerbaijan. Another popular Sunni trend in Azerbaijan is Salafism.

Salafism, the most conservative branch of Sunni Islam, began to actively penetrate Azerbaijan in the early 1990s through Sunni preachers from Arab countries, Chechen refugees, and Azerbaijanis educated in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Salafism is spread mainly in the northern regions of the country⁴³. One manifestation of this was the participation of Azerbaijanis in the Russian-Chechen wars and membership in IS. Due to the state propaganda, a negative attitude towards Salafis has developed in Azerbaijan, leading to their perception as disruptors of national unity⁴⁴. In the 2000s, after the terrorist attack in New York, hundreds of Salafists were arrested in Azerbaijan, and several structures operating under the auspices of Arab countries were closed⁴⁵. However, in the context of rejecting the Iranian and Arab models of Islam, the secular “*Turkish*” character became acceptable and exemplary for the Azerbaijani authorities, allowing Turkish preachers to operate unhindered⁴⁶ and contribute to the spread of the Hanafi direction. Amid support for Turkish Islam, opinions were even voiced in Azerbaijan that Shiism was Islam distorted by Iran and that Sunni Islam was true and closer to Turkish roots⁴⁷.

Other manifestations of Turkish Islam, such as *Gülenism*, also spread widely in Azerbaijan. The situation changed when the founder of the *Gülen* movement, Fethullah *Gülen*, was expelled from Turkey due to disagreements with President Recep Tayyip *Erdogan*, after which the movement’s activities were also suppressed in Azerbaijan⁴⁸.

Baku actively cooperates with Ankara in the field of religious education, trying to introduce educational practices used in Turkey with local adaptations in Azerbaijan. There are also student exchanges⁴⁹.

“Currently, our ‘hotline’ is operating in the Committee, and any citizen can apply there. But what we saw in Turkey was a completely different institution. There, applicants can receive religious information, certain advice, and suggestions. We want to establish that institute in Azerbaijan as well. A citizen can get information about a religious topic that interests him from the Internet, television, and books. But when he suddenly gets interested in some issue or doesn’t understand something in the book he read, he can apply to that center and clarify everything for himself. But this is an issue that requires a little expense. At the same time, there should be a

⁴³ Pashayan A., *Islam in Azerbaijan*, «Noravank» Scientific Educational Foundation, Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA, Yer., 2014, p. 107-109. (in Arm.)

⁴⁴ Gasimov K., *The Bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan: State as the Principal Regulator and Interpreter of Religion*”, *Central Asian Affairs* 7, 1 (2020), p. 18.

⁴⁵ Pashayan A., *Islam in Azerbaijan*, «Noravank» Scientific Educational Foundation, Institute of the Oriental Studies, NAS RA, Yer., 2014, p. 110.

⁴⁶ Bedford S., Mahmudlu C., & Abilov Sh., *Protecting Nation, State and Government: ‘Traditional Islam’ in Azerbaijan*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2021, p. 705.

⁴⁷ Pashayan A., *Islam in Azerbaijan*, op. cit., p. 106.

⁴⁸ Bedford S., Mahmudlu C., & Abilov Sh., *Protecting Nation, State and Government: ‘Traditional Islam’ in Azerbaijan*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2021, p. 705.

⁴⁹ Mübariz Qurbanlı: *Əsas məqsəd Azərbaycanda dini təhsilin bütün pillələrini yaratmaq və keyfiyyətini qaldırmaqdır*, [scara.gov.az](https://scara.gov.az/az/xeber/ictimaiyyetle-elaqeler/musahibeler/mubariz-qurbanli-esas-meqsed-azərbaycanda-dini-tehsilin-butun-pillelerini-yaratmaq-ve-keyfiyyetini-qaldırmaqdir), (18.12.2023), <https://scara.gov.az/az/xeber/ictimaiyyetle-elaqeler/musahibeler/mubariz-qurbanli-esas-meqsed-azərbaycanda-dini-tehsilin-butun-pillelerini-yaratmaq-ve-keyfiyyetini-qaldırmaqdir> (download date: 26.06.2024).

separate building, equipment, and, most importantly, required specialists. In other words, it is a very good idea, but for its implementation, there must be financial support and provision. Of course, the possibilities of our country are wide. It's just that certain issues need to be resolved in a timely manner," Gurbanli stated regarding cooperation with Ankara in the field of education⁵⁰.

In any case, the attitude towards Turkish Islam is not straightforward. The Islamic trends introduced by Erdogan in Turkey are not fully and unconditionally accepted in Azerbaijan. As a result, especially in recent years, Azerbaijan has put more emphasis on the promotion of traditional Islam⁵¹, which implies elimination of the difference between Shiites and Sunnis. There is also a fertile ground for this: traditionally, the differences between Shiites and Sunnis in Azerbaijan were not clearly separated. For example, Sunnis visited the Shiite shrines of Karbala and Mashhad, held Shiite titles, and so on⁵². Now, within the framework of traditional Islam, the idea of "Azerbaijanism" is brought to the fore by the policy aimed at eliminating the differences between Sunnis and Shiites. As a result, it can be said that a significant part of the citizens of modern Azerbaijan are not believers. They perform religious rituals only as part of tradition⁵³.

"The difference in the existing sects (madhabs) should not prevent our unity and integrity. The Muslim identity and the ideology of Azerbaijanism should overcome sectarian differences. The importance of the Azerbaijani model of state-religion relations is reflected in this approach. The state attaches importance not to a religion based on sectarianism, but to a religion that is alien to extremism and based on orthodox and fundamental foundations. The policy pursued in this direction is of extreme importance for both the state and the public. This is one of the main ways to prevent religious extremism," Chairman of the State Committee Gurbanli stresses⁵⁴. The idea of tolerance between Sunnis and Shiites is also one of the cornerstones of the brand of multiculturalism promoted by Baku, where the authorities try to show that followers of different nationalities, religions, and denominations live together in an atmosphere of solidarity in Azerbaijan⁵⁵.

OIC and AzR: religion in the context of Baku's anti-Armenian policy

Despite the pressure on believers, several religious restrictions, and general policy of the Azerbaijani authorities aimed at weakening Islam as a religion inside the country, abroad Azerbaijan presents itself as an "oppressed Islamic country" and speaks about the need to preserve Islamic values and heritage, positioning itself as an advocate of Islamic solidarity⁵⁶. Azerbaijan is

⁵⁰ Mübariz Qurbanlı: Əgər bu sahədə kaos olsa... (MÜSAHİBƏ), Trend.az, (16.07.2015), <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2417732.html> (download date: 25.06.2024).

⁵¹ Bedford S., Mahmudlu C., & Abilov Sh., Protecting Nation, State and Government: 'Traditional Islam' in Azerbaijan, Europe-Asia Studies, 2021, p. 705.

⁵² Ibid, p. 706.

⁵³ Azerbaijan: Religious Pluralism and Challenges of Cultivating Identity, studies.aljazeera.net, (15.10.2015), <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/10/20151015112738701335.html> (download date: 25.06.2024).

⁵⁴ Gasimov K., The Bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan: State as the Principal Regulator and Interpreter of Religion", Central Asian Affairs 7, 1 (2020), p. 19.

⁵⁵ Bedford S., Mahmudlu C., & Abilov Sh., Protecting Nation, State and Government: 'Traditional Islam' in Azerbaijan, Europe-Asia Studies, 2021, p. 706.

⁵⁶ İslam Əməkdaşlıq Təşkilatının rəsmi mətbuat orqanı olan "OIC Journal" jurnalında İlham Əliyevin "İslam həmrəyliyinin gücləndirilməsi zamanın çağırışıdır" sərlövhəli məqaləsi dərc edilib, president.az, (10.05.2017), <https://president.az/az/articles/view/23584> (download date: 27.06.2024).

particularly active with such a policy in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Within the framework of cooperation with the OIC, Baku in 2009 and the occupied Shushi in 2024 were declared capitals of this organization. In 2017, the Islamic Solidarity Games were also held in Azerbaijan. This factor of solidarity was used by Azerbaijan to gain the support of Islamic countries against Armenia. This policy was pursued both before and after the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020. *“We are one of those countries that has always attached great importance to Islamic solidarity in our foreign policy. You can see it in my statements on foreign policy. One of the priorities is to develop relations with Muslim countries. As we are part of the Muslim world, in the UN we have been supported most of all by Muslim countries,”* said Ilham Aliyev in one of his statements, presenting the Islamic direction of foreign policy⁵⁷.

During years of contact with Islamic countries, Azerbaijan has generated anti-Armenian theses, and the main ones are listed below:

- Armenia is an Islamophobic country.
- Armenia destroys mosques and keeps animals in them.
- Armenia’s Islamophobia is an insult not only to Azerbaijan but also to the entire Islamic world.
- Islamic countries cannot establish friendly relations with Armenia.

These theses were put forward by the Azerbaijani side during bilateral and multilateral meetings with various representatives of Islamic countries. The main platform for expressing such theses was the OIC. Here are some examples of using such theses:

During the first conference of OIC for sciences and technologies in 2017, Ilham Aliyev stated: *“At the direction of the Armenian leadership, **all mosques in our occupied lands have been destroyed**. Photos of the ruined mosques of Shusha, Agdam and other cities are documentary evidence of Armenian vandalism. **Islamophobia in Armenia has reached its peak**. Armenia is trying very hard to expand ties with various Muslim countries. It would be wrong to believe their hypocritical and deceitful words. **Armenia, which has destroyed sacred mosques in Azerbaijan, can’t be a friend of any Muslim country**”⁵⁸.*

On September 21, 2020, I. Aliyev made a statement on Apsheeron: *“We are always very sensitive to any rapprochement of Muslim countries with Armenia. Because Armenia has occupied our lands. At the same time, Muslim countries should know that Armenia has committed genocide against Muslim religious sites and cultural genocide in the occupied territories. Look at the state of our mosques! Don't people in Muslim countries know that Armenians keep animals, pigs and cows in our half-destroyed mosques? Isn't this an insult to the Muslim world? Therefore, officials of all Muslim countries should revive these images when shaking hands with an Armenian official whose hands are stained with the blood of the Azerbaijani people. Armenia is not an ordinary country. Armenia is a country where Islamophobia is a state policy. They raise their children in the spirit of hatred for the Muslims. They want to instill this ideology in their children”⁵⁹.*

⁵⁷“Müsəlman ölkələri də bilməlidirlər ki, Ermənistan işğal edilmiş torpaqlarda müsəlman dini abidələrinə qarşı soyqırımı törədib”, scara.gov.az, (21.09.2020), <https://www.scara.gov.az/az/xeberler/print/prezident-ilham-eliyev-ermenistan-olkeidir-ki-islamofobiya-onlari-dovlet-siyasetidir> (download date: 20.06.2024).

⁵⁸ Prezident İlham Əliyev: “Azərbaycanda müqəddəs məscidləri dağıdan Ermənistan müsəlman ölkələrinin dostu ola bilməz”, Report.az, (10.09.2017), <https://report.az/xarici-siyaset/prezident-i-lham-eliyev-azerbaycanda-muqeddes-mescidleri-dagidan-ermenistan-muselman-olkelerinin-do/> (download date: 20.06.2024).

⁵⁹ “İslamofobiya Ermənistanın dövlət siyasətidir”, Qafqazinfo.az, (19.09.2020), <https://qafqazinfo.az/news/detail/islamofobiya-ermenistanin-dovlet-siyasetidir-298860> (download date: 24.06.2024).

Baku has been successful in its policy of presenting Armenia as an anti-Islamic state especially in the OIC. The organization has always made statements in support of Azerbaijan and has fully promoted the Azerbaijani theses. The organization's anti-Armenian statements are related to various incidents. For example, when in August 2022, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces attacked and suffered losses in some parts of the northern and northwestern border zone of Artsakh, the OIC issued a statement on the necessity of withdrawal of “*Armenian illegal armed groups*”⁶⁰.

The OIC also regularly issues statements on the so-called “*Khojalu Genocide*”⁶¹. The organization has also adopted several anti-Armenian resolutions, including on the so-called “*destruction of cultural heritage by Armenians*”. After the April 2016 war, the OIC also created a contact group “*related to Armenia's aggression*”, the first session of which was held in September 2017⁶².

Within the framework of using the Islamic factor against the RA, one of the most wide-spread theses in Azerbaijan is that the Armenians transforming “*Azerbaijani*” mosques and presenting them as Iranian. This is especially related to the Blue Mosque in Yerevan and the Mosque of Lady Gohar in Shushi. In this context, Iran has also been accused of being Armenia's accomplice in “*vandalism and distortion of history*”.

Moreover, the Azerbaijani side has gone so far with this policy that the Azerbaijani MPs, who visited Armenia in 2022, after being in the Blue Mosque made a post on social networks, announcing that “*the Blue Mosque is the only preserved Azerbaijani monument in Yerevan*”, and expressed the hope that “*one day the true owners of the mosque will be able to pray there*”⁶³. In this regard, after the occupation of Artsakh the Aliyevs' visits to mosques and prayers there are also noteworthy. Renovating mosques in the occupied territories and opening them with great pomp, and later declaring Shushi as the capital of the OIC, are also within the framework of the same logic. In this way, even after the full occupation of Artsakh, Azerbaijan continues to fulfill its role as a solidary member of the Islamic Ummah, again with an anti-Armenian agenda.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan uses Islam as a tool both inside and outside the country. Domestically, Islam is used to strengthen the idea of “*Azerbaijanism*” by promoting “*traditional Islam*,” which integrates Islam into national customs and traditions. This approach removes the political component from the Muslim religion, preventing the emergence of opposition circles and discourse unwanted by the authorities. Within the framework of “*traditional Islam*”, efforts are made to eliminate differences

⁶⁰ İslam Əməkdaşlıq Təşkilatı Ermənistanın Azərbaycana qarşı təxribatını pislədi, avropa.info, (11.08.2020), <https://avropa.info/post/399112> (download date: 25.06.2024).

⁶¹ İslam Əməkdaşlıq Təşkilatı Xocalı soyqırımı ilə bağlı bəyanat yayıb, 1news.az, (26.02.2020), <https://1news.az/az/news/20200226030350116-Islam-Emekdashliq-Teshkilati-Xocali-soyqirimi-ile-bagli-beyanat-yayib> (download date: 25.06.2024).

⁶² Nyu-Yorkda İslam Əməkdaşlıq Təşkilatının Kontakt Qrupun iclası keçirilib, azərbaycan24.com, (20.09.2017), <https://www.azerbaycan24.com/nyu-yorkda-islam-emekdashliq-teskilatinin-kontakt-grupun-iclası-kecirilib/> (download date: 25.06.2024).

⁶³ Azerbaijani MPs in Yerevan visited the Blue mosque and named it «Azerbaijani», Yerevan.today, (23.02.2022), <https://yerevan.today/all/politics/98399/adrbedjanci-patgamavornery-erevanoum-aycelel-en-kapouyt-mzkit-ou-ayn-anvanel-%C2%ABadrbedjanakan%C2%BB> (download date: 26.06.2024).

between Shia and Sunni followers, thereby neutralizing possible external influences. To eliminate dissent, Azerbaijan imposes restrictions, persecution, and pressure on the believers. Additionally, to maintain full control over the religious sphere, the powers of the Caucasus Muslim Board are being reduced and transferred to the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations, which also trains local staff to promote the Azerbaijani model of religion.

Internationally, Azerbaijan presents itself as an active member of the Islamic community and a defender of Islamic values. This policy is primarily aimed at gaining the support of Islamic countries in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. It can be noted that Azerbaijan's Islamic policy has had its results both domestically and internationally.

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