

## The Caucasus Muslim Administration in Baku's Anti-Armenian Strategy

### ARVAK Center Comment, May 30, 2025

It appears that Azerbaijan's leadership, while seemingly refraining from openly escalating anti-Armenian rhetoric as the international community anticipates a peace treaty with Yerevan, may have authorized the Caucasus Muslim Administration (CMA) to undermine the peace process and potentially derail agreements. This gives the impression that the CMA has been assigned the role of devaluing the peace agenda.

Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the goals of the Baku event of May 22, 2025 (meeting of the Council of Elders of the CMA), at which a resolution was reached to appoint the deputy chairman of the CMA Bakhtiyar Najafov an *"Irevan elder"* or *"Kazi"*. The meeting also adopted the *"Charter of the Irevan Elders' Council"*, a document that had been presented by another deputy chairman of the CMA, Fuad Nurallayev. The chairman of the CMA himself, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, delivered an extensive speech at the aforementioned meeting. In his speech he named Yerevan and Etchmiadzin as *"historical Azerbaijani lands"* and stated that, allegedly, the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) has been identified as *"a potential threat to the entire region"*, as it continues the traditional policy of destroying and appropriating the cultural and religious heritage of other peoples (in particular, the Azerbaijani) and cultivates revanchist ideas in Armenian society.

Thus, Azerbaijani clerics took up the promotion of the narratives of the political leadership in Baku about *"Western Azerbaijan"* and the *"return to the historical homeland"* of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis. This initiative by I. Aliyev is trying to incorporate into the "peace treaty" as one of its key points.

It should be noted that from the inception of the formation of the Azerbaijan Republic in October 1991, the CMA pursued a policy of following the strict regulations of activity and propaganda methods prescribed by the country's political authorities for both in Azerbaijan itself and in the international arena. This strict coordination and highly synchronized interaction were especially obvious in the Karabakh Case and within the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations agenda in general.

Historically, both the Shiite and Sunni Islamic clergy did not have institutional independence in *Arran* and *Shirvan*, and already in the post-Soviet period, the CMA, which only formally unites the Islamic groups and communities of the Azerbaijan Republic, has always played the role of a kind of appendage of the political power and the state system, without having its own, separate line of action in the interests of the Islamic *ummah* and the state. Unlike the AAC, the CMA is not a free institution of spiritual identity with a thousand-year history and tradition, capable of having contradictions with the state system and political power. Rather, it is considered to be only a public organization supported by the state, and therefore, given the specifics of Azerbaijan, the CMA strictly follows the interests of the ruling regime.

Throughout the Karabakh conflict the CMA, headed by its permanent leader Allahshukur Pashazade, widely propagated the ideas of *"expropriation of the Azerbaijani cultural and historical heritage of Karabakh by Armenians"*, however, the organisation demonstrated discernment in its approach, refraining from radicalizing its rhetoric

concerning the rights of the AAC within Armenia itself. The CMA even tried to maintain a dialogue with the Mother See of Etchmiadzin, as sanctioned by the Azerbaijani government, at certain periods of time *“in search of ways to unite the clergy and peacefully resolve the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict”* and therefore, it allegedly demonstrated the apolitical nature of the CMA’s mission and activities in the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani issue.

Recent events, however, have shown that the official Baku administration has decided to completely push the CMA onto the path of open political conflict with the Armenian factor as well as the active promotion of religious hatred and confrontation in the region. According to the statements made by CMA representatives about *“the tragic fate of the Azerbaijani spiritual and cultural monuments destroyed on the territory of Armenia”* and about the *“exile”* of the peaceful Azerbaijanis from their homeland in Armenia, now the top leadership of this religious organization is already openly proclaiming the Etchmiadzin Cathedral of the AAC as the spiritual heritage of Azerbaijanis (in his speech, Pashazade called Etchmiadzin *“Uchmuedzin”*), as well as appoint *“Islamic spiritual leader of Yerevan”*, and also announces that the Armenian Apostolic Church poses a threat to the peoples and states of the region.

These openly provocative steps are purely political actions, indicating that the Azerbaijani clergy is being incorporated into I. Aliyev’s strategic agenda, which aims to eliminate Armenian statehood and to eradicate the Armenian factor in the region. This can be interpreted as a declaration of war on Armenia and the Armenian people by the Azerbaijani Islamic clergy, or rather, by those who are subordinate to the bureaucratic structure of the CMA and who do not challenge the authority of Allahshukur Pashazade. Meanwhile, the reputation of the *“leader of the Caucasus’ Muslims”* experiences problems not only within his nation, but throughout the global Islamic community as well.

In Azerbaijan, A. Pashazade’s standing is such that he is not regarded as a prominent individual within the country’s socio-political sphere. The overwhelming majority of the local public has a strong conviction that A. Pashazade, who has held the position of leader of the Azerbaijani Shiite (not Caucasian) clergy since the USSR times, was an agent recruited by the KGB, and who continued to cooperate with the Azerbaijani and even Russian secret services even after the declaration of independence by the Azerbaijan Republic. Being an ethnic Talysh, A. Pashazade was able to hold on to his position of *“spiritual leader”* of the Azerbaijani Muslims thanks to his unquestioning loyalty to all political groups without exception that managed to be in power in the Azerbaijan Republic before Heydar Aliyev’s presidency. Pashazade developed smooth relations with the latter as well, consequently enabling the Sheikh-ul-Islam to strengthen his personal financial well-being. According to opposition Azerbaijani media, he was granted the opportunity to participate in a number of ventures belonging to the leading Azerbaijani clans, as well as having outlined his own financial interests in the distribution of annual *“Hajj quotas”*, allocated to the CMA by Saudi Arabia.

Adhering to the guidance of Aliyev, as they believe in Azerbaijan, as well as the excessive financial activity of the Sheikh-ul-Islam led to the decline of the CMA’s authority and the reputation of Pashazade himself within the religious circles of the South Caucasian

republic, encompassing both Sunni and Shiite populations. Nominally being the head of the Council of representatives of all Islamic confessional groups in the Azerbaijan Republic, A. Pashazade did not ensure proper communication of the political leadership with those groups, who eventually considered themselves deprived of their rights and who expected a more liberalized regime from the government to organize the spiritual life of religious communities.

The result of such polarization of the spiritual and religious palette of Azerbaijan was the radicalization of Sunni groups in Qusar and Sumgait, as well as Shiite communities on the Absheron Peninsula and in Ganja who were spiritually oriented toward Iran, which in turn provoked severe crackdowns by the political regime. The CMA, headed by Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, was in fact unable to become a balancer between the political system and the multi-confessional *ummah*, capable of ensuring a balance of interests of all parties – both the government and the religious movements. On the other hand, the Aliyev regime obviously deliberately marginalized the Sheikh-ul-Islam in the eyes of the *ummah*, involving it in business and various corruption schemes, and also extremely bureaucratizing the structure of the Caucasian Muslim Administration. This was done with the aim of devaluing the authority of the spiritual authorities in Azerbaijan and preventing the prospects of strengthening clerical sentiments within society. Official Baku was especially wary of the theocratic Iranian regime, which, due to historical circumstances, could lay claim to a spiritual protectorate over the Azerbaijani *ummah*, 80% of which nominally profess Shiism, which was spread in the South Caucasus during the *Qizilbash* era.

Allahshukur Pashazade, despite his nominal position and rank, appears to lack any significant authority among the highest-ranking Shiite leaders in Iran. The extent to which Azerbaijan's spiritual goals are undermined in the eyes of Iranian clergy can be illustrated by the proposal to establish "*Heydar Aliyev's memory corners*" in all mosques administered by the Caucasus Muslim Administration. There is a widespread misconception that the initiative was suggested by A. Pashazade and his associates, but in fact the proposal was voiced by members of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party. The Sheikh-ul-Islam, even being totally controlled by the political leadership, would not express such an idea, since it fundamentally contradicts the basic dogmas of Islam. The initiative was not implemented, yet the mere fact of its announcement by the secular authorities was accepted by the Iranian clerics as a manifestation of the insulting attitude of the Azerbaijani government towards the Islamic traditions and the absolute decline in Azerbaijan of the authority of the CMA, headed by A. Pashazade.

The strategy employed by the Azerbaijani authorities is to maintain the image of the CMA as a bureaucratic entity devoid that is incapable of having independent socio-political weight within the country, but at the same time is a convenient tool for the implementation of various political combinations of official Baku, a practice that continued until recently.

This duality of the meaning of the CMA contributed to the simultaneous play of the Aliyev regime on two different political and diplomatic arenas. On the one hand, Azerbaijan positioned itself as a secular state, in which the influence of the clergy and religious structures was reduced to an absolute minimum. On the other hand, the clergy, which had merged with the government, contributed to the strategy of Azerbaijan's active participation

in the affairs of the Islamic world and the use of its platforms to solve foreign policy tasks set by the ruling regime. Thus, A. Pashazade constantly avoided the obligations arising from his status and rank to limit the repressive actions of the state apparatus against some Islamic communities of Azerbaijan. The Sheikh-ul-Islam not only failed to condemn the processes of marginalization of these communities and political pressure on their leaders, but also repeatedly criticized such confessional groups, accusing them, and not the ruling regime, of violating the spiritual unity and harmony of the Islamic *ummah* in the country. At the same time, he engaged in active efforts to address the foreign policy tasks set by I. Aliyev within the framework of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), of which Azerbaijan became a member on December 8, 1991.

This organization, in particular, became one of the main platforms on which Baku generated the thesis about the alleged religious roots of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and the anti-Islamic nature of the struggle led by Armenia in the South Caucasus. This manipulative narrative did not gain much currency among the Islamic countries themselves, especially those where the role and influence of Armenian Christian communities was traditionally valued, but the bureaucratized and, as a result, biased OIC, as an organization, quite actively supported Baku's initiatives, apparently backed by traditional allocations from the Aliyev regime. This position is evidenced by a number of OIC resolutions, initiated in 1993, condemning *"the Armenian occupation of the original Azerbaijani lands, with the accompanying destruction, desecration and appropriation of the Islamic cultural and material heritage of the captured territories"*.

Thus, Azerbaijan has become one of those countries that have stimulated the devaluation of the fundamental values and principles outlined in the OIC's Charter. These principles include the organization's commitment to apolitical nature and adherence to the principles of justice. The degradation of this structure is most vividly demonstrated now, when the Islamic world has been seized by a "crisis of numbness" in connection with the events in Gaza, which, in addition to formal condemnatory statements, have not mobilized the Islamic world to take practical measures to protect the rights of their Palestinian co-religionists. However, if even other Islamic countries, both within the OIC and at the individual level, are trying to demonstrate solidarity and empathy for Gaza, then the regime of I. Aliyev, based on the interests of the military-political alliance with Israel, has tabooed such rhetoric even for its religious structures.

Despite this, the CMA has never once issued a message emphasizing its rejection of Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, which is widely being referred to as *"genocidal"*. Sheikh-ul-Islam A. Pashazade did not make a statement condemning the murder of more than 15,000 Palestinian children, the destruction of over 1500 mosques and other Islamic shrines, the total food blockade of hundreds of thousands of destitute residents of Gaza. These topics are taboo for the Azerbaijani political authorities, and their silence by such a structure as the CMA testifies to its complete failure and removal from its spiritual mission.

The CMA consistently confirms the role of a political instrument in the hands of the Aliyev administration, which, disguising its authoritarian essence under the model of secularism, brutally represses spiritual life in Azerbaijan itself and does not respond to the need for a substantive solution to the problems of co-religionists around the world. The

administration has completely transferred to the service of the system, which has provided absolutely no moral and material assistance to the suffering Palestinians and *Rohingya* Muslims, but systematically spends millions of U.S. dollars on organizing all sorts of conferences and seminars dedicated to the “*struggle against Islamophobia*”.

One of such events started in Baku on May 26, 2025, becoming another example of Baku’s long-practiced method of using the Islamic factor in geopolitical maneuvering and strengthening its positions in the international arena. As a rule, at such events, the Azerbaijani side and its partners keep silent about the problems of the ongoing Palestinian genocide, but actively discuss issues of infringement of the rights of Islamic migrants in the West, discrimination against Muslims in Russia and “*the catastrophic consequences of the activities of the Armenian religious extremism, causing suffering to the Islamic peoples of the region*”. Therefore, all activities of the CMA and its leader A. Pashazade are now reduced to only voicing this agenda, which clearly reflects the intentions of the regime in Baku to use the religious factor in line with the Azerbaijani ambitions to redraw the regional political map.

It is obvious that the attacks perpetrated by the CMA and A. Pashazade personally against the Armenian Apostolic Church and the program of put forward for the “*restoration of the Irevan Kazyate*” should be interpreted as Baku’s attempt to justify the policy of partial destruction first of all, as well as its appropriation of the spiritual and material Christian heritage of Armenian Artsakh, by playing the “*Albanian-Udi card*”. In a broader perspective, this is Azerbaijan’s claim to Armenian sovereignty and the preparation of a historical and ideological platform for an attack on Armenian statehood, allegedly erected at the onset of the 20th century on the historical lands of the Azerbaijani ethnic group, declaredly unjustly deprived of its homeland and the rich civilizational heritage by the Armenian extremism.

The Aliyev regime has deliberately put forward CMA at the forefront of the large-scale anti-Armenian campaign unleashed by him, pursuing the goal of a qualitatively new play of the Islamic card, involving Islamic countries and the whole-Islamic *ummah* in the process and, thereby, creating a broad front of support for his plans. And although the authority of the AAC in the international arena, as well as among the Islamic community itself, is absolutely incomparable with the devalued reputation of the Azerbaijani clergy headed by the Sheikh-ul-Islam A. Pashazade, it should be understood that the ideological and propaganda war imposed on Armenians was initiated by much more significant and powerful centers than the CMA itself. Their strategy was developed not in the interests of the Islamic idea, but of the newly created “*common Turkic world*”. Consequently, the counter-game of Armenianism can and should be conducted using the deep, fundamental contradictions of the Islamic and, above all, that of Iranian-Shiite factor with Turkish-Azerbaijani chauvinism.