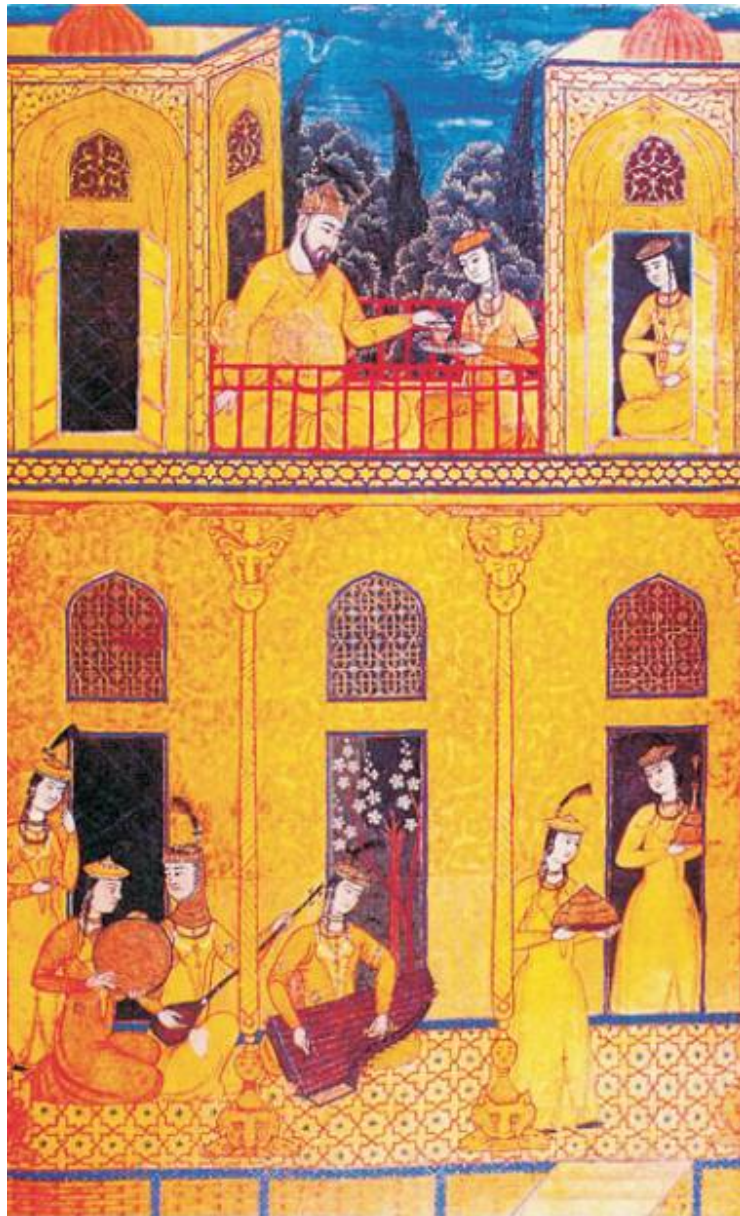


ISLAMIC AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN AZERBAIJAN: EMERGING TRENDS AND TENSIONS

A Discussion Paper



Hema Kotecha
Development Researcher - Anthropologist

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FOREWORD

With the fulfilment of Azerbaijan's aspirations for economic viability into the future, through the completion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil conduit, it is understandable that other primary factors in maintaining its stability may have been relegated to a level of peripheral concern.

The country's geographical location, at the meeting point of the political and cultural blocs of Asia, Europe and the Middle East continues to impact heavily as it emerges from its recent Soviet past to redefine its identity. Cultural groups, hitherto largely subsumed into the single Soviet identity, can once again proclaim themselves; political diversity can be fostered.

However, this historically volatile region is burdened by unresolved conflicts which render it vulnerable to wider global issues of security and the potential for Azerbaijan to again fall victim to others' desire for political influence remains as great now as it has ever been. Moreover, its stability, borne of mineral wealth, may become an irresistible lure to the burgeoning ranks of global terrorism and it is this latter concern which has prompted the OSCE Office to seek to discover the nature of possible vulnerabilities in the community.

The researcher, Hema Kotecha, has sought to do no more than to present her findings logically, in the context in which they were recorded, providing explanations to aid the reader where appropriate, but allowing the reader the freedom to draw conclusions. It should be emphasised that the work reflects the views and perceptions of people in Azerbaijan and these may not always align with reality or historical fact. Nonetheless, they do represent firm reality to those holding them and, as such, provide both a valuable insight into the huge cultural diversity which is Azerbaijan and suggest areas which may be vulnerable to exploitation.

The Office is grateful for the considerable time and dedication the author has devoted to this project and trust it will be of both interest and value to those who will read and make use of it.

OSCE Office in Baku
July 2006

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an insight into expressions of discontent in Azerbaijan that take particular ethnic or religious form, and the grievances that feed into them, in order to aid the OSCE Office in Baku in understanding how these discourses might be manipulated for certain political or financial agendas.

The report emphasises the local perceptions and sentiments heard through anecdotal evidence and observation; as such, it is neither definitive nor rights-based.

Religiousness

Azerbaijan's location in the Islamic world is at a crossroads of, and surrounded by, a variety of theatres of 'Islam' and range of Islamic identities: Iranian Shiite, Turkish, Russian (Dagestani etc), as well as Arabic.¹

Both the growth in religious feeling and practice and the emergence of certain puritanical/reformist strains linked to global counterparts were predictable and expected after the dissolution of the former USSR. What is striking in Azerbaijan is the variety of religious discourses and the complexity of their interaction. Research for this report suggests that this is partly created in the adoption of terminology and differing usages by various groups.

Religion and religiousness means different things in different settings. Islam is partly social-identity glue, historically (against Russia or Armenia, for instance) and culturally. It is a fundamental aspect of patriarchal traditionalism and conservatism. Islam is common in public discourses (funerals presided over by mullahs are traditionally a space of public-sphere discussion) and often combined with other roles and identities in private and public life. It functions in society on many levels including nationalism, tradition, morality/morale, discipline (self and societal), against corruption and injustice, protection of society and political opposition. Islam also provides possibilities for allegiances to other countries' and groups' interests.

Combined with this variety of significances, Azerbaijan's geography and historical development has created considerable regional variation (e.g. Sunni majority in the north, absence of Salafi trend in the south; each village has own character and religiousness). Although almost all have a strong identity as Muslims which they profess, what this means varies considerably across the country and Baku.

A basic instance of the complexity is a commonly heard statement that 'more Islam would bring morality to politics', often combined with anti-corruption sentiments; ostensibly, this sounds somewhat at odds with another frequently heard approach that fears 'political Islam' - for which Iran is often criticised and groups that aspire for the emergence of an Islamic khalifate are accused of. Sometimes this fear is extended to Islamic aspects and connections (e.g. active members) of political parties (Musavat has Kemalist secular-Islamic origins). Another contrast is the broad and general lack of knowledge (e.g. about Shia-Sunni division or other dogmatic differences – it is important

¹ South is Shiite Iran with Iraq beyond, newly dominated by Shiites. North is Daghestan and Chechnya where guerrilla/ freedom-fighters have long been active (including reportedly in Nagorno Karabagh as mercenaries for weapons, against Russian army/Armenian fighters) and where discussion rages about foreign militant-puritanical religious forces combining forces/clashing with local religious power structures. Moreover, Azerbaijan is occasionally described as a 'Muslim Oil State' – and Arabian models and the Iranian example do not serve to inspire confidence in foreigner observers. The pipeline provides a target, as the gas lines have, and BP ownership draws a certain kind of attention.

to note that this does not mean lack of piety or religious practice) alongside islands of very intense specific forms of Islam.

Thus many of the definitions often used, terminology and meanings imported from abroad are not helpful in determining current changes in the role of Islam in society, (e.g. seeing a particular significance in 'Shia' Azerbaijanis attending Abu Bakr mosque, sometimes rendered as 'Shias converting to Wahhabism') – especially given the diversity of the country already in terms of knowledge, traditions and trends.

Politics and Islam

A significant aspect of Islam in politics is Islam's potential as a moral driver to push for 'democratic change'; this causes links between Islam and the opposition to create concern for the incumbent power elite. One consequence is that leaders of groups recognise that they have power in their support-bases and are willing to negotiate using this influence to ensure they are allowed to operate, at varying degrees of overtness and self-awareness of their political positioning.

Around the presidential elections in November 2005 much was heard about the replacement of involvement in political parties with religious participation and practice, especially for negotiating grievances. To some extent this could have been assumed, in the sense that after an election period politics ceases to have the same dynamism and hence to draw people's interest; there is less to be engaged with. However, another significant cause was the disenfranchisement and disappointment felt by many in the way in which the elections played out.

The increased interest in religion over politics - and religion within politics - was predicted before the elections and used by all parties (government, opposition, activist-NGO) as leverage to influence participation, equally to encourage the intervention or support of the international community as of voters.

Human rights and security

The seeking of leverage by political actors over participation in the elections has played into and exacerbated the discourse between government and the broader opposition community concerning freedoms, in which official fears of 'Islamic fundamentalism' gets used as a justification for certain restrictions. This resonates with the sense of persecution felt by several religious groups, as documented by freedom of religion NGOs such as Forum 18, and human rights reports such as that of the US embassy.

Persecution (humiliation and intimidation, previous reports of forced beard-shaving or burning, beatings) is a significant element in explanations of 'radicalisation'. This argument is also used to encourage freedom of religious practice and less government control, especially over 'independent' religious groups (this is argued by groups such as Ibrahimoglu's and Salafis, as well as scholars). Police humiliation and physical intimidation of Salafi Muslims, as well as closures of mosques, was cited by NGOs and religious communities especially in the northern regions, which are further from the diversity and official realities of Baku. Persecution feeds a sense of righteousness (which fortifies a group's self-legitimation in relation to others), of 'martyrdom', to some extent gratification of being tested and it increases people's awareness of the group.

The dialectic between fear of radicalism and oppression verging on persecution reflects both the government's importation of a global post-9/11 discourse/paranoia, and one which grew out of the dissolution of the USSR. The manipulation of imported and local

religious terminology adds to the confusion created by a lack of understanding - and often knowledge - in the country about religious matters.

An instance of confusion in associations is the portrayal of the threat posed by 'Wahhabis', which is probably less than often perceived, although the heterogeneity of sub-groupings and motivations should be noted. The term 'Wahhabi' has developed with a set of stereotypes attached to it, starting from the Soviet period, and its usage is often confusing. Misunderstanding of Salafis is increased by their self-distancing due to disapproval of behaviour they consider non-Islamic.

The sincerity and straightforwardness of religious people should not be underestimated as a factor that converts or gains the sympathy of others, and convinces people of their righteousness.

Growth of Islam and changing nature

A rise in well-connected and educated adherents of Salafi Islam is noted by observers. Recent awareness of their representation in certain ministries, foreign organisations and oil companies and the decrease in the conspicuousness of their dress leads some to surmise a mainstreaming of the trend; this is mostly considered positive in that it reduces suspicion and marginalisation.

One aspect of conversion and integration into religious groups is tied to social protection of morals and fears concerning the degradation of principles and traditions. The coercive strength of telling a parent that their child will succumb to drugs or perceived moral depravity encourages them to turn to religion; strength of family leads to the spreading of practice through one member.

In the South (which, together with the Absheron peninsula, is considered the most religious in the country and influenced by Iran) a converse process was also noted – the enforcement of traditional norms in the name of Islam, an illustration of a country-wide search for authenticity in the religious aspect of Azerbaijani national identity. Reports from this region indicate that marginality and poverty allow the intensification of social conservatism and a process of reinforcement and reintroduction of norms and practices considered 'traditional'.

During research in the South, an ambivalence in attitudes towards Iran and Iranian Shiism was evidenced. Influences from Iran which enter this region are readily taken up, but often provoke reactions against its politicisation of religion. Respect for the sincerity of religion in Iranian people was indicated by less superstition and control of women's activities - despite the hijab - compared with societal behavioural constraints in Azerbaijan, and by a perception of greater practice of spiritual and moral philosophy. This combined with dislike of the enforcement of religion by a state, protectiveness towards secularism, fear of 'irrationality' and 'extremism', and suspicion of Iran's political motivations in its spiritual discourse.

Ethnic identity

In Azerbaijan, the surge of expressions of ethnic identity that came with the break up of the Soviet Union and creation of new states highlighted the Talysh and Lezgins.

The current reality of an 'Azerbaijani' political and social infrastructure in the public sphere (eg linguistic dominance) is mostly taken for granted. Neighbouring conflicts (eg Chechnya, over Karabagh and the theocracy in Iran) act as disincentives for agitation, as

does the threat of being seen as acting on behalf of foreign interests. Fairly universally, secessionist conflict is considered undesirable and unlikely to be won. At the same time, the complexity of rhetoric and factions indicates that 'nationality'/'ethnicity' discourses are changeable; certain vague allegiances combined with the range of local structural and emotive issues can be stoked with unpredictable results.

The suppression of Talysh identity (predominant in the south) during the Soviet period led to a situation in which the Talysh ethnicity is unquantifiable (yet the population with the largest growth rate in the country). This is also partly due to a reluctance to claim Talysh identity (influenced by a stigma against publicly pronouncing non-Azerbaijani identity) and the diminishing use of Talysh language, except in places which are relatively remote and unintegrated. Nationalists seem fairly marginalised.

In the north the ties to Dagestan and Russia are strengthened through Caucasian ethnic and religious commonalities. Disappointment since independence from Moscow and the persistence of corruption (political, financial, personal), whatever that means in the range of local contexts, are often quoted. 'Russia' often has positive connotations concerning religion in the North, partly due to the significance of Dagestan but also reinforced by Moscow's diplomatic roles in the Middle East.

Use of nationalism as political leverage is particularly evidenced in Lezgin ethnicity; the geographical location and shared ethnicity over the Dagestan border increases this and, combined with a metro bomb in the early 90s and a secessionist faction, ties it to the terminology of 'terrorism'. Various parties have an interest in claiming to have sole ability to control the situation, or by threatening the rise of dangerous nationalism if corruption and socio-economic discontent prevails in the region. Avar nationalism is another example of this; discourses around it seem at least partly formed by interests in the grey economy and local politics. Yet Lezgin statehood, whether within Russia, Azerbaijan or autonomous, is not a burning issue in people's daily lives. While it is clear that the vast majority of people do not see their self interest in pursuing ethno-nationalism, difficulties created and lures of other arguments will play a part for a small number that opens them to cooptation and manipulation by those with broader aims.

The role these identities play today may seem somewhat epiphenomenal in the way that they accompany other discourses of discontent and function similarly to radical religion as a 'threat' to be used as political leverage and manipulation, both by nationalists, officials and outsiders. Yet demands for greater 'minority' language and cultural rights are on the increase, which will continue as long as they are not dealt with.

Despite the weakness of ethnic movements, these cases show up failings in the state's ability to deal with ethnic minority issues and thus become a vehicle for criticism of the state onto which other issues can adhere, even if not the main motivating factor of dissatisfaction. Leaving the issue open to manipulation and the development of factions will exacerbate grievances and allow the problem to grow and variegate.

Introduction

Identity in Azerbaijan is complex, affected by physical geography, its location at a cultural crossroads and strategic interests in the region as a vital trade route and conduit for energy resources. Located historically on the fault line of territorial struggles between Persian, Ottoman and Russian empires, 'identities' in Azerbaijan are complicated and dynamic variables, with differing levels of entrenchment and thus potential for change and/or mobilisation. The emphasis of certain characteristics in nationalist discourses and the enfeeblement of others can exacerbate a lack of confidence that makes a range of scenarios potentially combustible; especially given the plethora of sensitivities, intensified by a certain culture of conspiracy, some disentangling of issues is required.

The purpose of this report is to gain an insight into expressions of discontent in Azerbaijan that take particular ethnic or religious form, and the grievances that feed into them, in order to aid the Office in understanding how these discourses might be manipulated for certain political or financial agendas.

It should be noted that in terms of emotive and resonant discourses of Azerbaijani identity overall, the Armenian question is the most influential and the principal conceptualisation of 'conflict'. However, this very specific phenomenon is out of the scope of this report. This report does not comprehensively detail all current trends in Islam in Azerbaijan, or explore all 'extremist', 'radical' strands or movements in the country.

Methodology

This report was commissioned by the OSCE Office in Baku to explore the mechanics of, and potential for, discontent within the various ethnic and cultural identities which possibly could foster support for, or engender of themselves, violence as political expression.

The project was undertaken over a period of three months. It included consultations with Baku-based analysts, academics, NGOs, political commentators and religious leaders. Over five weeks, several trips were made to the northern regions (in the East, Khachmaz, Gusar, Quba and villages on the border; in the West Zaqatala, Belakan) and southern regions (Lenkoran, Massali, Astara) to speak to local journalists, NGOs, lawyers, entrepreneurs, religious personalities, local authorities and others active in the public sphere.² Some interviews were also taken in Imishli, Sumgait, Sheki and Quba.

The approach of this project was to gather descriptions of local religious and ethno-nationalist discourses, structural factors that contribute to them, rhetoric that influences them and local analyses of problems and grievances which accrue. This was considered important for understanding the complexity, nuances and motivations of the ways in which agenda are communicated in the public sphere and may relate to those that resonate deeply in the private sphere. Description of these 'voices' in the report emphasise the various local perceptions heard: as such, their representation here cannot be the basis for judging the rights and wrongs of any claims made, in terms of either 'truth' or legality.

² Thus the material presented concerns the opinions and attitudes of local people; it should be noted that they were recounted – and approved or criticised - by members of the 'intelligentsia' who have sympathy with the local opinions on issues and engage with society, as well as having a certain distance and observation, relatively greater mobility, access to outside information and contact with Baku. As implementing partners they also have their own motivations for presenting arguments to 'western' institutions.

In this respect, many grievances expressed are common to the entire country, but those experiencing them do not have the benefit of an overall comparative perspective and mobility. They are usually not part of some coherent agenda but some may resonate for different people according to the circumstance. Socio-economic problems serve to enhance tensions and social pressures. These can be expressed through ethnic and religious rhetoric and can combine with the search for ideals, ideologies and solutions that the former-Soviet world is experiencing, to which, for instance, the social justice aspect of Islam may contribute.

Several events occurred during the period of research which affected the analyses produced and people's assessment of religion in Azerbaijan, especially the Parliamentary Elections and the 'cartoon issue' originating in Denmark. The articulation of certain prejudices triggered during Ramadan and Ashurra also highlighted divergences in social practice and in understanding between people, and not merely between 'religious' and 'non-religious'.

General Context

The same personalities can combine different roles that might appear incongruous and can participate in a plurality of discourses – political, governmental, religious, NGO, business, media, etc.. Characteristics and functions play out within individuals themselves that resist simplification.

It does not make sense to infer definitions of terms from elsewhere in the world (eg Shia; Wahhabi etc) to their meanings here; often people are not aware even of the existence of a Shia-Sunni difference within Islam, of differences within the country or globally. At the same time, there is a hunt for 'authenticity' that comes from abroad.

The public/private divide is systematic, functioning on a variety of levels.³ This, and the issue of trust, naturally affects the reliability of opinions gathered and the ability to judge the extent of sentiments expressed and their prevalence in society more widely.

³ Eg There are several instances of 'friends' and 'alliances' for purely function reasons; also prevalent are silences maintained between friends (that can result in or be based upon misunderstanding of each other's position) on certain topics. Trust tends to be bounded and context-specific. Several people in interviews mentioned the nature of privacy and secrecy between close associates and relatives preventing them from knowing 'what is going on in reality'.

Background

The vaguely posed question concerning the possibility for Islam in Azerbaijan to be a threat to 'democracy' requires a search to define 'Islam in Azerbaijan'. Islam is partly social/identity-glue,⁴ historically (against Russia or Armenia, for instance) and culturally; it is also a fundamental aspect of patriarchal traditionalism and conservatism. Islam also provides possibilities for allegiances to other countries' and groups' interests.

Profession of Muslim identity in Azerbaijan is almost universal but religiousness means different things in different places. Islamic practice is not always dividable into 'traditional-local' and post-independence 'new' (the usual categorisation of Islam in the post-Soviet world).

While locating oneself within the 'Muslim world', sometimes with an implication of distinction against another ideology or system of belief, 'being Muslim' is mostly a statement of a belief in God, intertwined with a certain moral outlook; a common identifying characterisation of a 'Muslim' is in its suggestion of societal responsibility and being 'a good person'. It is as much an indication of ethnic identity and values. However, often a rather technical definition is proffered, thus, for instance, even those who 'believe' consider that until they start to 'do *namaz*' five times a day (and fulfil other requirements) they will not define themselves as 'Muslim'.⁵ The entire spectrum of permutations is in evidence.

Local and social institutions

The mullah is the primary 'executor' of religion in society and an aspect of 'core'/common Azerbaijani Islam. Mullahs preside over weddings and funeral processes⁶, collective occasions where information is shared in public. While religion is regarded reverentially, and mullahs' blessings are sought in starting an election campaign and they are visited first by candidates campaigning a community,⁷ this does not mean they would gain automatic allegiance if taking a political position: people would generally not risk self-interest just because a mullah proposes it. Mullahs are often associated with being uneducated, funereal, regressive, images that partly stem from the Soviet period.⁸ Official mullahs are under the guidance of Sheikh ul-Islam Haji Allah-shukur Pashazade (who heads the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Caucasus, a descendant of the Soviet board) and, as linked to the state, are colloquially known as the 'spies in society'. Rafik Aliyev (Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, set up in 2002 and rival to Allah-shukur Pashazade)⁹ plays on this, quoted once as calling

⁴ In a forthcoming analysis of a survey on gender and values, 83% respondents considered the religious affiliation of a marriage partner to be important. Yet the total number of respondents who identified themselves as "religious" (*dine inananlar*) and "devout" (*dindarlar*) is lower, 78.3%, indicating that even for those who are simply "respectful towards religion," "atheist," or neither, religious identity is an important factor.

⁵ This is virtually impossible to predict according to social definitions: a barman (40s) in Lenkoran is a Sayyed with an obligation to hold poetry scriptural readings at home at Ashurra to which the community is invited, yet drinks alcohol and interprets the Koran's injunction against it as referring to 'modest' consumption and 'knowing one's limitations', while a young, fairly secular NGO worker and university lecturer in Baku (20s) finds himself wanting to pray, not drink and 'become a real Muslim'. This could also be due to the ability in Lenkoran to take religion for granted but in other regions a need to 'discover' it in order to 'be a Muslim'.

⁶ People sit together for hours on the 3rd and 7th day and each Thursday for 40 days.

⁷ As described by a parliamentary candidate.

⁸ People under 50 were discouraged from entering mosques by Soviet security standing outside. In the Soviet period a popular perception was created that 'mosques were only for the dead', because religion tended to be associated only with funerals, the only moments when religion was permitted.

⁹ The Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations "first of all said it would concentrate on monitoring radical religious groups, but soon began to ask difficult questions about the board as well. It started to investigate the funding of Azerbaijan's mosque building programmes, trips to Muslim holy places and religious education, all the responsibility of Pashazade's department. In 'Azerbaijan: State Hounds Muslim Leaders', IWPR, 12 April 2002 (*CRS No. 124*). The rhetoric of Pashazade regarding the Committee is that it constitutes Soviet-era repression and a flouting

some 'foreign spies'. Individual mullahs' images are mostly created by their roles and status in the local setting. Other concrete factors associated with religion can also have striking negative reactions. As described more fully in the section on the southern regions of Azerbaijan, Iranian religion is often denounced as political; this also reflects the common perception (especially in the South) that religion combined with political motivations is not 'true' religion and is therefore (morally) 'corrupt' – although religion in politics could equally well mean simple morality and lack of corruption. Fears of its obstruction to women's freedoms were also evidenced.

'Pirs',¹⁰ have enormous popular followings and those who control them are strong enough to maintain independence from Pashazade and control their own funds which come from donations; the growth of the pir tradition is indicated by the renovation and new buildings constructed around many traditional pir sites. Pirs constitute what have been dubbed by some scholars as 'parallel Islam' that grew during the Soviet period but were not part of the official structures; this distinction is too neat, people are not always aware of the separation between officially-approved and 'non-official' aspects of their religious practice. During the Soviet period Party members would obey the codes of visiting and bringing gifts for a 'sayyed' (revered person often tracing roots to the Prophet), sometimes in the middle of the night so that they would not be seen by authorities but so that people would be aware that the social obligation was fulfilled and also out of tradition and possibly superstition.

Post-Soviet Islamic influences:

In early independence when Azerbaijan opened to influences, various strains of Islam began to take root:

Turkish (considered a 'secular' model for Islam. One group is the Nurçü order, whose educational institutions influenced a lot of businesspeople. Kafqaz University is an example of an influential but not overt source of religion - high-standard secular education at an institution with Islamic values.¹¹ Several political strains have Kemalist secular-Islamic bases that are pre-Independence);

Iranian (Azerbaijan is approximately two-thirds Shiite; many burgeoning religious leaders went to Iran during perestroika for education directly after independence);

Saudi Arabian (Sunni Salafism – often dubbed 'Wahhabism', directly from Arabic countries, took root in North Caucasus but has a particular significance in Baku and elsewhere in the country where it contrasts with 'traditional' and Shia religious strains.)

Fifteen years after independence, the situation is not as simple as looking for external actors, influences and foreign literature and contrasting them with 'local'. For many, these influences have been internalised and personalised and religious leaders and

of the secular separation of 'church and state'; that of Rafik Aliyev towards Pashazade is the accusation of corruption (monopolisation and nepotism) and the fear of 'extremism' entering country if there is not proper regulation.

¹⁰ Burial places or homes of saints, 'sayyeds' (descendants of the prophet), of descendents of Shia imams, religious scholars or venerated people, of which there are hundreds of greater or lesser importance. The term can also refer to the actual person. Often a continuation of pre-Islamic practices, they are a phenomenon over much of the Islamic world from Turkey to India. Pirs in Azerbaijan are visited mostly for seeking cures, some specific to certain illnesses or problems, some general. There is an anecdote regarding a USSR finance minister's wife being cured of a health problem by Mir Movsum's pir in Icheri Sheher as a last resort, after Moscow doctors had given up on her. In 1948 Heydar Aliyev, despite working in the KGB, visited Mir Moysum; interestingly, this pir developed when he died in 1951, thus he and his pir had a privileged status despite Soviet restrictions on religion. Bayram Balci notes that 'Although such pilgrimages were disapproved by the regime, religious consciousness was real and even officials knew about the public's attendance in pir and imamzade.' 'Islam in Azerbaijan', *Central Asia Survey*, (June, 2004) 23(2), 205-217.

¹¹ Bayram Balci, director of the Institut des Etudies Anatoliennes, Baku branch, is an specialist on the Turkish Nurculer movement in the former Soviet world.

students trained abroad are now in Azerbaijan practising and channelling religious discourses.

The changing processes of societal regulation in the post-Soviet era, in particular the negotiation of 'traditions' in society and the resulting 're-traditionalisation', often involve the (re-)construction and enforcement of cultural norms justified under religion; these include local and traditional practices combined with new information considered authentic. This is most clearly evident in the south of the country and the Absheron peninsula. Assertions of religious and ethnic identity in the formation of national identity can provoke sensitivities, for instance of those who prefer a Turkish rather than Iranian model for 'national' Islam, or who cannot relate to religiousness but may have a stronger post-Soviet and Russian-language heritage.

Internal variations and complexities in manifestations of religiousness exist similar to those elsewhere in the world. For instance, women covering their heads can result from several impetuses: family coercion for religious reasons, a need for self-protection, an assertion of belonging to a confession or as an ethnic marker. It can also enable a woman to behave with more freedom in public, secure in the knowledge that the covering wards off unwanted approaches as well as derogatory assumptions or negative interpretations of her actions. As such, it can enable behaviour opened up to women through Soviet and other 'modern' ideologies, rather than simply indicating a rejection of it.

Certain contemporaneous factors contribute to the attraction of religion. For instance, corruption and oligarchic control of the public sphere drives those disadvantaged by this system to try to enforce greater control in the private. Some turn to religion as a form of gaining 'positive freedom'¹² the freeing of ties and influences from the mundane world (alcohol, materialism, political or social ambition), or imposing greater restriction on the domestic sphere. Fears of rapid 'westernisation' of children's morals reinforces this turn inwards.

Perceived Role of Religion

Islam as a 'moral' driver can be part of the criticism of corruption in government and lead people to favour 'freedom and democracy' rhetoric. In interviews about religion widespread use of term 'Islamic' together with 'justice' and 'democracy'¹³ was heard. 'Western' examples were also used both to emphasise protection of religious freedom and to illustrate rightness of way of life, social plurality/harmony (as opposed to dogmatism or autocracy), and other values as a 'religious' person would want to live. Some opposition rhetoric connected the corruption of government with irreligiousness. Sometimes this was pointed to as the divide between government and society. By mullahs and religious people who saw society as lacking in religion, religion was presented as part of the solution to corruption. The general resonance of 'religiousness' with 'democracy' is sometimes expressed as a lack of autocracy in a government.

Another perspective on social justice was given by a committed Salafi, a highly eloquent and educated BP employee working in community development. In a conversation about 'Western hegemony' he considered that BP does more for local communities than the government does.

¹² Where negative is 'absence of restraints' to pursue individual goals and positive freedom is the enablement to pursue those goals made possible by certain 'rules' placed on the whole of society (such as gender protection). The head-scarf is often a typical example of this.

¹³ The introduction, or increased popularity, of the term 'democracy' may partly have been influenced by the actuality of the approaching elections and its implications in real and local terms.

The publication in Danish newspapers of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad and the resulting altercations was a global test for secularism. In Azerbaijan many ordinary citizens expected ‘an apology from those who made the offence’.¹⁴ Yet the issue also served to increase the indignation of those who consider religion should be a private and not public or collective issue, an attitude partly influenced by the Soviet era, partly by *realpolitik*. They see religion as a potential obstacle (traditionalism, fatalism, superstition) to development as well as fearing that protesting about the cartoons would create a negative image of Azerbaijan to the world. Both of these reactions can be seen as negotiating what constitutes national Islam and what kind of Islam is good for Azerbaijan. At a conference ‘Against Islamophobia’ organised by Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, at which permission to protest about the ‘cartoon issue’ was also discussed, Musavat leaders were prominent. Illustrating a typical negotiation of identity-consciousness with political savoir faire, Leyla Yunus (NGO Institute for Peace and Democracy) spoke at this event as a ‘friend and colleague’ of Haji Ilgar against the idea of holding protests, for fear that this would reflect upon the politics of Azerbaijan and alienate ‘the West’. Her speech also suggested possible strategic concern about the negative reflection on the image of Musavat/ opposition if associated too closely with the certain sorts of campaign politics such as those of Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, given their combination of religion (and its ties to Iran), opposition, and religious-freedom (and more recently ‘anti-Islamophobia’).

¹⁴ Discussions around central Baku.

Recent contrasts and tensions in Islam in the political sphere

This section seeks to clarify what ‘political Islam’ could refer to in Azerbaijan, the threat it could pose and the nexus between Islamic and political spheres of discussion regarding the government, opposition, ‘the West’ and human rights/democratisation.

Personalities and institutions

The fragmented history of Azerbaijan, changes in presidents and the variety of vying identity-discourses means that religious leaders and experts commonly have a political view and are even political actors.¹⁵ This results in religious and political roles¹⁶ being combined and Islamic identity politicised. The 2003 elections was an important moment in creating these identities. Arrests made at protests after the elections defined or hardened certain characters as ‘opposition’.¹⁷ The public fights for their release and human rights developed a sense of injustice in people and many public platforms and reputations for leadership were consolidated after this.

The Head of the Spiritual Board of the South Caucasus,¹⁸ Pashazade was a prominent leader of Azerbaijanis at the crucial moment of the break up of the USSR and Soviet military intervention in Baku on 20 January 1990, when he led public mourning for those killed and united the population. In June 1993 with the creation of the Talysh Mugan Republic in the south of the country he attempted to mediate between President Elchibay and rebel commander Surat Huseynov. The issue was resolved by Heydar Aliyev and Pashazade subsequently supported his career, blessing his presidency, the 2003 elections and later that of his son in the 2003 presidential elections.

A different example from outside the capital is the Khachmaz local head of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, originally from the south and leader of the Shia community. It would seem that more than a drive to further either Shiism or Islamisation, (he considers bridging Shia, Sunni and ‘Wahhabi’ Islam his principal task) he found in Khachmaz a position for himself through which to express his discontent with changes and by which to be a public personage, building on his function as head of *kholkhoz*. The example puts into context his fulfilment of a position which could externally appear religiously political. The local level mix of economic, social and religious authority is further illustrated in the chapter on the south.

Pashazade and Rafik Aliyev, head of the Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, although different in rhetoric and in mandate, both constitute government positions on Islam. Iranian, political-oppositional and Arabic influences are sometimes considered threatening to the State. The most spoken of are ‘Wahhabis’, a universal global trend that creates tensions due to ultimately desiring to live in an Islamic state.

¹⁵ Other examples include Nariman Gasimoglu who was a parliamentary candidate, has had his own TV programme, uses moderate Islamic scholarly interpretations to inform people about Islam in Azerbaijan and encourages tolerance of different kinds, including towards ‘Wahhabis’. Rauf Arifoglu (editor of the main opposition daily *Yeni Musavat* and vice-president of the opposition party *Musavat*) also writes on tolerance and religion, combining both in ‘philosophical’ style (less written but used to talk a lot in this regard in election campaigning and eg appeared on television without a formal suit, Iranian-style, not wearing a tie).

¹⁶ The way in which they combine these roles also differ: official religious and political leadership, as religious commentators and parliamentary candidates, Orientalists and religious experts; religious freedom and human rights defenders, commentators on / explorers of national and therefore ‘Muslim’ identity, etc. Ethnic community leaders also have political roles and connections to Baku, teachers/ scholars combined with political leaders and human rights defenders.

¹⁷ For instance of Ibrahimoglu, Arifoglu, members of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan.

¹⁸ The descendent of the Board created by Stalin: ‘Reporting directly to Moscow, this institution had little leeway and was a propaganda tool for foreign policy purposes towards the Muslim world.’ Bayram Balci, ‘Islam in Azerbaijan’, *Central Asia Survey*, (June, 2004) 23(2), 205-217

Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, former akhund (administrator) of the Old City ‘Juma’ (Friday) mosque and dubbed ‘leader of the Juma mosque community’ is seen as threatening to official religion for his combination of Islam with opposition politics and his Tehran education. These two will be further discussed in detail below.

There is consciousness that Islam’s role in politics is an issue of interest and debate – as indicated, for instance, by another prominent Islamic leader, the head of Abu Bakr mosque, Gammet Suleymanov (further discussed in later section), currently writing a book on the ‘Muslim’ (Salafi/‘Wahhabi’) stance on ‘democracy and participation in elections’. The role of ‘Western’ organisations in the elections made them an important part of the ‘audience’ for these kinds of discourses around religion and by religious groups. Haji Nuri Aga’s (head of Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, based in Nardaran¹⁹) approach towards journalists before the elections was, for instance, to relativise his Islamic party with examples from ‘the west’: ‘the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan is like the German Christian Democracy’ and ‘I go to the mosque just as Bush goes to church’.²⁰ He is quoted in an article as saying that “Islam is the guiding set of principles for his campaign, along with a commitment to democracy and “an end to tribalism”.

The support bases of religious leaders - and the authority, based on trust, which they hold in society - are coveted, which is partly how Ilgar Ibrahimoglu was co-opted by opposition parties and reportedly persuaded to restrain his ties with Iran.²¹ The relationship of the ‘Wahhabi’ mosque Abu-Bakr and its Imam, Gammet Suleymanov, with the government also seems aided by the fact that his ‘congregation’ and influence is widespread and large, now seemingly increasingly in government.

This consciousness increases the impression that ‘Islam is a political issue’, but the mechanics and vocabulary of this nexus is ambiguous. Individuals are adept at presenting different faces according to the situation and what they are representing. This is not to say that this kind of expression is dishonest – though such an analysis might sometimes be tempting it might misrepresent a person of integrity which can create resentment – but that it is very common for several factors work to influence identities and interactions between identities.

Government, opposition and religion

Murat Gassanly, campaign adviser to the Azadliq bloc, noted that when he asked all leaders of the parties which made up the Azadliq bloc to note the 10 issues they felt the population felt strongly about that would be most important to their campaign, he was surprised how many religious issues arose, including the need to withdraw Azerbaijani troops from Iraq.

¹⁹ The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan arose in 1992 and was registered in 1995 has little following outside Nardaran, the reputed site of Rehim Kazim’s tomb, wife of the seventh shia Imam and thus important pir and so-called ‘religious enclave’, heavily influenced by Iranian Shia Islam. The party is discredited by the government for its Iranian contacts. It is currently ridden by factions. It was brought to public attention in May 2002 with riots in Nardaran when police confronted alleged ‘dangerous Islamist activists’. The villages on the Absheron peninsula are considered some of the most conservative and religious places in Azerbaijan and there are many pirs located there. Nardaran had a certain political independence from its green-houses, supplying winter-vegetables. It is noticeable for the absence of posters of Heydar Aliyev and for the Islamic slogans painted on the town’s walls; it is dominated by the mosque and site of the pir. In 2002 certain demands for electricity and other amenities led to extremely violent riots; this is an ongoing problem for the government. It is thought that Haji Nuri Aga of the IPA was ‘allowed’ to stand in these elections because he was approved by the authorities as someone who could negotiate between Baku and Nardaran. (<http://mitglied.lycos.de/polizek/news/nardpubl.htm> gives details of the events in 2002 onwards)

²⁰ Interview in late October 2006

²¹ Interviews with PFP and Musavat party activists.

During the election period the government and state leadership appeared worried about a 'religion-coloured' revolution. In August, Rafik Aliyev (Committee for Religious Affairs) was quoted as saying that Islamic extremists were a threat to political stability around the parliamentary elections in November. "Propaganda against the state and the government is currently provided in several mosques and this should be prevented," said Aliyev. "Special services have already taken the situation under control. The government possesses information about the number of those mosques and preventive measures against those mosques have already been started."²²

'Religious personalities' were banned from standing for election which was justified as an important aspect of the secularism of Azerbaijan. Religion is itself developing as part of an opposition discourse just as it is growing in society generally.²³ However, the extent to which this is a real 'threat' depends on the context in which it is perceived: it is a threat to the government in the way that the opposition is a threat to the government, but it is also useful for the government to justify certain restrictions, for instance, on certain election candidates and opposition campaigners.

The opposition asserted the notion that if 'democracy' were not supported and a change in power did not take place, the disappointment caused would 'make people turn to Islam'; this functioned as a scare-tactic to create a sense of threat and garner support.

Since the elections some interviewees have indicated that Islamic identity and practice has increased, stressing the redundancy of politics as a sphere for negotiating grievance to emphasise the widespread disappointment and political apathy caused since the elections and general disenfranchisement of many who stood for parliamentary seats. For instance, it was stated in Khachmaz that "people are speaking of wanting to create a group like Hamas: they say that Hamas is taken seriously by the West but the Opposition is not."²⁴ It is unclear whether this is a manifestation of a natural shift of environment for gathering together, and form of collective catharsis after the political sphere ceased to act as a focus of interest or have potential for change, or whether it was a kind of personal implementation of the - perhaps internalised - 'threat' that religion would take over from politics were people to feel let down by the conduct of the elections. Prominent religious leader Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu was very much against the use by the opposition of a threat of 'Islamisation' of politics, arguing that it is wrong to make people fear Islam.

Human rights, opposition, religion and politics

A large number of students pass through Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu's religious philosophy courses which are reinforced by comparative Islamic and western political and religious philosophy. He is respected as having moral standing, charismatic public leadership and an educated, 'modern' (and Russian-speaking) approach enhanced by his position on human rights, which contrasts with the traditional image of a mullah.²⁵ Having gained religious qualifications from Tehran University he studied human rights law in Poland, where he attracted attention as the only practising Muslim and developed a strong personal understanding of the combination of HR theory and Islamic justice. Support for Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, his role in opposition politics, his freedom of religion

²² 'Watching For Wahhabis: The Religious Factor In Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Election Campaign', in *EurasiaNet*, Shahin Abbasov and Khadija Ismailova, 18 August 2005.

²³ The Musavat Party's banner is "Islam, Modernity, Democracy", although this is affected by its historical links with Turkish Kemalism. ICG report *Azerbaijan: Turning over a new leaf?* 2004.

²⁴ Interview in Khachmaz.

²⁵ At the same time as reinforcing other forms of 'authenticity': for instance, on entering his office non-Muslim females are politely informed that 'Muslim men do not shake hands with women', so not to expect such a greeting from Haji Ilgar; yet a traditional sayyed mullah of Koslar village near Lenkoran shook hands without hesitation, despite having regular contact with Iran and knowing the significance of it there.

NGO, DEVAMM, and his intractability over several issues²⁶ are greatly enhanced by a sense of martyrdom to certain official rulings on religious matters; this combines with his position as a human rights defender supported by international organisations and embassies.

Ibrahimoglu was charged with organising protests after the 2003 elections in which he encouraged his 'community', an important support base, to support Musavat. Seymur Rashidov, a spokesman for Ibrahimoglu's religious rights group Devamm was interviewed by Forum 18²⁷ and noted "that during his interrogation, investigators were particularly concerned that Devamm was frequently used as a source by the United States State Department in the religious freedom section of its annual human rights report for Azerbaijan, issued in March 2003." The government's fear of religion and the support bases which religious leaders have the potential to accumulate creates a relationship which often leads to standoffs, such as that which arose over the 'confiscation' of the Old City Juma Mosque from Ibrahimoglu, the 'leader' (akhund) of the 'community' for failing to register with the authorities, following a series of other accusations. Many attendees at this mosque were not followers of a particular leader but traditionally visited this well-known, central mosque that is now closed for refurbishment, which had the effect of increasing his profile.

Ibrahimoglu's cynicism towards the 'west' and politics generally also resonates with common outlooks on Azerbaijani non-western identity that many young people have and with popular and common analyses of western anti-Muslim approaches. It also echoes the Salafi leader Gammet Suleymanov's position on Islam and a geo-strategic analysis of motivations of western or non-Muslim attitudes and influences in Azerbaijan.

The 'threat'

Approaching the topic of Islam in Azerbaijan, one is met with an array of views concerning the potential for violent manifestations of discontent that would take Islamic form or develop out of certain religious attitudes. The border with Iran in the south, Dagestan in the North, proximity of Chechnya, increase in visibility of religion and in people who practice and profess Islam are often noted. Combined with this are structural insecurities, such as a relatively large population of forced-migrants/displaced people, an unresolved conflict with a neighbouring country, inflation and material insecurity. This leads some, influenced by certain western approaches, to consider the 'Islamisation' of the entire country a worrying trend, others to delineate the various strands of religious development and express concern. As noted elsewhere in this report, both terminology and analyses are often imported, presumptions made and correlations drawn from discussions of Islamic radicalism elsewhere in the world. In parallel, national grievances against the 'West' (sometimes fed by issues such as 'Section 907'²⁸ or comparisons after the elections with the Georgian scenario and popular support of 'Russia' vs. 'the US'), are assumed to contribute to the potential formation of popular dissent framed in Islamic terms. Some of these perspectives and anecdotes heard from religious commentators illustrate a framework in which Islamic identity is developing.

Processes of 'radicalisation'

²⁶ Such as the right for women to wear the headscarf in their photo-ID, his claim that 'in no European/democratic countries is it a problem getting ID photos in the hijab, they do not have problems identifying veiled women'. He also organised the conference to campaign the government to allow a protest against the Danish cartoons of the Prophet.

²⁷ Freedom of belief media source. http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

²⁸ Banning US aid support to Azerbaijan; the act was waived in 2002. http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/64_folder/64_articles/64_maresca.html

In interviews, Ibrahimoglu's analysis of radicalism was that it develops out of intolerance and is dependent on family upbringing. He also argues that in Azerbaijan it is created by the government due to its need to justify the control it enforces, restrictions on freedoms and as a way to detract public attention from "well-known pressures put on freedom of speech and free journalism; that it is convenient for the government to blackmail the west with; that the west is attracted to the notion and western journalists can write about it.

Ibrahimoglu was quoted by zerkalo.az "it is no secret to anyone that radical Wahhabi groups have been active in Azerbaijan for several years," and that there is no indication of a weakening of that trend. Ibrahimoglu attributed the appeal of Wahhabism to the lack of democracy, frequent human rights violations and the authorities' clumsy repression of less radical but unregistered religious communities. ("Ibrahimoglu's own Djuma Mosque in Baku has been subjected to repeated pressure and harassment over the past two years.")²⁹

Tensions are also created by the rationalist, scholarly approach to Islam and responses of more devout followers. Nariman Qasimoglu, a respected Islamic scholar, represents a religious but secular trend of Orientalist scholars. He lectures on topics such as praying in vernacular language and that the literary interpretation of the Quranic verse concerning the *hijab* "which reads that women should put coverings on their chest".³⁰ While many 'intelligentsia' find his presentation of Islam appealing, traditional interpreters dismiss him as having no serious religious authority (being a scholar not a cleric), particularly those with a tendency to understand Islam as an essential entity, searching for an authenticity and to consider that "somewhere people live 'real' Islam."³¹ He received death threats for some of the positions he aired on his television programme on Space TV by some young men from a Shia group called 'Ahli Beyt', heavily influenced by Iranian preachers; having identified the youths he later met them and they were forced to apologise.³²

The Imam of Abu Bakr mosque, as many charismatic imams with young followings, is present, active and influential at a vital point in spiritual crises and development of young people when they are discovering religion and exploring more intolerant and trans-national radical ideas. The tendency of 'Wahhabis' to analyse everything in relation to them or as being against them, perhaps taking themselves perhaps more seriously than others, itself creates a form of marginalisation.

Gammet Suleymanov pronounces that 'radicals' are a 'threat' to the state: he defines who they are as those groups who come to the mosque and attack him, accusing him of being 'kafir' (unbeliever) for not opposing more actively and physically the government and to democracy and for not attempting to create a Khalifate.³³ Gammet Suleymanov is now

²⁹ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/08/eab69c32-8e62-4cf2-b861-6c27ac63563e.html>

³⁰ "As for traditional interpretation of mentioned verse the word "coverings" means veils two ends of which falling on chest from both sides should cover it." Nariman Qasimoglu.

³¹ Those seeking authentic Islam seek to dismiss or denigrate the various influences upon Azerbaijan Sufism, Zoroastrianism, animism, Albanian/Armenian Christianity – and Soviet atheism as well as Soviet morality and ethics.

³² www.ddm.iatp.az The website of the FAR Freedom of Religion NGO.

³³ Comments from other interviews include: "some might say they like the government, but they're just pretending". "Until two years ago Wahhabis had no power in politics. Last elections they had their own candidates but wouldn't say so because then the candidates would not be allowed to stand. They're well represented in public organisations and government bodies, NGOs; they work hard supporting rights. In government they cannot be recognised. Before they had beards and trousers but no longer." "At an ideological level it's very attractive, telling people to go straight to the Koran, not the hadith; they argue that America is more interested in oil." "In funeral processes Wahhabi mullahs don't take money."

writing a book related to this: about the “Khawarij” (Kharijites)³⁴ (he explains them as a group who pitted themselves against a government, of which modern examples are Qutbists and bin Laden) of Azerbaijan, whose ideas are rooted back to the original Kharijites in the times of Ali. ‘Muwavirs’ (monotheists) are told they are kafirs (unbelievers). As described by Gammet Suleymanov, such ‘Khavarishes’ also existed in the prophet’s time, they call kafir all those who do not pray and say that they ought to be killed. Ihvans, he explained, are less radical.³⁵ “They say the President needs to be a Muslim and that the government is kafir and needs to be changed. Radicals call for Jihad. Some government officers might stereotype us because we look the same and they treat us the same.”³⁶ Radicals, he observed, tend to be less educated – people who do not have the capacity to progress in life otherwise.³⁷ He also commented that “here there is not much radicalism, it is not like the North Caucasus or even like in the West – like London.” In terms of the process of radicalisation he noted that with the internet, radical groups can grow without anyone knowing, can get information and make contacts, and that Afghanistan had a radicalising effect, as has the ‘war on terror’ and general attitudes of the US.

Factors considered to influence ‘radicalisation’

- As part of the Muslim world; ‘The West/Christians is/are against Islam’ (for instance as indicated by opinions that the West favours Armenia).
- Frustration with ‘west’/US - Section 207; US hypocrisy with ‘democratisation’ compared with Ukraine and Georgia, US and Armenia.
- Persecution of religious people causes radicalisation.
- Iraq (Azerbaijani troops guarding Najaf) and Afghanistan – Azerbaijan should pull out.
- Disappointment in elections.

How the discourse of radicalism is used:

- To blackmail the ‘west’ for support both by opposition and government.
- Fears (weapons to Chechnya and Dagestan, Middle Easterners from Chechnya war, instability in Dagestan) justify security measures in the North.
- Theory that it is encouraged and manipulated by Russia to maintain pressure on Baku.
- Theory that radical groups manipulated by individuals such as Haji Magomedov in Zaqatala, or at least that both as ‘bandits’ must have some link. Indicated by fact that during time of Haji Magommedov’s activities police particularly persecuted Salafis.
- Used by local regional authorities to threaten Baku with loss of control over certain regions.

³⁴ Kharijite is a general term covering a variety of Islamic sects. They do not recognise the distinction between Sunnis and Shias; the right of arbitration belonged to Allah and so the caliph could not be questioned by humans. The Kharijites were puritans (they call for war only on other Muslims), combining a radical egalitarianism (even a slave could become caliph) with revolutionary zeal. Esposito, John (2004), *Islam: the Straight Path*, Oxford University Press.

³⁵ Two years ago one was caught bringing arms here from Dagestan at Samur crossing, and is now in prison. He stayed in the neutral zone for two days until trying cross out of desperation. In interviews in Qusar and Khachmaz it was related that “his father was modern, not radical, from an intelligent family from Gusar. He was strongly attracted by the ideology of Salafim. He became an Ixfan - would have used it against the government. He felt need for revenge against the police. The official version said that he was manipulated from Dagestan – he had connections with Dagestani imams.”

³⁶ Interview with a Salafi in the North.

³⁷ Abu Bakr imam

‘Wahhabism’ in Azerbaijan

Views from the outside

Authorities’ understanding of ‘Wahhabism’ and media presentation

The inability to know the extent to which the authorities consider all ‘Wahhabis’ ‘extremists’ blurs the reality of ‘Wahhabism’ as an internal threat. The term has the connotation of extremism and usually refers to a specific group of fairly identifiable Muslims. Occasionally ‘radicals’ are differentiated, yet at the other extreme sometimes the term is used to include Iranian Islam. The general attribution to a fairly large group of people of ‘intolerance’ and the possibility of violence leaves its mark on general societal perception of the group as a threat, whether social or physical.

State officials frequently call Abu Bakr ‘extremist’, using terms such as ‘den of Wahhabis’; importing Wahhabi literature is banned. At the same time it seems clear that Abu Bakr must have positive relations with the authorities at some level, as it continues to function. Moreover, attendees note fellow-worshippers with positions in ministries, notably Internal and National Security. They note this is positive as it reduces suspicion of the mosque’s activities through transparency. Another confusing official use of the term ‘Wahhabism’ is reportedly the Justice Ministry in 2003 asserting that the Islam-Ittihad Society, a non-governmental organization (NGO) in which Ibrahimoglu was involved, supported “Wahhabism” and al-Qaida.³⁸

Azerbaijan’s former UN Ambassador Elshad Iskandarov is Secretary General of the Islamic Conference Youth Forum, which is organised by the Kuwait-based Committee of Asia Muslims, at a recent event of which Rafik Aliyev gave a welcoming speech. The Kuwait-based Committee of Asia Muslims is an officially sanctioned organisation with which state religious institutions (both Pashazade and Rafik Aliyev’s offices) coordinates events. Yet officials’ statements appear in the press that merge images of Arabic Islam and extremism, such as: “The State Committee for Religious Affairs has also imposed a ban on the distribution of religious literature that promotes Wahabbism, the Turan news agency reported. The Azerbaijani Caucasus Muslims Board has already received 14 tons of religious books, containing “radical Wahabbist propaganda,” from the Kuwait-based Committee of Asia Muslims in late July, Aliyev said”.³⁹ Another example is of Pashazade quoted as having said at an Islamic conference, sitting next to a representative from Saudi Arabia, “we must not let extremists and Wahhabists take over”, apparently ignoring the sensitivity of the issue and state religion of Saudi Arabia. Several foreign experts and scholars believe him to be a figure more concerned with administration and maintaining control (faxing Friday sermons to the region, monopolising Haj tours, controlling clerics through nepotism) than occupied by religion.

The term ‘Wahhabism’

This term can be confusing as it was coined by officials in the late-Soviet period from the name of an 18th century puritanical movement in Saudi Arabia to refer derogatorily to any kind of ‘extreme religion’, which often meant simply those practising outside the officially-sanctioned institution of one of the four Spiritual Board of Muslims (especially when feared as political opposition) or simply just particularly devout people.

In broad terms, those referred to as ‘Wahhabis’ aim to follow a purist way of living their religion, developed from the way in which they consider the first few generations after

³⁸ ‘Azerbaijan’s struggle for identity’, November 2005, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=13411>

³⁹ Watching For Wahhabis: The Religious Factor In Azerbaijan’s Parliamentary Election Campaign, *EurasiaNet*, Shahin Abbasov and Khadija Ismailova, 18 August 2005

the Prophet - the "Salaf as-Salih", (pious forefathers) - to have practised Islam; hence the term to describe them as 'Salafis'. This involves 'clearing' Islam of the barnacles of innovation ('bidah'), superstition, convention, tradition, 'idolatry' ('shirk' eg considering pir as mediator to God). The overall tone is modern, puritanical and with a tendency to distance itself from 'others' to maintain personal purity (especially occasions involving drinking and music; this can lead to rifts within families and friendship groups).

If pressed for a label, people who are considered 'Wahhabis' would refer to themselves as 'just Muslims'⁴⁰ or as 'al-Muwahhidun' (monotheists). This is a significant self-labelling as it trumps other schisms in Islam and other identities (in particular Shiite or pan-Turkic or other nationalist). Salafis distinguish each other internally (eg ideologically as Wahhabism, Qutbism; by the means they consider permissible for changing the government to an Islamic one; and by different movements and degrees of opposition to authority/the 'west'). However, in the case of Azerbaijan it would not be helpful to be over-deterministic or to seek to label practice and political views by definitions created in the Middle East, the North Caucasus or in anti-West movements.

Societal Perceptions of Wahhabism

People are often willing to believe – or at least repeat - all manner of things about 'Wahhabis', their connections to criminal groups, foreign governments, power over the Azerbaijani government. Yet one of the first noticeable aspects today in Baku is the significant frequency of personal ties⁴¹ and common educational level with 'intelligentsia' (with positions in international organisations or political analysis NGOs). The high education and societal centrality of adherents to the Salafi trend in Baku severely disconcerts their peers, not least because they are observing at close quarters many aspects of Salafi ideology and spirit which attract – often in the Russian language – while shuddering at its isolationism and 'fundamentalism'.

The rector of the Islamic University in Zaqatala expressed denial of his students participating in Salafi groups, indicating a kind of fear of acknowledging their obvious presence in his mosque. The Avar founder of Sheykh Shamil Society expressed his community's hatred of them, regarding them as 'evil' and 'dark'. Yet they are equally generally met with bemusement and a certain tolerance of well-meaning cultishness, as would any kind of benign fanaticism. At the same time, analyses persist that they are 'placed' by Russia in collusion with Iran in order to destabilise society, or by the government in order to have a convenient 'threat' to justify certain moves.

Development of Wahhabism in Azerbaijan

It does not make sense to overly define 'Wahhabis' or to identify them as a unitary sect, as much as to see them as followers of the Salafi way, sharing certain commonalities in ideology, and/or locations of religious learning such as Abu Bakr. The movement's stages of development began with early introduction by visitors from Syria, Palestine and Arabic countries, from Chechnya, from Dagestan; many Azerbaijani students went on Arab-funded scholarships to study theology abroad and returned as Salafis (mid-90s). The construction of mosques, most influentially Abu Bakr in the late 1990s, has resulted in increasing numbers of locally-converted followers; this process is characterised by the charisma of imams, sincerity of those practising (conversion by example), 'rational' and tangible way of describing things. The attention paid to 'Wahhabism' and 'extremism'

⁴⁰ In practice, presenting itself as 'just Islam' also aids the allure of Salafism to people seeking religion. It sometimes results in attracting people to their overall philosophy who may not aware until later that it belongs to a group they are otherwise taught by society to be wary of.

⁴¹ Ie connected not just by anecdotes or acquaintances but relatives, friends and classmates.

in general is partly up to individuals, such as the former Minister for National Security⁴², who made ‘extremism’ a priority between 1997-2001 in a period in which retaining the confidence of oil partners may have been a major concern.⁴³

Earlier ‘Wahhabis’ were recognisable by wearing shorter trousers and long beards, but recently many adherents have either chosen or been permitted not to do so (whether in response to persecution, the alien – rather than inviting - image this created, or whether because new members, with roles in mainstream society, could not carry the image in public). The latter is a persuasive argument as several employees at the Ministry for Internal Security, National Security and BP’s Health and Security and Community Development departments⁴⁴ are practising Salafis and said to attend Abu Bakr mosque. A recent article by Hikmet Hajizade of the FAR Centre (concerned with religious development and freedom) addressed the rhetoric and actuality of ‘Wahhabis’ in government ministries.

Self-Perceptions and representation

Abu Bakr and Gammat Suleymanov

In 1998 the Foundation for Islamic Heritage of Kuwait⁴⁵ was very active in Azerbaijan and built the Abu Bakr mosque, but apparently took no active role in the life of the mosque other than appointing the imam. When the mosque opened 80 people attended, now the number reaches 7000 on Friday.⁴⁶

The imam of Abu Bakr, Gammat Suleymanov is respected due to his Islamic education (in Khartoum, graduated 1991, and Medina). He recounts that originally he did not want to have a public leadership position or to make speeches, but to teach a few students and spread his knowledge through that method. Suleymanov commands a great deal of respect and trust for his calm and reasonable, yet charismatic, manner. One of the greatest attractions of his teaching is reported as its relative ‘rationalism’; religion had never before been considered as a ‘science’ or been taken seriously and had a negative reputation; many educated and modern young people attracted to Salafism were seeking spiritual fulfilment which they could not find in the rituals, traditions and mysticism of ‘traditional’ religion. They found in Abu Bakr an approach which appealed to their need for spiritual and moral order and provided explanations for societal issues that concurred with their views.

Gammat Suleymanov engages in the tropes of criticism of the west and analysis that sees them broadly speaking as ‘against Muslims’ (such as: preserving their economic underdevelopment, depleting *zakat* (charity) funds through conflict that would otherwise be used for development and social aid; encouraging radicals that Muslim governments then must fight; manipulating them for their own purposes including oil interests) that links him to global orations that pit the West against Islam. His reaction towards policies of the USA (or ‘hypocrisy’ seen in the inability to discover bombs in Iraq) is phlegmatic rather than emotional because they fit in to the generally understood state of things and worldview of a western ‘conspiracy’ or policy against the Muslim world.

⁴² Tofiq Babayev

⁴³ He is now ambassador to Uzbekistan.

⁴⁴ Interview with a Salafi working at BP.

⁴⁵ For instance this translation of a report posted on EurasiaNet: “there already exist facts on joining several Azeri citizens to the battles in Chechnya under the influence of extremist organizations. One of them died several days ago. Father of the youth said that his son was fallen under the influence of radical Islamists in one of the Vahabi mosques in Baku.” <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200110/0057.html>

⁴⁶ According to the mosque’s Imam of

Intolerance

Many are concerned and feel threatened by ‘Wahhabis’ attitude towards those who do not follow the Salafi way. Yet their ‘intolerance’ tends to be more of a condescending kind that regards Christians and Jews and followers of other kinds of Islam as ‘lesser’ or ‘wrong’, a situation to be solved by missionary work, and conversion by example. They view all those who do not adhere to their idea of ‘Islam’ as ‘kufra’ (unbelievers and thus heretics), although to non-Muslims they are defensive about Islam and unlikely to stress differences, including with Shiism (it is not quite ‘the right way’ but it is still Islam) and its ‘ignorant’ (rather than ‘infidel’) practice of pir-veneration. This is how it is expressed at official levels, however, there have been occasional cases of groups of Salafis burning pirs or throwing out stones commonly found in Shiia mosques, of which they disapprove, and of ‘ihvan’ (brotherhood) and ‘khavarij’ groups (both puritanical, reformist groups seeking to ‘purify’ Islam).

All Salafis would like to live under an Islamic government and anticipate a khalifate, however, apart from a few small groups, they are vehemently against violence and overthrow, they seek to create the environment in which it would be a natural transition to living under Sharia – referring to the story of Mohammad being ‘invited’ into Mecca after 14 years rather than from forced conversion through war and say that ‘it is better to invite people into Islam’ and ‘seizing government is *haram*’ (wrong).

Attraction of Salafism

The points below summarise portrayals by adherents and outsiders heard during research:

- Salafi interpretation offers a **rationalisation** of religion, not ‘unquestioning tradition’; it has a ‘thinking’/intellectual aspect. It provides an alternative to both western ‘secularism’ (whether US/European, or Russian/Soviet) and tradition. The **contrast in Salafi thought with ‘traditional’** Islamic practice,⁴⁷ **social pressure, superstition judgementalism** also serves as an attraction.
- The morality and **integrity** of participants is contrasts with perceived hypocrisy often associated with ‘traditional’ Islamic practice and with the mixing with pre-Islamic practices and superstitions. For instance, the missing of fasting on a Ramadan day with the avowal to make it up later is seen as a weakness both by practising ‘traditional’ Muslims and non-religious/secular people. Many are fed up with certain aspects of tradition (obligation to donate large amounts of money, shrines and saint worship, praying for favours and ‘bribing’ with a promise if their wishes are granted.)
- There is a tone of **moral superiority** and condescension, for instance, that they are more reasonable, calm and honourable about dealing with differences; they argue that Shias are more judgemental eg about people who leave the religion and would call them bad names and criticise their wives. But, for Salafis, this would not be considered acceptable, honourable behaviour.⁴⁸
- The emphasis on **‘purity’** sets itself up in contrast to corruption (eg this comes out in views expressed about Pashazade).
- Calling themselves ‘Muslims’, ‘Monotheists’, Salafism overrides other fears of inferiority and unites ethnicities. In some analyses this is considered an attraction to minorities who feel threatened by pan-Turkism.
- Provides a structure through which to engage with international **politics** and identity in the national and international context, as well as in relation to various conflicts, also provides a set of rational and fraternal peers with whom to discuss. **Internally**

⁴⁷ Wahhabi trends ban pictures, tobacco, photographs, and celebrating Muhammad's birthday, the invocation of prophets, saints or angels in prayer, supplication at graves and ancestor veneration, celebrating feasts for dead saints, wearing of charms, magic and seeking healing from witches. They are strongly against innovation in matters of religion such as new methods of worship.

⁴⁸ Imam of Abu Bakr mosque

fulfilling, (helpful if unemployed but requiring mental stimulation as well as providing collegiality).

- Salafism presents itself as '**direct**'⁴⁹ – refuting the authority of 'intermediaries' or others' interpretations, saying they go straight to the Koran and hadith. Directness and self-ownership of one's religious practice also contrasts with sense of being accustomed to being manipulated by official approaches and societal pressures. This is part of the contrast with 'pir' and traditional religious culture (and an aspect of the global, not just Azerbaijani, opposition of Salafism to traditional Islamic practice.)
- In speaking of religion, the Russian word 'demoralisatsiya' is crucial and often used, combining as it does the concept of loss of morality and loss of morale: As with most puritanical strands of religion there is a tendency to see the 'corruptness' and depravity of modern behaviour as the source of all contemporary ills and thus 'demoralisation of society'.

⁴⁹ Claims to interpret the words of the prophet directly; they hold that some groups such as Sufis and Shias follow novel (and thus non-Islamic) practices.

‘Wahhabis’ in the North

Background

In the Khachmaz region Salafi mosques were opened in 1996/7 by imams from Zaqatala and Belakan.⁵⁰ Five local imams studied together in Baku and all are Salafi as are those who pray in their mosques. In the late 1990s 15 mosques were built by Ahia Trust – Islamic Heritage, Kuwait; all were closed down after the attacks in the US on September 11th 2001. Mosques are closed and opened again sporadically, according to the perceived necessities of the local authorities.⁵¹ In Zaqatala are many who practice Salafism, fewer in Belakan, Gax, Sheki.⁵²

The North of Azerbaijan is considered particularly full of ‘Wahhabis’ because the religion there is Sunni⁵³ and traditional Shiite norms do not forestall foreign religious influences. Compared to the South, where ‘Wahhabis’ were told ‘this was not their place’ by local religious-leaders and quickly left,⁵⁴ the relative lack of local religiousness in the Northern regions makes ‘new’ religions more easily taken up. Levels of knowledge about Islam are low, for instance concerning the existence of Sunni and Shia variants.

The ethnic mix ties the region to the Russian Northern Caucasus; commonly cited factors are the proximity to Chechnya⁵⁵ (where some foreign Salafi-jihadists⁵⁶ are thought to have fought, although this is contested) and Dagestan (where ‘Wahhabism’ vs ‘Sufism’ is the general explanation for competition for power). Both are cases with some notoriety. Certain influence does come from over the border and books in both Russian and Azerbaijani are received from Dagestan. Local journalists claim that many locals are fighting in Chechnya.⁵⁷

They have also gained a reputation for burning pirs from some incidents several years ago; however they are also reported not to stop people going to pirs but to tell people not to ask them for help, rather to ask God directly.

Societal perceptions

Local observers note that the behaviour of Salafi Muslims shows “they want to create a positive feeling”⁵⁸ and create a good impression. They do not dress ostentatiously, they wear old clothes, are calm, peaceful, they pray – but they are sometimes still held in suspicion. Adherents to Salafism come from all parts of society, but one interviewee noted that a recent change was that “several local government members have also turned Wahhabi.”⁵⁹ There is a perception that they tend to be very educated people with good jobs but that this is a recent change in the composition of the group. This may be linked to the change in their visibility - whereas previously they had to wear a beard and short trousers, now they seem to be ‘allowed’ not to. In Qusar they were noted as often seen in internet cafes and making phone calls, including from the office of the Helsinki Committee which runs an internet café. For some interviewees this was a sign of

⁵⁰ Interview in Khachmaz

⁵¹ Interview in Khachmaz

⁵² Information from Abu Bakr mosque in Baku.

⁵³ Almost all the non-Azeri ethnicities and 80% of the Azeris in this region are Sunni.

⁵⁴ Madrassah, Lenkoran

⁵⁵ Interview in Qusar

⁵⁶ Eg from Afghanistan, Pakistan.

⁵⁷ Information from a young journalist whose ‘Wahhabi’ friends who discuss their fellow Salafis and activities.

⁵⁸ Interview in Qusar

⁵⁹ Interview in Khachmaz

‘external influence’, whether from ‘commanders’ in Baku or Arabic countries or over the internet.

From friends and relatives in Dagestan, some observers gained the impression that, while ideologically the same, they are more violent and ‘dangerous’ there because the political situation is generally more unstable.⁶⁰ They are noted in Dagestan for being more globally connected, for instance they created an organisation for the defence of Iraq and donated blood.⁶¹ It is difficult to judge how far opinions are created by inference or observation.

Conversion process

Local observers note an increase in numbers in the last few years have seen, although they are becoming less ostensible in their clothing and length of beards.⁶²

To convince parents to send children to Islamic classes they point to ‘depravity’ introduced into society by television, especially examples from the west, and say children will follow these examples, “better make your daughter religious or the next thing you’ll hear she’s had sex before marriage.” Thus conversion happens easily and propagates quickly, because once one member of a family converts the extended family is affected; there is peer pressure to convert and control one’s family – women follow, sisters are made to wear hijab.⁶³

Drug use is also cited to urge families to make their children religious. Cases of wealthy families whose son has everything and turns to drugs were mentioned; rehabilitation occurs through attraction to ‘Wahhabism’ which gives it a positive image. Families prefer their son to be religious than a drug user and give money to the cause.

Sense of persecution and freedom of belief

Another distinguishing aspect of ‘Wahhabis’ in the North is their distance from the urban mix and political realities of Baku. Police in the North can use the accusation of ‘Wahhabism’ to arrest, fine and harass; the notion that certain appellations are not ‘crimes’ carries little with the police. Nor do citizens in general feel confident in their ability to resist arrest, thus practicing Salafis feel the daily insecurity of this arbitrariness. Pressure felt by police to show efficacy in fulfilling their roles has been quoted as a motivating factor. Humiliation, intended to intimidate, is a frequent tactic of police; provocation through attacking pride, thus inciting the recipient to retaliate; insulting mothers etc.⁶⁴

In periods of particular attention on Wahhabis the police have been known to forcibly shave and set light to beards, imprison Wahhabis, beat them up and inflict torture. In 2004 during a period of heightened government crackdown on Wahhabis, two were beaten until they nearly died.⁶⁵

It is this form of provocation that is often quoted as leading to the ‘radicalisation’, especially of young men. At the same time, the ‘martyrdom’ aspect of suffering such persecution provides a certain gratification in the persecution, a test of faith to have

⁶⁰ Interviews in Qusar

⁶¹ Helsinki Committee Qusar branch

⁶² Helsinki Committee Qusar branch

⁶³ NGO Resource Centre Khachmaz

⁶⁴ Interview with imam of Abu Bakr mosque

⁶⁵ Salafis in Baku and Hodad; NGO Resource Centre in Khachmaz

undergone in common with the Prophet,⁶⁶ which, moreover, increases people's awareness of Salafism. The good image which they seek to maintain in society is enhanced by their approach that they should not complain to the police but take care of themselves and ask help only from God.⁶⁷

The closure of their mosques adds to their sense of persecution which becomes a freedom of religion issue, feeds into their sense of righteousness and adds one more 'battle' to their cause/activity. Eight mosques have been closed due to officials' worries about 'Wahhabis', and the Khachmaz HR/NGO Resource Centre fights for them to be reopened and deals with many religious complaints.⁶⁸

One well-known local imam, whose links to the Khachmaz NGO and political awareness makes him a common interlocutor of visitors from Baku, NGOs and international organisations, is a former PFP member and village leader of a nationalist movement who suddenly turned to religion. He is cited by the Khachmaz NGO as a common example of opposition and religious groups joining together against the government.

This religious leader's personal sincerity and authenticity is a major draw: he has only secondary school education, earns living simply, sometimes doing construction work, cultivating vegetables. He was elected to be imam of a mosque built by the Kuwaiti Heritage organisation in 1995 that was first closed in 1998. He previously held a position in the municipality but, as this conflicted with his religious role, he chose to be imam of a non-existent mosque rather than work for the municipality – an indication to people that he prefers to work for his religion than government and is a proof of his dedication. Yet his authority is reinforced by having been chosen by popular vote for two positions. He is reported as having strong, unchangeable belief and hence being unafraid of the police. Interest in his group of followers increased (by locals and internationals as well) by the fact that the mosque is closed, they manage to organise themselves without an official location and even to hide and pray in people's private houses. The ExCom⁶⁹ do not answer requests to reopen the mosque and this religious leader adds to the sincerity of the cause by claiming that they would accept any imam, even chosen by the government, if they could just have a place to pray in.⁷⁰

Politics and Religion in the North

The relation with opposition and other agenda-driven groups seems to be the attractiveness to those who wish to use their social leverage, such as the PFP local Khachmaz office which apparently courted the respected local Salafi leader and former imam described above.⁷¹

However, this can work both ways; the Khachmaz NGO office noted that after the recent parliamentary elections the number of people praying seemed to increase enormously – religious groups used the fact that people were active during elections, had high expectations and were disappointed, to attract them. In many ways people see this as an alternative to opposition parties, an equivalent means of public protestation even in terms of having to brave the police.⁷²

⁶⁶ Salafi in Hodat

⁶⁷ NGO Resource Centre in Khachmaz

⁶⁸ eg Two in Hodat, Gusarjar, Gotagli village

⁶⁹ Regional representative of the presidential administration, often more influential than elected representative of regions.

⁷⁰ Interview with former imam of now closed mosque; he has his hopes pinned on the US Embassy with whom he had spoken concerning religious freedom to have his mosque reopened.

⁷¹ NGO Resource Centre in Khachmaz

⁷² Interview in Khachmaz

During the elections there were differing answers to journalists' questions concerning voting: one said that if a person supports a candidate they will share their sins eg if he becomes corrupt, others said they were not voting, others that they had a candidate (e.g. who'd help get a mosque reopened) but would not disclose the name as if they became known as the 'Wahhabis' choice they would be removed from the list of candidates.⁷³

Conclusions

'Wahhabis' are a defined faction in conflicts in Dagestan and Chechnya. Criminality, including smuggling, in the mountains is often associated with Dagestan and Russia; whether simply due to assumptions about Wahhabis' criminality or whether linked to ideological support for secessionist warfare, the association is commonly made. The vagueness of terminology is also noted by researcher Bobrovnikov in reference to Dagestan; he notes that "So-called Wahhabites include the moderate reformist Ahmed-kadi Akhtaev, ... the radical politician Movladi Ugudov, who is not very religious yet tries to parade as a Muslim; and even the notorious terrorist Shamil Basaev; as well as many others, some of them pure bandits who have nothing in common with the movement except their 'Caucasus nationality'."⁷⁴ This quotation illustrates some of the usages of the term 'Wahhabi'.

In analyses concerned with Russia as a manipulator of identity-groups, 'Wahhabis' are often linked to 'Sadval' (local ethnic nationalist movement straddling Azerbaijan and Dagestan, referred to later in report) and recently there are claims that the two groups agreed to 'cooperate' to achieve mutual aims – both being pro-Russian and persecuted due to assumed 'extremism'.⁷⁵ The ICG report of 2004 includes Sadval in the section on 'Radical Islam and State Repression'. While certain individuals, perhaps even politically-minded, may have straddled both camps, it is difficult to see what common ground the ideologically motivated in these groups could have found and this would require further investigation.

Whether the Wahhabi groupings in the north are a threat or not partly depends on their proclivity to be co-opted: this requires the leaders, as potential inciters of religious identity, to have an interest either in political or financial gain or protection.

⁷³ Journalist in Khachmaz researching the 'Wahhabi candidate'

⁷⁴ Forthcoming article, IFEA, Istanbul, 2006.

⁷⁵ Interviews with active inhabitant of Yalama and NGO Resource Centre in Khachmaz.

Social identities in the South

Background

The South of Azerbaijan is considered a particularly religious area, with religion affected by its proximity to Iran. In the Soviet period mullahs were persecuted and not allowed to propagate religion, yet much unofficial activity continued and people protected the imams and their secret classes. Similarly, flagellation in the celebration of Ashurra took place.

Lenkoran is the largest town in the south and consists of about 80 villages, each with at least one mosque. Pashazade, the Sheykh ul-Islam, is ethnically a Talysh from Gil village; a large proportion of mullahs practising officially sanctioned Islam through the spiritual board are appointed from this region.

This section will illustrate aspects of the impact of 'tradition' and 'religion' on each other and of both of these on the possibility of effecting changes through coercion using the pressure of social convention and on the social structures that hold communities together in this region. Village life is most vulnerable to external influences given the lack of mobility, strength of traditions, faltering electricity and other services, poverty and lack of alternatives. The opinions presented here are those offered by 'intelligentsia'.

Recent trends

Increase in religion, public/social pressure and re-traditionalisation

'Tradition' and 'religion',⁷⁶ have significant roles and meanings in society in this region; the two notions reinforce each other and are sometimes used synonymously. Religion is both social and personal and different aspects are stressed according to the context and interlocutor. It was stated in interviews⁷⁷ that atheists do not exist in this region.⁷⁸ Aksakals (respected, usually elderly community member) have great influence and authority over social issues. Coercion to obey social traditions by the threat of negative judgement and the need for security through relying on conformism is powerful.

The combination of post-Soviet hardships and 're-traditionalisation' of society (influenced in different ways by nationalism, socio-economic depression, unemployment, lack of available channels for social development) has made the situation for women increasingly restricted⁷⁹ and, at the same time, their lives burdened. Men are also affected (frustrated, humiliated, authority undermined) if unable to fulfil traditional roles as providers. Women's decreasing literacy rates, knowledge of their rights and the resources available, combined with coercion regarding 'correct' behaviour borne of fear of judgement of 'neighbours' are issues. The period of economic decline since the

⁷⁶ This was preserved during the Soviet period, mullahs gave classes at home: a range of stories are told of the ways in which local people, including police, would protect 'suspected-mullahs' by eg children escaping from the back window taking his religious books with them while he answered the door to police outside so that the books would not be discovered; or by police in a prison telling one mullah who had a musical talent to be 'discovered' playing the tar at a given hour as a way to convince the authorities that he couldn't be so religious because otherwise he would not have played music. People emphasise that they all 'kept religion in their hearts' and no aspect of religion was weakened during the Soviet period.

⁷⁷ An indication of a divide between those influenced by whatever little information they receive and those who are more in touch with the media and with Baku for professional reasons, was given in several comments eg from lawyers and entrepreneurs. They asserted that traditions and dogmas presented as 'religion' hold sway and that belief is often 'superstitious', especially in the villages and people are 'naïve'. In Lenkoran one aspect of religion's influence on people was described as 'people rely on God – they don't plan but live ad-hoc'.

⁷⁸ Stated in an interview in Lenkoran. However, an extremely highly-respected, aged Professor of Linguistics at Lenkoran University (he is a demanding teacher and does not take bribes; a poet in Talysh and Uzbek languages; he has worked in universities in Central Asia and USSR, is a self-avowed atheist (defined as 'believes in physical power controlling things').

dissolution of the Soviet bloc creates burdens and stresses on people that enhance social tensions.⁸⁰

Some of the seminars held by the local implementing office for the Ministry of Youth, Sport & Tourism are revealing: ‘girl and boy need to meet before marriage’; ‘women’s rights’; ‘drug awareness’; ‘religion’, indicating the concerns of local youth workers about the combination of social and religious pressure in the region.⁸¹

Authority and religion

Mullahs tend to be the main executives of religion here and the principal conduit for social, religious and moral commentary. Instances were cited of mullahs ‘promoting Iran’ and, during the elections, using funeral procedures to get certain people elected, from whom they would expect favours such as land or property.⁸² Iranian trained mullahs as well as those officially trained in Azerbaijan, referred to often as ‘government mullahs’, are reported to practice as do some who studied in Syria and Egypt; these are noted for being more ‘generalists’ characterised by focusing less on the Shia-Sunni, Azerbaijani-Iranian differences.

Anecdotes indicate that respect is often due to the ability to provide employment or social support. The combination of wealth and religious authority or religious endorsement works through both contemporary and long-standing mechanisms. Religious families which historically formed an elite, including ‘sayeds’, with generations of religious scholars and community leaders, often continued to hold authority through the Soviet period as kholkhoz heads. They were well placed to benefit from privatisation using their network of contacts through which to obtain information, knowledge, and further their business interests and through financial success maintained their elite social and economic status.⁸³ They maintain authority by job-creation and charity, for instance, giving money and meals at feasts, funding orphanages, giving construction materials cheaply to poor families, not charging for officiating in their religious roles at marriages and funerals.

Lenkoran Madrassah

Haji Zade, the head of this Madrassah appears to have strong links with Pashazade’s (indicated by photographs on his desk) and official directions of the Spiritual Board have strong influence on this institution. Its rhetoric is noticeably pro-governmental⁸⁴ and pre-emptively defensive about accusations of ‘terrorism’ or pro-Iranian leanings.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Interview with senior University lecturer: students do not trust or have faith in the future and as a result have become apathetic and even ‘nihilistic’. The numbers of those going on to further academic study has decreased, yet for a few, study abroad has become more possible.

⁸¹ Local office of Ministry of Youth, Sport & Tourism

⁸² Journalist, Masalli.

⁸³ For instance being able to have one’s tomatoes prioritised through the canning factory while others’ rotted in the summer heat; knowing how to find out how best to use resources, how and where best to market goods,

⁸⁴ Statements such as ‘Bribes are *haram* - our state already fights corruption; but bribes existed even in the Soviet Union.’ ‘Even in most Islamic countries see corruption: we’re a young country’. ‘The West did nothing wrong in not supporting the opposition during the elections - the opposition lost because they are not strong enough.’ ‘Government is gradually making improvements eg increasing salaries of teachers.’ ‘Most important is solving the Karabagh issue peacefully; we’re not for war’.

⁸⁵ As noted by researchers from Baku: “What we discovered in Abbasiye Medrese to our surprise was anti-Iranian environment among the teachers who said that the Iranians are not allowed to enter the yard of Medrese. Should we accept Iranian teachers and mullas we would have had modern renovated Medrese certainly but as they say the Iranians would only pursue political goals here. That was the case in neighboring Masalli region where all Medreses were closed.” (2003 British Embassy-funded report on conflict-prevention by Elkhan Mehtiyev, Director of the Peace and Conflict Resolution Centre and Dr Altay Rashid Goyushov, Associate Professor from the History Faculty of Baku State University).

The madrassah seems accustomed to foreigners making enquiries and is quick to answer questions and assert the lack of coercion of the students at the madrassah and their 'rationality' rather than 'fanaticism'. One instance of changes official Islamic institutions of Azerbaijan under Pashazade have made and which people cite to demonstrate this reasonableness ('people here are less superstitious than in Iran') has been his encouragement of blood-donations rather than self-flagellation during Ashurra.⁸⁶ However, they did not feel that there were any cases of stricter religious regulation by families than were absolutely necessary, indicating conservatism and that their religion can reinforce the rhetoric of 'tradition'.

The madrassah teaches Persian and Arabic. Students are between the ages of 16-40 and from all financial situations and all backgrounds.⁸⁷ Classes are in the afternoons after ordinary school. All students are supported themselves or by parents; in one or two cases the parents had paid but the students did not attend. Former students go on to Baku Islamic University or other universities. Many become Akhunds (registrars and administrators of mosques). One is an Arabic translator for diplomats; after leaving Lenkoran he studied at Al-Azhar in Egypt.

⁸⁶ This is seen as a positive and constrictive interpretation of drawing blood at Ashurra and widely supported, yet alongside it self-flagellation continues.

⁸⁷ There are cases of less religious families sending and more religious not – it is about personal interest.

The Role of Iran

In the early years of independence, Iran took a paternalistic approach towards Azerbaijan, there were some ideas of integrating Azerbaijan to Iran and 'Iran expected/pretended that Azerbaijan was a very unhappy place'.⁸⁸ Having been trained to be blind to the external border of the USSR ('to pretend Iran did not exist') there was a certain amount of vulnerability when the borders opened; it was mentioned that people's impression formed after this period, when trade and communications started people often felt cheated, that their trust had been abused and drug trafficking began.⁸⁹

Stories about pressure put on Tehran by the US through sponsoring its minorities and dissenting groups increases its sense of insecurity and the pressure it puts on Baku not to support the US. Part of Iran's leverage over Azerbaijan is religious influence over society and at moments of tension local observers say they perceive an increased involvement of 'Iranian propaganda', Iran pulling on its strings of influence over people in the south.⁹⁰

Several interlocutors in the south considered that the Iranian state wishes to hold influence over people in Azerbaijan and uses various means to do so. Iran seeks to create a good impression and make people feel their interests are/would be better protected by Iranian influence on their state or social life. Increased and more targeted communication can be felt by Iran during moments such as elections and religious festivals. Several people contrasted the south with dynamism in Baku - regretting that the 'US works more from Baku' while Iran makes particularly clever use of the informational void and lack of activities in the South. A journalist in Masalli remarked that while there is not a single 'normal' bookshop - one can see in the local bazaar Iranian books. Recently at maharramliq people were observed selling tapes of *mersias* (religious songs/poetry, in Azerbaijan associated with funerals).⁹¹

Iranian interest in influencing Azerbaijan and society in the south functions at several levels, including:

- concern over ethno-nationalist tendencies or fomenting ethnic rise of the large Azerbaijani minority in its north (especially with recent US and Turkish media)
- its pursuit of allies in its current scenario with the West
- it fears challenges to its theocracy and wishes to enforce this by spreading support for its form of Shiism
- it is a way to control the border
- at a non-state level, religious leaders are keen for influence and students from Azerbaijan.
- drug trade to the west requires management.

Having influence on and ties to the population in the south is important not just for geopolitical interests but also for those whose agenda is promoting the state religious-

⁸⁸ Interview in Lenkoran

⁸⁹ Interviews in Astara and Masalli

⁹⁰ A significant divide in sympathy between Azerbaijani and Iranian Azeris is Armenia: Azerbaijanis feel outraged by and question Iranian Azeris' 'nationality'/patriotism when they are unable to feel hatred for Armenians. This seems countered by Iranian accusations that Azerbaijan are pro-US and Israel. Recent US attempts to stir insurgency from within the country and Chicago based TV Gunel beamed through a Turkish satellite has exacerbated Tehran's insecurities and it recently complained to Ankara about the TV channel. The Iranian ambassador to Azerbaijan recently (April 2006) made statements about the positive and inclusive role of Azerbaijanis in Iran ("Iranian Azeris have one motherland, Iran, which unites different ethnic groups") accusing Azerbaijan of making 'anti-Iranian' statements about the oppression of minorities, warning of 'Zionism'.

⁹¹ Interview in Masalli

ideology. However, there are various Islamic tendencies in Iran which are not entirely under state control (for instance several sufi orders, which seem to be gaining in interest, especially in Qom). One former student in Iran of a religious leader who he claimed 'had no propaganda purposes' and whose modesty and self-discipline indicated lack of corruption (Ayatollahs he had met often had big houses and were officious) gave his teacher's definition of Islam as striving to be perfect through hard work. These distinctions between state and religion are not clear to those in the southern regions of Azerbaijan and it is difficult to know which kinds of Islam people have been influenced by and also which actively seek to affect the population in Azerbaijan.

Effects of the opened border

These are effects of proximity to Iran that affect people's perceptions of Iranian 'propaganda' and attempts of Iran to affect their culture, attitudes to religious, and any co-nationalist tendencies with minorities in the north of Iran.

Family Azerbaijan is seeking to strengthen its border with Iran while Iran is seeking to establish a freer border regime.⁹² Slowly family ties are being reestablished, but after such a long separation these are rare. In the period of open border in 1989 many families from Azerbaijan visited to trace family; the Azerbaijan-compatriot organisation helps organise and help people; this is an organisation Iran has a strong interest in repressing. Since many Azerbaijani men are in Russia, some girls marry Iranian traders and go to live there, thus creating new family ties.⁹³

Trade There is some small trade with Iran but this is getting less profitable for private entrepreneurs, operating illegally.⁹⁴ Few people support families through trade with Iran, those who go to Iran mostly have religious reasons.⁹⁵ Private trade is not systematised, people have their own contacts. 'Government'-trade, it was reported, is controlled and used as a means to create ties, with discounts and benefits for 'people they like'; this was defined as 'people who promote their propaganda', the instance was twice given in interviewed that they either specifically seek out or track large-scale traders and gauge their religious feelings, seeking to coopt them.⁹⁶

Commercial protection People in the South are aware that the Iranian state is protective of the commercial interests and lives of its citizens; they note that 'they have better lives which supports and enhances the power of their propaganda - as does US policy', indicating the emotional resonance of US belligerence with civic and social protection of Iran. 'The Iranian state has bad characteristics but they protect the interests of their citizens - whereas the Azerbaijan state is so far from its own people'. Examples of ways in which the state promotes the interests of the citizens include provision of gas and electricity; in Iran businessmen can easily get loans from banks; in its policies with other countries, for instance, Iran has negotiated for its trucks to travel easily in Azerbaijan but not vice-versa; 'they don't let our trucks go there because they are protecting the rights of Iranian drivers. It means Iranian drivers get more work and we cannot earn money there, they don't pay for road maintenance and this irritates our drivers.'⁹⁷

Drugs

⁹² 'Iranians Looking for Safe Haven in Azerbaijan', *Eurasianet*, Rufat Abbasov and Mina Muradova 3/21/06

⁹³ Interview in Lenkoran

⁹⁴ Interviewee at the border

⁹⁵ Interview in Lenkoran

⁹⁶ Interview in Astara with a businessman and a teacher

⁹⁷ Interview in Astara with journalist/businessman; until 1998 had been 5times, since then cannot go because has worked for Freedom Radio (US).

Drug trafficking across the border from Iran has increased, and there has been a noticeable increase in availability and consumption of hard drugs. There are many cases of Azerbaijani police ‘sending Iranians back’ for distributing narcotics in Azerbaijan and most arrests of Azerbaijanis on drug related charges are for possession of drugs obtained from Iran. Across the Talysh mountains young men often risk their lives drug-trafficking; there is no other income and not much else to do in the way of innovative income-generation. Azerbaijanis find it very easy to begin involvement in the drug trade, they return and tell others where and how to get drugs in Iran.⁹⁸ Traders are often victims of the trade themselves – eg paid with drugs to create the dependence on trading or women relatively well paid to deliver items across the border without knowing they contain drugs, and sometimes are caught⁹⁹. There is a sense that there ‘seems to be Iranian political interest to send drugs to Azerbaijan’,¹⁰⁰ that the trafficking of drugs from Iran is organised and intended, especially as it was claimed that Iranian truck drivers (who have transit rights through Azerbaijan) are involved in trafficking through Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. It was mentioned that addicts are used to perform other jobs for financial or political interests from Iran. Consumption is noticeably increasing and mentioned in almost every interview; girls seem to be becoming addicts too, some cases at Lenkoran State University came to light.¹⁰¹ A very small percentage of consumption today is marijuana, and the entry of cocaine and heroin from Iran is very recent.¹⁰² The head of PFP in Zaqatala’s brother is a general of the Moscow police and told him that the largest number of drug addicts in Moscow is Talysh.

‘Propaganda’

The lack of media, information, mobility and transport, being cut-off, often without electricity were widely cited as the source of boredom and frustration.¹⁰³

Several examples indicate Iranian media directed towards Azerbaijan that are not anti-government (for instance, the Iranian sponsored ‘Voice of Islam’ newspaper included material promoting Heydar Aliyev) but seen to persuade people through whichever means resonate at the moment that their interests lie with Iran and to weaken loyalty to Azerbaijan as a ‘state’.¹⁰⁴ Some illustrations were given in interviews:

⁹⁸ Interview in Astar

⁹⁹ Women are also used as drug mules unknowingly eg told to go to Haji A in Iran, he says just trade these balloons and B will give you money in Azerbaijan. Iranian organisations focus on widows and they are also used. (Interview in Masalli).

¹⁰⁰ Interview with lawyer in Lenkoran and with journalist in Astar.

¹⁰¹ Interview in Astar. This is considered linked to the lack of occupation for young people (they mostly either leave the region or get into drugs) and frequent absence of heads of families to discipline who are working in Russia.

¹⁰² Turan news 03.04.06: “Azerbaijan is located along a drug transit route running from Afghanistan and Central Asia to Western Europe, and from Iran to Russia and Western Europe. Domestic consumption and cultivation of narcotics are low, but levels of use are increasing. The United States has funded counter narcotics assistance to Azerbaijan through the freedom Support Act since 2002. Azerbaijan is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention. Azerbaijan's main narcotics problem is the transit of drugs through its territory. Azerbaijan emerged as a narcotics transit route several years ago because of the disruption of the "Balkan Route" due to the wars in and among the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Domestic consumption continues to grow with the official GOAJ estimate of drug addicts reaching 18,000 persons. Unofficial figures are estimated at approximately 200,000 to 300,000, 75 percent of which are heroin addicts. Students make up a large share of total drug abusers at 30-35 percent. The majority of heroin use is in the Lenkoran District (64.6 percent), which borders Iran. Drug use among young women has been rising.

¹⁰³ An interviewee recounted that he saw two 17-18 year old girls wearing black hijabs and following a funeral procession; he was walking with them and so asked why they were going to the funeral, it was hardly the normal place for young girls. They answered that there was nothing else to do, that they went anywhere there was to go ‘for entertainment’. The interviewee protested that “this was not way for young people to engage and communicate in society!” This was partly blamed on the change in ExCom; apparently a former ExCom in 1992-3, Remur Aliyev had organised events for girls for finding talents and encouraging them, he organised a club of ‘funny and witty young people’ which held competitions and other similar activities.

¹⁰⁴ Interview in Astar

The very popular Iranian-sponsored TV channels in the Azerbaijani-Turkic language such as Sahar TV have recently increased. During the elections people could not talk to local TV but eg Sahar II advertised a telephone number for people to call and voice their opinions on a programme ‘Compass’ regarding corruption and the falsification of the elections and generally talk about their problems around that time. They encouraged the presentation of an opposition perspective and this contrasts with the control over the media in Azerbaijan and restrictions by government on expressions of opposition support.¹⁰⁵

Sahar is also broadcast in Talysh language with a programme about Azerbaijan 2/3 times a week as well as lots of information about religion. They take news from INS, Az TV and broadcast it in Talysh – it is very informational; they talk about the Talysh region, they make it interesting, insert into it subtle assumptions about Talysh to make them believe they have most cultural affinity to Iran.¹⁰⁶

Sahar II is also broadcast in English and in Russian. Until recently it showed only mullahs, but it has started attracting people’s interest with music, sport, movies etc. It gives examples of women in hijab using computers, driving cars and even a plane, knowing how to use guns – indicating that the hijab is not a restriction; this contrasts to Azerbaijan where women often do not receive education and are repressed by tradition - prohibitions and taboos and fears of being judged. It also shows America and Israel in a bad light, when there are attacks in Iraq or Afghanistan or if a mosque is destroyed they focus on different angles of this to sear it into people’s minds (described in the interview as ‘preparing people for jihad’).

Another instance of rhetoric in Iranian sources trying to disenchant the public with ‘the west’ was when general disappointment was felt with the US after the so-called ‘failed’ elections: they announced ‘if you had been with us you would not have been disappointed’. They bring up the issue of homosexuality in Europe: ‘you should be with us because of the bad effect of the west – westernisation takes the morality from society, demoralises and degrades people’.

Iranian media was said to seek out influential and educated people and try to use them; Sahar offered good salaries to the journalists of ‘Southern News’, ‘Jenub Heberleri’, the independent paper in Masalli, and invited the editor to be their journalist for the whole southern region. He recounted that Sahar TV had invited him to be interviewed several times recently during the election period. He refused because he felt that it would be naïve, he didn’t like the way Iran was using the TV to attract people and insidiously inserting its pro-Shia, pro-Iranian state propaganda and fomenting seditious feelings towards ‘democracy’ and ‘the west’ and their support of a government that suppressed people.

Social influence

It was often mentioned that influence over society is effective because it is presented in a way that resonates with local realities, rather than Baku. “Because of the culture they understand what’s going on here”¹⁰⁷ thus their use of media is very effective – and they relate to people’s conservativeness and social and economic worries.

¹⁰⁵ Interviews in Astara and Masalli

¹⁰⁶ Interview in Masalli

¹⁰⁷ Interview in Masalli

Targeting the poorest, most marginalised and vulnerable is seen by intelligentsia as ‘using’ the most vulnerable part for its propaganda ends: one example was providing TV programmes and printed books in Cyrillic for older people, as they could not read Latin.¹⁰⁸ An example was given by a journalist of the head of ExCom of Erkevan village (largest village in region) holding a public meeting, but no one wanted to talk to him because they thought it was pointless. However, if you go to certain houses – belonging to a ‘witch’/‘magician’ - there are big queues in front of them.¹⁰⁹ These ‘witches’ are mostly old women who dispense traditional cures, charms and advice and in doing so often act as confidantes and surrogate counsellors. It was asserted that they even act as informers to people in Iran on the personal lives of local people as a way to gain a hold over them. The pressures that women and especially girls are under (their life prospects tend to be seen only through marriage) drive them to ‘witches’ for personal problems as well as remedies, so they know all kinds of personal information, about vulnerable people and how people can be influenced (i.e. with money, bribery, blackmail).

There were many Iranian-sponsored organisations in the 1990s but most, such as Hizbollah, were closed down after the authorities became concerned about the nature of their activities.¹¹⁰ Charity organisations target the most vulnerable and interviewees suspected this being used to gain a stronghold in society, develop dependencies and allegiances. Women, especially widows who are targeted with charity, are particularly vulnerable to psychological means used to gain influence in their lives. The Khomeini Aid Committee (IMDAD) provides charity, especially to Azerbaijani refugees: given the refugees are some of the most vulnerable people in the country both materially and in terms of ideology, and given the emotive impact they have on society in fuelling Armenian-hatred nationalism, including Islam, this is a powerful social base in which to hold influence, gratitude and respect. It was mentioned that charities in Baku tend to be close to government; in the south businessmen try to help widows and orphanages and, for instance, distribute food during feasts but, according to interviewees, there is no other regular or sustained charity work in the south. International organisations such as SOROS help orphans develop professional and technical skills.

Religious influence and recent changes

The increasing religious influence from Iran was described as wishing to de-emphasise ‘Azerbaijani’ identity in favour of ‘Shia-Muslim’ and less nationalistic: “Iranian propaganda tries to say all culture of Azerbaijan is religious culture, tries to convert people not to follow the norms of the Azerbaijan state but in the style of Iranian state norms”; “As the Soviet Union pretended it was the centre of world communism, Iran pretends it’s the Centre of Islam.”¹¹¹

After independence Iran was described as being far more active in this region - one interviewee described it as ‘chaos’ with about 500 mosques in this region. Iranian mullahs opened new mosques and madrassas (for instance large ones in Jalalabad and Masalli), now only the one in Lenkoran remains. Eventually Rafik Aliyev’s committee started regulating religious institutions and it was mentioned that now Iranian-trained mullahs “hide their position more” and are more discreet about any differences in opinion they hold with Azerbaijan-trained mullahs.¹¹² Since then Iranian influence was observed

¹⁰⁸ Interview in Masalli

¹⁰⁹ The strong private-public divide and protection of privacy means that social problems are difficult to solve in public spaces eg teaching about drugs in schools or through local-municipalities. On other issues, people may talk to a neighbour but not to government.

¹¹⁰ Lawyer in Lenkoran

¹¹¹ Interview in Astara

¹¹² Interview in Astara

functioning through books “which do not state where they are published”; although these are controlled through customs they can be seen in the bazaar. Apart from local mullahs, connections and learning from pilgrimages to Meshad and Qom are likely to have a large effect on pilgrims and their extended families/communities.

Certain ongoing changes in social norms were ascribed to the religious influence of Iran. For instance, “dervishes from Iran come and chant *mersia* at weddings to replace ‘haram’ music; they also come for Muhhramliq (sacred month, Ashurra is 10th day)”. There has recently been an increase in so-called ‘sufi weddings’ without music but with *mersia* chanted instead (religion poetry), with women and men celebrating separately; a local wedding-group called ‘Ahlibeyt’ has started operating and it struck one Persian-language teacher that even ‘progressive’ students were choosing these. Another social change is in marriages: previously without being government registered a couple was not legally married and some people would not bother with the mullah’s service. Now it is the other way around, with some people not registering at the government agency, indicating that they consider the mullah’s authority to be higher and sufficient for a marriage to be socially acknowledged as legitimate. Moreover, some mullahs agree to marry girls according to Sharia law. Some marriages take place with underage girls aged 13 or 14.¹¹³ It was said that Iranian but not Azerbaijani mullahs would perform such a marriage.

Arguments and tensions between ‘Iranian’-trained and ‘Azerbaijani’-trained mullahs were noted by interviewees. A significant instance of Iranian religious authority was given regarding the date of Gurban Bayram: although the Azerbaijan President announced the holiday for the 10th and a mosque in Qom on the 11th; most people followed Iran’s version and celebrated it on the 11th.¹¹⁴

Contrasts made between state and religion

One effect of the proximity of the Iranian example of living Shia Islam seemed to be the creation of an appreciation of secular separation of church and state.

A dedicated Muslim but ‘intelligentsia’ interviewee stated that some mullahs who studied in Syria and Egypt are considered to have more ideological independence and to be ‘more secular’ in their understandings of Islam, giving the impression that they are more sincere and ‘Syrian’ religion may be more genuine than Iranian. These mullahs’ more ‘general’ perspective on Islam contrasts with the emphasis put on Iranian-style Shiite ways of practising.¹¹⁵ Mentioning that Sunnis ‘don’t share our values’, ‘don’t do ashurra’ etc “reminds people of when they used to say that the Sunnis have tails” which makes them often dismissed and derided. However, Shia-consciousness also increases divides because “people start looking differently at the next village,”¹¹⁶ even if not believed literally, such discrimination resonates ‘irrationally’ with historical and unconscious prejudices.¹¹⁷

Some interesting contrasts emerged in interviews in opinions of Iran and Azerbaijan state and religion:

¹¹³ Stated by lawyer and journalist in Masalli, and in Astara by local representative of Ministry for Culture, Sport and Youth

¹¹⁴ Interviews in Masalli

¹¹⁵ Interview in Astara

¹¹⁶ Interview in Astara

¹¹⁷ Interview in Lenkoran. The example was given of a ½ shia ½ sunni village of Pensar – no tension is felt, open intermarriage takes place. Before they would not intermarry – local Shia mullahs would say if you marry Suni then 7 generations go to hell and vice-versa, but during the soviet period this changed. Shia mullahs would say Sunnis had a tail. Sunnis sometimes would say that too but less so. Today any Shia-Sunni distinction made by Shia mullahs makes people remember this and disregard it.

People in Azerbaijan are afraid of Iranian restrictions on women. ¹¹⁸	People who go to Iran see women freer – they drive cars and take children to resorts on their own; here women don't drive cars and don't go anywhere without the head of the family; it's more conservative here and less genuine religion ¹¹⁹
We don't trust 'politicised' Islam, Islam used for political purposes and the manipulation by the state of people's belief in god ¹²⁰ Iran is not less corrupt, there are bribes there and our state at least has a programme to fight corruption ¹²¹	More Islam in politics would bring more morality and sense of social responsibility to the government (but Azerbaijani society not ready for Islamic government). ¹²² 'I learn a lot about Islam from Iran (but politicisation must stop)', ¹²³
People are more naturally and sincerely religious here – it is not enforced by authorities and not political	Religious students who experience Iran see the 'striving to be good for its own sake' aspect in religion in Iranian ¹²⁴ and compare it to hypocrisy here (behaving correctly because of fear of what neighbours will say; engaging in corruption etc).
Mullahs don't have a good reputation since soviet times [Iran 'mollahs' often butt of jokes and not well respected either in popular culture] and it is often through them that Iran propagates its agenda through them.	Nb. Mullahs given 'respect'/have influence as social authorities and have 'voice' eg in funeral processes. 'superstition' or obedience to form and social norms mean they still have influence: in public people would find it hard to disagree.
Iran suppresses the Azerbaijani population in Iran	Iran supplies TV broadcasting in Azerbaijani language that Azerbaijan state doesn't ¹²⁵
Iranians are fanatics – and they call for a consolidation of the Muslim people	Iran is a counter-balance to the influence of western morality and anti-Muslim US
	There are current fears at Iranian retribution towards Azerbaijan if the US attacks it from here and of refugees
People less superstitious and irrational in Azerbaijan than in Iran, eg in Iran at Ashurra they beat themselves til blood pours; head of Lenkoran madrassah Hajizade promotes blood-donation instead of this. ¹²⁶	In Azerbaijan people are more materialistic, 'colder', self-interested; in Iran there is sincerity and mutual societal support that stems from religion.

¹¹⁸ Interviews in Lenkoran with teacher and lawyer

¹¹⁹ Almost all interviewees in the south said that this was portrayed on Iranian TV.

¹²⁰ Teacher in Lenkoran, lawyer in Masalli, businessman in Astara.

¹²¹ Interview in Lenkoran madrassah

¹²² Former student in Qom, Iran with a history of spiritual seeking; previously was a Hare Krishna.

¹²³ Interview in Astara.

¹²⁴ Former student in Qom.

¹²⁵ Journalist in Masalli, interview in Lenkoran

¹²⁶ Lenkoran madrassah

Nature of Islam in the south

Religiousness is mostly deep-seated and un-self-conscious, people's daily lives involve relationship with religion and they take it for granted. This has a twofold effect: it both makes them more resilient to efforts of outsiders telling them how to live their religion and it makes them more susceptible to persuasion towards supposedly more 'authentic' versions of their religion. It also allows for a natural internal scepticism that comes from security in their religion; for instance, in colloquial usage, as in Iran, 'the mullah' does not necessarily enjoy a great reputation. While obeying rituals and engaging mullahs to perform rites, popularly mullahs are the subject of jokes and are sometimes even despised. In the latter attitude there may be an echo of the Soviet period when mullahs were often seen as 'spies' of the state.

Religiousness also increases the interest of the local population in religious philosophy and background. The local madrassah (which is both a school-level madrassah and has Baku Islamic University affiliated courses) has many students who are studying after school for additional degrees: while there are often fears that this madrassah is a haunt of the more fundamentalist or extreme in their beliefs. Polls and interviews¹²⁷ show that it tends to be those more curious about their culture and society, rather than seeking religion as a solution to broader issues, political or social. It is, after all, an academic institution rather than purely a mosque or religious group and is, moreover, officially run.

Religion, as elsewhere in the country, is considered protection against drugs, depravation such as homosexuality and parents want religion for their children. 'Being a Muslim' means being a good family supporter, employed, not drugs etc., praying: it is social stability and social support.

The relation between religion and traditions is mostly social and related to social conservatism; however a critique of religion in the region made several times by 'intelligentsia' interviewees is that its nature is conservatism and superstition rather than morality.¹²⁸

'Iran' tends to be conceptually homogenised into a combined religious and political entity, actor and source of influence. Although people interviewed were aware that these two aspects of Iran's influence can be judged separately, distinguishing the various sources of influence would be necessary to gauge the direct impact of Tehran policy on the region and those of unofficial, private religious organisations, individuals and trade or financial motivations. Iranian religious propaganda is feared by those who are concerned about the rise in religiousness in Azerbaijan. Combined with the strength of traditional norms in this region and the dearth of media, information and occupations, influences from Iran which enter this region are readily taken up, but also provoke reactions against its politicisation of religion and the 'irrationality' it encourages.

¹²⁷ Peace and Conflict Institute, research for the British Embassy

¹²⁸ Noted both by secularist 'intelligentsia' NGO leader and by a very devout practising Muslim and follower of his former teacher and spiritual guide in Iran, Ayatollah Mahammad Bagir Hikmetniya.

The Talysh

Population figures

The identification of people with their Talysh ethnicity was strongly suppressed under the Soviets, however, an apparently small cadre of so-called ‘nationalists’ seek to preserve and re-introduce the Talysh language and are demanding ‘cultural rights’.

The Talysh language is Indo-Persian; ‘Talysh people’ cover a region straddling the Iranian border. According to the Talysh Cultural Centre in Lenkoran, 60% of Masalli is Talysh, only two villages in Lenkoran are Turkic, Astara is entirely Talysh and in Lerik only two villages are ‘Turkic’. There are also several Talysh-speaking settlements in Baku and on the Absheron peninsula as in the 19th century they migrated for employment in the oil industry and fisheries (according to the Lenkoran Talysh Cultural Centre a third of Sumgait is also Talysh).

The ‘territory’ on which the Talysh are considered indigenous is described by one website as bounded by the river Viliash in the north, the river Sefidrud in the south and the west frontier, the Talysh mountains. They also state that the Talysh came under Turkish influence during the Middle Ages, but established a khanate (presumably headed by a Talysh) in the 17th century, with the capital first in Astara and later in Lenkoran territory that was later divided along the Araxes between Russia and Iran in the early 19th century. In 1918 Lenkoran was the centre of a Russian military base which was created separate from the rest of the country on the sensitive border with Iran. Those who speak of ‘separatism’ describe this as its first instance, as the first Russian-sponsored autonomous region.

In the early Soviet period there were Talysh-medium schools, a newspaper called ‘Red Talysh’, and several hundred Talysh language books published. By the end of the 1930s these schools closed and the ethnicity did not appear in official statistics; nationality was officially ‘Azerbaijani’. Representatives of the Talysh intelligentsia that were repressed (as were many through the Soviet Union) are remembered.¹²⁹ During Elchibey’s short presidency each ‘rayon’ had its own Talysh cultural centre which are now almost all dissolved.

Talysh Mugham Republic

On June 21, 1993, during the political wrangles between Ganja and Baku and when Armenia captured Nagorno-Karabakh, the ethnic Talysh Colonel Alikram Gumbatov led a group of officers to establish a break-away Talysh-Mugham republic of seven districts of south-east Azerbaijan that lasted until the 24th August when they were arrested. The ‘coup’, organised by Alikram Gumbatov, Rahim Gazim (then the Minister of Defence¹³⁰) and Surat Huseynov (gathered troops in Ganja and led an attempt to seize Baku) are considered to have been working for the Russian KGB in this period when Azerbaijani statehood was weak and Russia seeking to keep the Caucasus under its influence. This separatist state did not receive support from the local population.

Statistics

According to the census of 1926, there were 77,039 Talysh in Soviet Azerbaijan. 1959 and following censuses do not mention the Talysh who became officially Azerbaijanis and this has been the case ever since. Nevertheless, the Talysh language was

¹²⁹ For instance a prominent public figure, Akhmedzade, was banished to Siberia where he died in 1942. www.azdiaspora.org

¹³⁰ Is accused of lack of patriotism for creating regional ‘self-defence’ groups instead of unifying the army he created.

acknowledged as a mother tongue by 10,500 people in 1959. According to data from 1983, nearly 100,000 Talysh live in Iran.

Only in 1989 did the census register the Talysh ethnicity. 76,800 in Azerbaijan is the 1999 official population, undoubtedly an under-representation (given the problems with registering as Talysh) and some claim a current population of 500,000 living in the southern regions of Azerbaijan.¹³¹ (Talysh also inhabit the north-western areas of Iran – Gilan province and some of Ardebil).

The Talysh identity is an unknown variable because of the unavailability of reliable statistics, especially the periods of complete restraint in the Soviet period. Inter-marriage with ‘Turks’ also makes the issue more complex as does the decline of the Talysh language. The issue of a realistic representation of ethnic demography becomes pressing the longer it takes to resolve. Although currently more oppressed by poverty, unemployment, lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity, Talysh communities (and generally those in the south) have a higher birth rate, marry younger, and thus their proportion of Azerbaijani state will grow.¹³² These factors combine with historical fear of repression of assertions of ethnic-identity and fear of being associated or accused of colluding with Armenia if they voice any nationalism. Allowing this issue to continue unaddressed risks rising pressure to resolve it that could, in future, be further affected by other issues.

Issues affecting support for a Talysh identity

‘Talysh identity’ is fairly nebulous: during research it was virtually impossible to tell the level of support for any form of the Talysh movement for many reasons.

The attitude towards any separatist tendencies seems predominantly negative. Many interviewees said ‘I’m Talysh myself’ as a way to show that many Talysh do not vocally ‘claim’ their identity and do not support the cultural movements. Some pointed to others as ‘on the other side’, although when this was investigated it turned out to be false, indicating that people do not talk about the issue, working on assumptions and misunderstandings. It was mentioned that supporters would not be honest about their activism with those who are against Talysh propaganda.¹³³ Possibly the greatest practical problem with setting out to gauge the nature of Talysh identity today and the extent of its potential politicisation or possibility of bringing it to the public sphere, were these factors overcome, is the intense public-private divide.¹³⁴

Historical suppression of identity and inability to promulgate ‘culture’/language led to an internalised self-repression. As noted, there is a lingering fear from the brief period of separatism in 1993 of being associated with separatism and of association with Armenia or Russia. An instance of current repression was when a school in Lerik wanted to invite a poet from Lenkoran and have a party in his honour and talk to the children; the Head of ExCom told the headmaster that he would be dismissed if this event went ahead.

This suppression is a significant – but not the sole – factor contributing to a certain lack of interest by many in their ethnicity today and has left a lingering dislike of the ethnic-question due to the fear created in the past that feeds into the assertion of ‘tolerance’ and of lack of interest in ethnicity.

¹³¹ UNPO website: <http://www.unpo.org/member.php?arg=65>

¹³² If they become parents while still teenagers, grandparents (and aksakals) are in their 40s.

¹³³ Interviews in Lenkoran.

even internally within close-knit communities a secrecy pervades that is not simply a Soviet remnant but probably historically from surviving under different foreign powers.

The lack of interest is also due to pragmatism – that it is not professionally useful to be Talysh and because people are overburdened with other problems. The intelligentsia, for instance, are more interested in ‘democratisation’, ‘human rights’, the elections etc, than the Talysh issue and any available funds in society, such as charity by businessmen, would more likely go to charity projects such as refurbishing schools. Indignation is perhaps also mitigated by an acceptance that Talysh was not the only group marking to suffer from the series of changes in Soviet policies.

In society more generally there is a certain dislike of non-conformism that, combined with the strong public-private divide, stops it becoming a public-sphere issue. Part of this pragmatism is current pressure of expressions of Talysh-identity: the less daringly political though still forthright parts of Talysh movement are terrified of the police. The head of the bureau in Lenkoran is under heavy surveillance of National Security such that his wife does not allow him to work on the Talysh issue from home.

Other factors create an allegiance to the Azerbaijani state including a preference for being part of a secular republic than the theocratic Iran, and a professed shared Azerbaijani-national-bond of indignation over Nagorno-Karabakh.

All these factors contribute, to varying extents, to the vagueness in which the Talysh movement resides.

What constitutes the Talysh Cultural Movement?

Individuals who support the ‘movement’ range in the nature of their passion for the cause from Talysh-purists claiming a historicism that makes their culture the foundation for many others, for whom exploring the possibilities for aggrandising Talysh identity is an obsessive hobby. More moderate are those who would like to see poetry printed and the language¹³⁵ survive and those who are protective of the culture and traditions of the region. There are several factions to the Talysh movement – at least two in Lenkoran and another grouping in Moscow (Ilham Amemov from Astara and Ferhadin Abbasov created the ‘Talysh Party’ which changed into ‘Equality of Minorities of Azerbaijan’ and both are considered the pawns of Moscow). Another faction seems to have developed purely to participate in the Talysh conference in Yerevan.

The aims of the Lenkoranian Talysh-activists interviewed in February 2006 were rather taken up with the history and language of the Talysh (for instance the history of placenames and the literature written in the Talysh language). They publish booklets of poems for children, nursery-rhymes, the writings of local poets, and recently, for the Council of Europe conference, the Council’s statute of minority rights in Talysh. However, they cannot print in Lenkoran and are dependent on Baku which, given the lack of resources (mobility and financial), virtually prevents their activity. It is possible that some of these distinctions are superficial, or personal rather than ‘professional’; equally, that some of the assertions of differentiation subordinate to pragmatism.

A recent conference by the Council of Europe on Minority Rights brought the Talysh issue to the fore. The Azerbaijani Presidential Consultant on Minorities seems to have accused them of making agreements with the Armenians. This fails to recognise the factions involved and hence, through providing justification for their sense of threat and

¹³⁵ I was also informed in Baku that Talysh is a set of mutually-incomprehensible dialects, which is the reason why half the paper is published in Azerbaijani, the ‘Talysh’ section being the dialect of Lenkoran, not understandable in Masalli, Lerik and Jalilabad.

persecution, alienated the more innocently-motivated/culturally-focused activists, who voice strong opposition to the conference in Yerevan to the extent of refusing to hear about the actual event, preferring to stick to their own activities and staying away from something they considered 'dirty'.¹³⁶ The Lenkoran Talysh Cultural Centre – maintained purely by one individual (from whom many of his friends dissociate themselves in terms of his ideological fanaticism about Talysh culture) - publicly asserts allegiance to Baku by displaying the official pictures of Heydar and Ilham Aliyev.

Despite the lack of secessionism, the case of the Talysh cultural movement shows up certain failings in the state's ability to deal with ethnic minority issues and thus becomes a vehicle for criticism of the state onto which other issues can adhere, even if not the main motivating factor of dissatisfaction. Leaving the issue open to manipulation and the development of factions will exacerbate grievances and inevitably allow the problem of identity of those who speak the language as a mother tongue to grow.

¹³⁶ Lenkoran Talysh Cultural Centre

Ethnic identities in the North

The Northern areas of Azerbaijan are considered unstable due to their remoteness, the difficulty of surveillance in the mountain areas and relationships with Russia and Dagestan that are, by association, considered threatening.

The North Caucasus is characterised by the large number of ethnic groups which, with the break up of the Soviet Union, found a need to renegotiate identities in the context of new nationhood. In Azerbaijan, this created a question about Baku's ability to take for granted the natural allegiance of various non-Azeri ethnic groups which populate this region. My research focused on the emanation of Lezgin nationalist identity, as during early-independence a secessionist group 'Sadval', one of a variety of ethnic and territorial based movements which arose in the post-Soviet moment of the early 1990s, was formed on the basis of this; it is frequently brought up in conflict-assessments of the country. The issue must be seen in the perspective of the current reality that the basic Azerbaijani political and social infrastructure in the public sphere (eg linguistic dominance) is accepted and taken for granted and, moreover, seen as important and valuable for participation in society.

One factor is that the North Caucasus, for historical reasons, is predominantly Sunni (rather than Shia as is the majority two-thirds of Azerbaijan) and so tied by confession to Mahajkala, capital of Dagestan. This is often stated as a reason for the growth of 'Wahhabism' in North Azerbaijan. 'Wahhabis' in the North are considered a threat as linked to Chechnya and Dagestan (as well as due to general suspicion against them) and cases of police persecution arise, as covered in the previous chapter.

Various aspects of these close relations with Dagestan affect the relation of populations in the north to their official nation-state. What are referred to in Azerbaijan as 'the ethnicities' (*'etniki'*), are considered in Dagestan indigenous and usual, while Azerbaijani-Turks may be seen as visitors and foreigners, having their own nation state (yet 'Azeri' is one of the indigenous ethnic Dagestani groups). It was stated that ethnic minorities feel more at ease in Dagestan which contrasts with persecution by police who arrest them for bribes on their return, threatening them with being suspected of either smuggling, 'Wahhabism' or 'sadvalism' (see below) for having been in Dagestan.¹³⁷

Background

The Russian border

The Samur River divides Russia and Azerbaijan with the formal border enforced since 1991; the only crossing is at Samur in the Khachmaz region. Movement over the border was far freer until September 1994 when, reportedly, measures were taken to stop Islamic guerrillas and military supplies from the Middle East reaching Chechnya. In summer the mountains can be crossed overnight on horseback and border guards, reportedly, bribed. The boundary is enforced more strongly by Russia (their border guards and rules for permitting entry are more stringent) than Azerbaijan and far fewer cross from Dagestan to northern regions than from Azerbaijan. Villages next to the border are apparently the most cut-off; they watch only Russian TV, not Azerbaijani and it was stated by the local branch of the Helsinki Committee that they are not aware of Azerbaijani law or mechanisms for solving their problems.

Ethnicities

¹³⁷ NGO Resource Centre in Khachmaz. A similar statement was made concerning persecution of Avars after criminal events involving Avars.

There are a range of ethnicities in the north, including Avars, Sackhurs, Tats, Lezgins, Kumyks, Georgians, Udins and others. The 1999 census gives the population of Azerbaijan as 7,953,400 of which 91% are ethnic Azeris, with Lezgins officially at (2.2%) and Avars and other North Caucasians (0.6%).¹³⁸ Yet with openness towards intermarriage and the inclination to give 'Azerbaijani' as census data and even in passports (for 'ease' and because of Soviet-period suspicion of and restrictions on ethnic identities) these figures are contestable.¹³⁹ A single ethnicity can comprise of communities belonging to different confessions and with numerous dialects.

Population Figures

A report for the UNHCHR states that Lezgins make up about 75% of the total population in Qusar and Khachmaz regions and Greater Baku is 15% Lezgin.¹⁴⁰ Official statistics give the Lezgin population as 178,000, 2% of Azerbaijan's population, although this figure could be up to double. Arif Yunus suggests closer to 250,000-260,000 and some Lezgin nationalists claim more than 700,000 - an unlikely figure. It is generally acknowledged that many ethnic groups are underrepresented by their censuses, not entirely because of current discrimination (as often claimed) as a result of Soviet policies. "In the Soviet period, many Lezgins concealed their ethnicity in an attempt to benefit from educational and social programmes that they felt excluded from."¹⁴¹ The Lezgin population in Dagestan is officially 204,000.¹⁴²

Qusar town is approximately 90-5% Lezgin, according to the local NGO Helsinki Committee office. Qusar town holds a national military base of about 2000 people; those who perceive this community as distinct from the local one note its different ethnic-make-up as 'Azeri'¹⁴³ rather than Lezgin. In the villages of Qusar many houses are shut up and families gone to Russia; it was casually estimated that a third of local youth are in Russia.¹⁴⁴ The border village of Yalama has a large proportion of Lezgins as well as representatives of several diverse religious trends, striking for such a remote and small settlement.¹⁴⁵

Historical Context

Concepts of ethnic identity in the northern region are bound up in the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union's policies and techniques of ensuring control over the region, in particular the creation of Dagestan as an 'ethnic cauldron'¹⁴⁶ that could be controlled through the manipulation of deliberately fomented insecurities of the ethnic groups that made up its indigenous population, while making provision for the preservation of 'culture' and a particular kind of awareness of '*nationalnost*'.

In this regard, a local ethnographer and historian (and sometime commentator on Freedom Radio) recounted how Russian propaganda used to function and the mechanisms of techniques of destabilisation. The KGB used 'provocation groups' - including Russian (as opposed to Azerbaijani) Avars - and disseminated propaganda, as

¹³⁸ Matveeva 2003, *Minorities in the North Caucasus*, paper prepared for United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCHR), Sub-Commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, Working Group on Minorities. [http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/070076b3751631cfc1256d250047d982/\\$FILE/G0314151.pdf](http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/070076b3751631cfc1256d250047d982/$FILE/G0314151.pdf) accessed April 2006

¹³⁹ Following the adoption of the Constitution in 1995, nationality (or ethnicity) ceased to be officially recognised and indicated in passports.

¹⁴⁰ Matveeva 2003, *Minorities in the North Caucasus*

¹⁴¹ *Minorities at Risk*, Assessment of Lezgins, University of Maryland, www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=36531

¹⁴² Khachmaz NGO Resource Centre

¹⁴³ Lezgi journalist. (The military obviously represents the ethnic make-up of whole country rather than the region.)

¹⁴⁴ Lezgi journalist

¹⁴⁵ Some recounted by inhabitant of Yalama, some by interview in Qusar.

¹⁴⁶ Matveeva 2003, *Minorities in the North Caucasus*

well as using personal relations: “In 1989 when the Soviet Union was about to collapse, Ivanov sent peoples from Moscow and started creating an atmosphere in which ethnicities were ready to kill each other” he described. In this period he was reporting to Radio Liberty and the BBC about events there. An Avar relative of his came around and showed him leaflets, one of which read “you will be expelled from here so better leave here soon.” Thus living in this region created an understanding of the fragility of balance between ethnic and religious identities and interests.

Pro-Turkic nationalism in the period of uncertainty and insecurity after independence is recounted as having disconcerted the non-Azeri-Turkic ethnicities.¹⁴⁷ Since this period in the 1990s pan-Turkic rhetoric in Turkey’s relationship with Azerbaijan has been superseded by more pragmatic economic and business priorities, yet opinions formed in this period can still be heard in private life.

The perceived Lezgin threat

The Sadval (‘Unity’) movement started in 1989; in 1990 it began to press for unification of a Lezgin territory.¹⁴⁸ In later 1991 this was modified down to appeal for nation-state formation. In the words of one participant, “in 1991-2 new people began to be involved and the movement started to dabble with ‘terrorism’. After 1993 people who had previously been involved in Sadval began to have roles in government.”¹⁴⁹ The Azerbaijan government accused Sadval of being behind an explosion on the Baku metro in 1995 and banned it but since the late 1990s nothing has been reported in the mainstream media. This is probably largely out of fear of being associated with a declared terrorist organisation, combined with the growing reality of statehood that has dampened secessionist expressions and marginalised any hardline nationalists. An assessment of minority rights of Lezgins in Russia states that: “In 1998 Sadval held a congress in which the party split: the moderate wing’s demands include an open border between Dagestan and Azerbaijan, securing cultural rights for Lezgins in Azerbaijan, improving the ecological situation north of the Samur, and demands for an autonomous region for Lezgins within Dagestan; the radical wing demands a “Lezgistan” formed outside Dagestan but still within the Russian Federation, while maintaining a long-term goal of unification with the Lezgins of Azerbaijan. It appears that neither side is militant, with no reports of violence in recent years and both sides have abandoned demands for outright independence.” As reported by RFE quoting *Nezavisimaya gazeta* in January 1999, the radical wing continued to campaign for an independent Lezgin state while the moderate wing advocated an autonomous territory in Dagestan that would have the status of a separate federation subject and be a free economic zone. According to the article in RFE, “infighting between the two factions continued for several years, during which the movement apparently forfeited much of what popular support it once enjoyed.”¹⁵⁰ There appear to be moves to change it from the inside and co-opt those who were previously against the movement.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ One of the practical measures was that in 1992 Azerbaijani (a Turkic language) was made the state language and Cyrillic alphabet replaced with Latin. The Lezgin language continues to be written in Cyrillic. In the late 19th century Arabic script was used for writing Lezgin; the Bolsheviks changed it to Latin in the 20s then to Cyrillic in 1938. President Elchibey changed the Azerbaijani alphabet to Latin.

¹⁴⁸ The declaration of the independent Talysh-Mugam republic in 1993 also affected Sadval’s creation.

¹⁴⁹ Active participant in local affairs, Yelama and Khachmaz.

¹⁵⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2006/02/5-100206.asp> RFE/RL Report 10 February 2006, Volume 9, Number 5.

¹⁵¹ An example was one participant who was told her close relative could be awarded the titled of National Hero/’Shahid’ (martyr). Although the ‘bribe’ was not accepted, she says she now wonders whether this was wrong the decision because “today no one appreciates her.” The organisational factions and interests undoubtedly have complexities that obey not even family lines.

Another Lezgin movement, ‘Samur’ was formed that does not push for unification but for the development of mechanisms to improve cross-border relations. In March 1999 a Federal Lezgin National Cultural Autonomy was established and is led by a Lezgin from Azerbaijan. “The leader of that body, a Lezgin from Azerbaijan, was quoted... as affirming that “the broad mass of the Lezgin people will never support the separatists.”¹⁵² These cultural demands could be seen as the development of relatively neutral demands, internally in opposition to the separatist faction, and as compared with territorial claims of the early 1990s. These claims resulted in the stigmatisation of the Lezgin community and a certain reluctance to voice political opinion even by those politically active. Ethnicity is also way to particularise general discontent at corruption and poverty.

The current demands of the nationalist movement can be summed up as:

- border issues: easier crossing over the border, creation of a tax-free zone
- cultural issues: textbooks and educational curriculum in the Lezgin language.

Border issues

In 1992 Yeltsin as Russian President agreed with Azerbaijan that only ID was needed to cross the boundary. As part of its foreign policy on terrorism and illegal trade Russia is strengthening its boundaries further. Since March 2005, (after Beslan), Russia is enforcing a new regulation that a ‘green [international] passport’ is required for crossing to Russia¹⁵³ – which costs \$23. Ties to Russia make this a particular issue for inhabitants of this region, these include:

Livelihoods and trade The Russian border is difficult to cross,¹⁵⁴ people report sometimes waiting days in the neutral zone and customs tariffs are high. The higher customs tariffs Russia imposes means higher bribes to avoid them, restricting trade. According to the NGO in Khachmaz, this is seen locally as one of several reasons to develop better relations and cooperation with Moscow. Recently Azerbaijan has allowed goods to enter from the Russian side without customs or strict controls.

Most households survive from family members sending money from Russia; according to one journalist the majority of the working population is in Russia.

Initially the tension around the divide of the Samur was that it made sheep herding, the traditional occupation of the Lezgins in certain communities, a problem; in the early 1990s it was reported that flocks were decimated by the inability to migrate which severely damaged the livelihood strategies to which Lezgins were accustomed.¹⁵⁵ As more than a decade has passed, during interviews in the region this was not referred to as

¹⁵² RFE/RL Report 10 February 2006, Volume 9, Number 5. <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2006/02/5-100206.asp>

¹⁵³ “Before the republics gained independence in 1991, citizens travelled freely within the old Soviet Union by producing internal identification documents, and only needed an international or “foreign” passport for travel outside the country. ... Last year Russian president Vladimir Putin reaffirmed his commitment to visa-free travel between his country and Azerbaijan. But the requirement to hold foreign passports caught most people on both sides of the frontier by surprise. ... The seizure of a school in Beslan by Chechen extremists last September changed the situation dramatically. This border was virtually shut down, cutting relatives off from each other, and train tickets could only be obtained several weeks in advance. ... In January the situation was further complicated by Baku’s refusal to sell train tickets for destinations in neighbouring countries to those citizens who did not possess a foreign passport. ... Almost everyone who crosses here is forced to pay a 50-rouble (around two US dollars) tax for no apparent reason.” http://www.iwpr.net/?p=crs&s=f&o=239833&apc_state=henicrs2005

¹⁵⁴ Last year Putin visited Dagestan, paid a chance visit to the border and decided to build 72 new control posts, fully computerised, each with a prayer room.

¹⁵⁵ *Minorities at Risk*, assessment of Lezgins, University of Maryland

a significant issue. However, this may be more in evidence in summer, as in the winter the mountains are anyway impassable – just as certain forms of trade are impossible.

Family All ethnic groups have strong marriage, family ties and trade relations with Dagestan (in summer may be more frequent, in winter only those who perhaps cross for family reasons may also engage in petty trade on the side. From the West they have to go via Baku, whereas those closer to Samur in the East have more direct access).

Education and information Many Lezgins have studied in Moscow, Mahajkala and other Russian universities and many subsequently settled there.¹⁵⁶ The use of Russian language makes Russian media more accessed. Awareness of the nearness of and ties to Dagestan creates a general consciousness of Russia that makes events in Russia and Dagestan often of more interest than those in Baku. The pre-eminence of Russian language is evident in the North-East and strengthens affiliation to Russia.

Religion The north Caucasus is mostly Sunni and confessionally tied to Mahajkala, the Soviet centre for Sunni leadership and base of the Spiritual Direction for Caucasus (Pashazade in Baku was Shia counterpart). Several religious leaders in Russia receive pilgrims and students from Azerbaijan who often do not return. Religion is studied in Mahajkala and those who have studied abroad are not permitted to practice as religious leaders in Azerbaijan. This can upset those who have difficulties returning to their families in Azerbaijan due to inability to work and fear of police who sometimes harass those who return from Dagestan¹⁵⁷ (language teachers also find themselves unemployable on returning from education in Dagestan).¹⁵⁸

Many go on pilgrimage to pirs in Daghestan. Dagestan is considered ‘more religious’ - having more religious ‘freedom’ and with a greater number and size of mosques. The distinction between Dagestan and Russia is often blurred and the terms resonate together, thus despite not being an Islamic country, ‘Russia’ often has positive connotations concerning religion to northern Azerbaijanis. This is reinforced by Moscow’s diplomatic roles in the Middle East.

Given the mastership structure in Sufism these religious authorities in Mahajkala have a significant personal influence; they were frequently mentioned in relation to anything religious in the North-West.¹⁵⁹

Cultural issues

Cultural history is consciously preserved, not only of the kind encouraged in the Soviet period but recalling Lezgin lineage and heritage of pre-Soviet times and its relation to historical change in the region; for instance, self-avowed liberalism in their religious dogmatism is attributed to changes in religion from pagan, Zoroastrian, Christian and

¹⁵⁶ One Lezgin was brought to practising Islam by his two sons who live in Moscow. He is one of the Sadval founding members, and former head of Social Democratic Party / Lezgin Popular Democratic Party “Party of National Equality” which was never registered. HQ was in Baku.

¹⁵⁷ Mentioned by the Helsinki Committee branch in Qusar as well as by Avars in the North-West.

¹⁵⁸ This description regarding Ingiloyts provides analogy and context with another ethnic minority of the North Caucasus: “...many of the young end up studying in the Georgian sector and they will usually enter Georgian universities. This is mostly because of the language barrier with the Azeri national language. But after returning to Azerbaijan life becomes difficult for them to find a job. It is only natural that a diploma of Azerbaijani universities is preferred in the workplace and as a result those that graduated Georgian universities are mostly unemployed and have little prospect of finding a normal professional job.” *Melting Nation or "Cultural Nationalism"*, By Shahla Sultanova, <http://www.azerbaijantoday.az:8101/life1.html>

¹⁵⁹ Small-trader babushkas bring Sufi booklets to sell in Belakan, according to one local observer who has bought them from outside the mosque. A particularly devout woman interviewed in Zaqatala bazaar similarly referred to her devotion to a Said Effendi in Mahajkala.

finally to Muslim.¹⁶⁰ This came across in discussions as a possible factor that tempers passion about external influences on Lezgin identity - such as religion or a particular state - in favour of attachment to the territory on which they have lived. This can serve to strengthen sentiments concerning the environment and responsibility of ensuring stability of the region for those whose families' lives are invested there.

In Qusar a Lezgin National Drama Theatre was established in 1992 and there is a branch of the Baku Teachers' Training College for teaching Lezgin in primary schools that serves as the centre of scholarship on Lezgin language in Azerbaijan. Sadegat Kerimova, poet and editor-in-chief of the Lezgin-language newspaper Samur: 'fewer and fewer Lezgins can speak their own language. Lezgin history and culture has a strong oral tradition. The most popular songs and historical legends were never written down. They were carefully handed down to future generations. Today this has become a practically impossible task as there is no one in the current generation to take them and pass them on.'¹⁶¹ There is an IREX programme to produce Lezgi poetry online.¹⁶² IWPR reported in October 2005 that "The Lezgin language has become the main electoral issue for Kusari candidates. Broader issues such as unemployment or road construction appear to sway voters less than the preservation of their cultural heritage. Shamil Ahmedov's concerns about reduced representation in parliament are fuelled by the fact that his daughter has been unable to find a job after she trained as a teacher of the Lezgin language in Dagestan."

In Soviet Azerbaijan the language of instruction in primary schools was Lezgin, as it continues to be in Dagestan. Today the main language is Azerbaijani or Russian, "but in primary schools with many Lezgin pupils, two sessions a week are offered in the Lezgin language," noted researcher Anna Mateeva. In Qusar Lezgin is taught at school as a foreign language. Lezgins textbooks come from Russia and teachers complain they are not adapted for contemporary teaching.¹⁶³

The former ExCom closed a Lezgin television station run from Qusar. Reportedly, the reason given was that there was an American film about Armenia to be shown.¹⁶⁴ The new Head of ExCom promised to restore a TV channel and the organisers are in the process of setting up an NGO through which to register it. Those who are able to watch Lezgin-language TV from Dagestan. Lezgin-language newspapers exist in Baku and a local one in Qusar.

Other issues: representation of Lezgins

Representation is not one of the specific nationalist demands; however, it is discussed popularly. The move away from proportional representation results in there being one, rather than the previous two, Lezgin parliamentarians.¹⁶⁵ An article for IWPR during the election period considered the Lezgin community not to have engaged for a while in overt political activity due to the problems after the Sadval movement was active in the

¹⁶⁰ Interview in Qusar.

¹⁶¹ IWPR Article CRS No. 307, 06-Oct-05 'Lezgins Pessimistic About Election', www.iwpr.net/?p=crs&s=f&o=257648&apc_state=henicrs200510

¹⁶² Information from head of Azerbaijan Entrepreneur Organisation and local Helsinki Committee branch.

¹⁶³ Interview in Qusar.

¹⁶⁴ Interview in Qusar at Helsinki Committee branch office.

¹⁶⁵ Asya Manafova, YAP MP for Gusar was a prominent Lezgin figure – her brother was extorting money from local businessmen and harassing people to keep a monopoly and engage in various forms of corruption, which engendered enormous resentment and rising indignation – in response to her brother was imprisoned and Asya Manafova deposed, replaced by another Lezgin (information from Azeri from Quba); Gulmet Pirmetov, elected by direct vote from Qusar. Lezgins are said to be prominent in the Ministry of Defence.

1990s, and considered it significant that during these elections Lezgin candidates stood for opposition parties, fourteen Lezgin candidates altogether.¹⁶⁶

Several prominent Lezgins have been elected or appointed to high governmental positions.¹⁶⁷ From discussions with people in Khachmaz who are politically involved, it is less spoken of as an issue of Lezgins being kept 'in' or 'out' of government as much as of local government being run by individuals who are able to relate to the local population and have a sense of local responsibility.¹⁶⁸

In several interviews, the legitimacy of representation was questioned in terms of what was perceived as the 'appointing' of parliamentarians; specifically, as expressed by one independent candidate¹⁶⁹ who came third in the local elections, 'people don't know his grandfather but they know mine.' This was presented as less to do ethnicity but about having one's interest in the region rather than towards Baku or elsewhere in the country, or in one's private finances. Yet often this issue of representation was also expressed in terms of ethnicity as it forms a significant part of the consciousness of roots and ties to the location. For instance, in Khachmaz during the recent elections a so-called 'Nakhchevanian' was put in place (understood 'placed by the government'), which was seen as an imposition from the top and 'now the government has lost leverage in that region and any connection between the government and the people'.¹⁷⁰ A similar opinion was voiced in the Avar district of Djar-Belakan. Related to this is the fact that there are representatives in other regions who are Lezgin; their appointment to a parliamentary post is considered (by one independent candidate and by an NGO) to have been more due to 'corruptibility' and participation in the 'system' than reflecting any ethnic representation or ability to relate to the local population.

Conscription

Conscription to the army was another issue with demonstrations in Qusar 14-15 June 1994¹⁷¹; a Lezgin attitude towards Armenia, arguably one of the strongest nation-building identity bonds of Azerbaijanis, is relatively ambivalent.¹⁷² While it would be difficult to hear sincere opinions openly, one nationalistic Lezgin opined that Lezgins in general do not feel the national indignation at the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as the rest of the country – 'they do not see why the people living there should not have autonomy'. The opinion concerning 'autonomy', however, is likely to relate to Lezgin nationalist demands of the 1990s as much as to the specificities of the Nagorno-Karabakh case.

Soviet legacy and comparisons

General disappointment with Azerbaijan and post-Soviet developments combine with nostalgia for, enhanced by current ties to, 'Russia'. The general sense of demoralisation - for some, humiliation - since the Soviet period adds to the feeling that 'under the Russians' (i.e. Soviets.) life was better: factors that contribute include rising prostitution, discrepancies in salaries, creation of new elite, exclusivity and nepotism and trade restriction. The possibility, formerly, to complain to and receive a response from Moscow and a certain threat over officials coming from Moscow to behave, perform and

¹⁶⁶ Abdulhalim Ahmedov, Azadlig bloc; Nizami Sultanov Adalat, Shakir Magomedov PDP.

¹⁶⁷ eg General Safar Abiyev, appointed Minister of Defence in 1993 (previously was also a Lezgin post) and Asya Manafova chairperson of the Parliament's commission on natural resources (conservation of the environment and judicious use of natural resources is a topic that resonates with them today, as described above).

¹⁶⁸ Interview with local activist

¹⁶⁹ Interview in Khachmaz

¹⁷⁰ Khachmaz NGO and Reyhan Aslanova

¹⁷¹ UNHCR Background paper on Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Azerbaijan

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ/openssl.htm?tbl=RSDCOI&id=3ae6a6490&page=publ>

¹⁷² Interview with Lezgin journalist in Qusar.

deliver kept rein on corruption. After privatisation people did not know how to deal with their land and so felt it had been more productive under Soviet organisation. Interviewees opined that there is much more 'stealing' (corruption) here than in Russia – here one can see it openly and everyone knows.¹⁷³

Russia/Armenia analysis

It is frequently stated by the media and many local observers that both Armenia and Russia have interests in maintaining Sadval: the organisation is labelled as a 'game' used by Russia, Azerbaijan and internal Dagestani politics.¹⁷⁴ It is suggested by local political players that Azerbaijan needs to pay more attention to this game and its mechanics and, indeed, to "play it as 'Russia' would".

There are various ways of expressing this: one politically active professor of Culture Studies stated "some Russian organisations invite me to tell me how Azerbaijan is treating us" using this incitement of antipathy to lure her allegiance to them; she would not give further details.¹⁷⁵ By one of the founders of a Lezgin Democratic Party it was noted that 'Lezgins have been pro-Russian (like the Armenians) since the 18th century.' He emphasised that there is no particular leader for the Lezgins who might head a movement and that only outside organisations and people can channel their interests through Lezgins; Sadval have no particular source of financial support other than through external interests.¹⁷⁶

Use of this for personal, political and financial ends

Political actors with leverage threatening Baku with allegiance to the 'other side' as a way to enhance their demands appear in statements such as "Corruption here gives wrong message and tends people towards neighbouring countries".¹⁷⁷ This is a useful rhetorical tool, similarly "Lezgins feel Russia will protect them from Big Brother Azerbaijan's punishment - like the Talysh feel about Iran".¹⁷⁸

In 2000 it was reported that Wahhabi and Sadval organisations were cooperating: this argument was used to show the involvement of Armenia and Russia in manipulating various groupings in the north of the country to pressurise Baku when necessary. In interviews, concern for terrorism was frequently voiced, both 'Wahhabi', 'Dagestani' and as accusations against other Lezgin nationalist factions.

The connection of local politics was also linked to this: "One still can remember last year's statement by the former chairwoman of Yalama administrative and territorial unit that the head of Khachmas District, Rafik NiftAliyev, patronizes Sadval."¹⁷⁹ She seems to have been implying that his interest in doing so would have been to maintain his position in authority by 'negotiating' between them and Baku.

¹⁷³ An economic emigrant from Lenkoran said that there is as much if not more corruption in Russia as here, however here it's a functioning system whereas in Russia one cannot rely on obtaining what one bribes for and is ethnically discriminated against. It should be noted that even of those working in Russia face xenophobia, unpredictable corruption and 'krisha' systems weighted against them and tough conditions for earning, they send back money and, since their existence there and Russian money gives them authority back home, they are unlikely to speak unfavourably about Russia.

¹⁷⁴ Eg 'Zerkalo' article 'Sadval - anatomy of Lezgin separatism'. Baku, 05 Feb 2000, access through BBC monitoring available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200002/0017.html>

¹⁷⁵ Minister for National Security enquired into the case when a local activist had written to Chirac, Putin and Bush complaining about 460 hectares taken from Lezgin people because they were on a boundary with Russia.

¹⁷⁶ Such as the SCO or certain border and customs issues. Lezgin journalist. Pro-Russian can be seen in less strong anti-Russian feelings regarding 1990 events and Armenia; and sympathy for Russian arguments to influence the Azerbaijan state eg for cooperation in the Caspian or other issues on which Russia is pressing Baku

¹⁷⁷ Interview with conflictologist in Khachmaz

¹⁷⁸ Interview with conflictologist in Khachmaz

¹⁷⁹ Source: 'Zerkalo', Baku, in Russian 05 Feb 00 pp14,15 : BBC Monitoring TCU 070200/** sh/la

Political opposition and Sadval both tried getting leaders of smaller groups on their side, putting them in a powerful negotiating position. It was even reported that ethnic and religious affiliations were brought together: “Sadval and Wahhabis had an agreement that they’d work together in Dagestan. Some Wahhabis in Khachmaz go every week to Dagestan and bring video tapes and CDs in Lezgi and Avar languages. From Dagestan they try to influence Lezgi people through religious ways.”¹⁸⁰

As such, Sadval is also seen as a ‘threat’ which Baku can refer to as justification for restrictions. The police can use this fact to persecute, harass and extort bribes.

Is Sadval a threat?

Statehood, whether Russian, Azerbaijani or autonomous, is not a burning issue in the daily lives of the vast majority of the population. The overwhelming majority of people neither want conflict, nor to be abused. At the same time, interviewees presented a distinct pro-Russian sentiment that at key moments could be stoked by anti-Azerbaijani feeling and subtly introduced through the range of structural and emotive issues with unpredictable results. Combined with the many cultural factors that tie inhabitants of this region to Russia, this is unpredictable.

A Lezgin state is fairly universally considered as unlikely: people are aware that most Caucasus secessionist conflicts are intractable, undesirable to live through and unlikely to be won. Moreover, other conflicts in the region – Chechnya in particular - act as a strong disincentive to supporting or even sympathising with secessionist movements. Nevertheless, the complexity of rhetoric and factions indicates that ‘nationality’/ ‘ethnicity’ discourses need to be dealt with.

¹⁸⁰ Interview in Khachmaz

Avars

Avar nationalism as presented by the founder of the Sheykh Shamil society in Djar village, almost entirely Avar, takes the form of ethno-cultural pride, with a certain sense of superiority; there are also historical ‘independence’ claims for the Djar-Belakan region or at least special consideration, and quotas for ministerial and governmental representation due to this historical status. There is no explicit movement or demands. The sensitivity of the Avars, however, is indicated by the way in which their religious practice is related with a sense of restriction and secrecy.¹⁸¹ This seems partly a memory of use of ‘sufism’ to unite the north Caucasus against authority by various Sufi orders from the beginning of their subjugation to the Russian Empire and through the Soviet period. Avars also prefer to write their language in Cyrillic. Privately, as many in the country, they are reported as complaining in strong terms about the ‘Azeri [sic] government’.¹⁸²

Avar identity came to attention with the explosion of a bust of Sheykh Shamil in Djar village (a few kilometres from Zaqatala) which was attributed in the media to various spheres including criminal gangs and the Russian state. Another of the analyses in circulation was that ideological nationalists seeking support exploded the statue, in order to make the Avars feel under threat, stoke their indignation and create solidarity; a well-established Soviet tactic. Not just politicians but members of ethnic groups themselves utilise the ‘ethnic issue’ for their own ends, for instance in business, as is evident in accounts of the formation of the new elite formed by post-independence privatisation and nation-building projects. The example was given of the Avar head of the Forestry Commission threatening that if a land dispute was not resolved in his favour he would “cause all the Avars to rise up” which he announced at a public meeting in the ExCom.¹⁸³ Most examples encountered during research illustrated the plurality of experiences of ethnic identity and complications which arise in attempting a positivistic categorisation of political identity. This illustrates the way in which people’s consciousness of using ethnic and religious identity to justify an argument or to analyse news and politics can complicate analyses.

Ambiguities in Avar nationalism

The plurality of identities which make up nationalist identities and influences discourses in the public sphere were illustrated by one interlocutor who combined the roles of school teacher of Azerbaijani with that of founder of the Sheykh Shamil Society (implying Avar nationalism). He was eloquent on the notion that Djar-village was the centre of a khanate that had historical independence. Another indication of his Avar nationalism and influence in the Djar community was his activity helping Avars change the nationality written in their passports to Avar if wrongly registered (eg as Russian or Azeri). However, this proud Avar was also an Azerbaijani-literature and language teacher and poet in Azerbaijani.

¹⁸¹ Avars are popularly considered to be stronger in their religion than other ethnicities in the region. Most are Sufi Muslims under various Naqshbandi Sufi masters. As described by a local ethnographer, the core of the Naqshbandi order develops as a masonic sect with unknown/secret members who belong to a tight-knit group: they are considered more ‘fanatical’ than ‘extremist’, in the sense that the core of their belief and practice is mystical and rigorous. Membership of a group involves intense devotion and being ultimately answerable to a leader. Sufi orders are headed by ‘masters’ who mediate the experience with God. Renunciation of the ego is a vital part of this mysticism and the suffering of humiliation and worldly wrong, denial of senses, considered an intrinsic part of the process of becoming a better Muslim, to be rewarded in the long run – ie. in paradise. Obeisance to the master of the order is considered an aspect of self-renunciation as is the experience of humiliation by others.

¹⁸² Reported by a French language scholar from studying one of the minority Avar languages.

¹⁸³ Interview in Zaqatala with Head of Hazelnut industry.

This teacher proudly asserted (even enjoying the irony) that Turkish-Azeri friends asked him advice on language while regretting that his Avar had suffered as a result of his prowess in Azerbaijani and regretting that there were not possibilities to improve his Avar. Moreover, his involvement and support of an opposition candidate and use of the rhetoric of Azadliq bloc during the elections indicated an overall interest in, and engagement with, Azerbaijani public life. In describing political attitudes towards 'ethnicities' of the north, he was also eager to relate how the candidate (who was not actually Avar) had been 'stigmatised' by "people in Baku" with the epithet 'Avar' simply because he was from this region. This was mentioned as a way to explain the prejudices and manipulation of stereotypes in Azerbaijani politics.

This indicates the nebulous nature of connections between nationalism and political events on the basis of which conclusions, assumptions are often drawn or asserted, stigmas created.

Haji Magomedov and criminal gangs

In 2001 and summer 2002 there were various attacks on police and security officials by armed gangs in which several people were killed. In August 2003 there were kidnappings and hostage demands, including of wealthy people and ministers' wives, and robbing of a petrol station. The Ministry of Internal Affairs reinforced their representatives and police. The Avar community are stigmatised by these events which involved gangs, several of which were from Djar village. In the village itself it was emphasised that the youths who were caught up with the gangs of Haji Magomedov were criminals as one would find in any community – and hardly ideologically driven. Local theories concerning these events include 'Russia', local criminality and power-lords and state control mechanisms.

Various media sources and interviews present sometimes convoluted analyses in which various actors are assigned responsibility. From these descriptions, four basic levels that seem to be most commonly cited can be discerned from accounts of these events, but the connections and commonality in motives are ambiguous:

1 - Simple local gang rivalry; youths who are unemployed, not well educated, criminals as one would find in any community, who enjoy a sense of being adventurers, hiding in the mountains and descending on the town to rob the rich. Several of the gang members were Avars from Djar and this has increased the feelings of suspicion against them in the region. A community leader in Djar emphasised that these gang members were hardly ideologically driven and stressed that the events did not take with 'community' awareness of who was involved.¹⁸⁴ Secrecy between and within families and individuals was described, such that the close relations of one of the youths involved never knew he had become caught up in gangs.

2 - It was stated that "those few who were ideologically driven may have spent time in Dagestan", suggesting the possibility that ethnicity may be a means of radicalising a few individuals: their ability to co-opt, spur, motivate or even to create such petty-criminal gangs, or the combination of ideological individuals in gangs with criminal proclivities is suggested. In other analyses that make this connection, it was stated that such ideological sentiment could be manipulated for political ends by those wishing to threaten Baku's

¹⁸⁴ One pillar of Djar-Avar society with close associations with political figures in the broader, Azerbaijani, public sphere, was nevertheless related through his wife to one of the young gang members of Haji Magomedov and entirely unaware of the young boy's involvement – which he recounted as a way to describe the secrecy even within families and the possibility for 'black sheep' to appear anywhere, regardless of ethnicity or statehood.

central hold on power, whether state actors or those with interest in maintaining local power or a combination of both for control of the unofficial economy.

3 - Individuals or families involved in unofficial/grey economy, motivated by financial interests or to gain/maintain political influence, came up repeatedly.¹⁸⁵ It was stated that “the people arrested are not the organisers, they are free and people know who they are (including authorities ie Baku)” and, as an analogy, “the revolution was done by ideologists but its beneficiaries were pragmatics”.¹⁸⁶ Haji Magomedov is alleged to have had links to individuals within local authorities¹⁸⁷ who had an interest in maintaining their positions through boasting to Baku that these are dangerous regions which only they are capable of controlling. These analyses from local commentators could be influenced by bad relations or result from suffering unfavourable policies including behaviour such as abuse of power of particular individuals in local authorities.¹⁸⁸

4 - Those acting in the strategic interests of external political actors are commonly implicated. Partly because of the ethnic implications of the explosion of Sheikh Shamil’s statue, and because many of the gang members were arrested in Dagestan, an interpretation of Russian/Armenian¹⁸⁹ state-level involvement is typically cited. This resonated with those who had previously experienced propaganda through leafleting that encouraged a sense of insecurity and persecution of ethnic groups and destabilised the region. Although this seems to have been a phenomenon in the early 1990s it is unclear whether the historical establishment of these techniques make them likely to be used by others contemporaneously.¹⁹⁰

General picture

Understanding perceptions of these events involves negotiating a variety of local, media and state analyses and a level of conjecture. It is also difficult to gauge the circularity of reporting and assumptions, given the small number of people with both personal interest in maintaining a role in public life and a sense of responsibility to local people.

For several interviewees, this region is considered by Baku as so ethnic-rife that, for instance, an ethnic-Azeri opposition candidate was described in Baku as Avar, simply because he came from Belakan, possibly also to cast doubt upon his Azerbaijani-nationalism.¹⁹¹ To some extent ethnicity can even be considered an epiphenomenon, vaunted either for a specific purpose, agenda or due to assumptions and stereotypes.

¹⁸⁵ The connection of the oppression of the Belakan ExCom (recently replaced) with Haji Magomedov (but also connected to Naqshbandi sheikh in Dagestan and people from Moscow – (possibility the representative of minorities) - who often came to his house) was observed in several interviews in Zaqatala, Belakan, Khachmaz and Qusar, suggesting that ExComs often have an interest in keeping political control and interests in the grey economy has a significant impact.

¹⁸⁶ Interviews in Belakan and with a Sheki journalist from who spent those three years in Belakan.

¹⁸⁷ eg Rafik NiftAliyev, also accused of links to ‘Sadval’, other former Heads of ExComs and members of parliament in Belakan, Zaqatala and Qusar. Haji Magomedov and these political representatives are also linked anecdotally to Lushkov, the mayor of Moscow and to certain Naqshbandi religious leaders and politicians in Dagestan.

¹⁸⁸ For local people, the actions of local authority, police and other officials, no matter how ‘unofficial’ the actions, represent Baku or at least reflect on central authority: thus ‘*police repression of Wahhabis stokes anti-government and, by association, anti-state feelings and ‘causes radicalisation’*’. Equally, extortion of local businesses by members of local authority, as former MP Asya Manafova’s brother of local businesses in Gusar; the former ExCom of Zaqatala using local resources, land etc for personal gain and exploiting the privatisation programmes to appropriate local resources (cf. conflicts over forestry department) etc.

¹⁸⁹ *EurasiaNet* articles 2003.

¹⁹⁰ Whether by states or by local authorities or local power-lords such as Haji Magomedov. The possibilities are indicated by the reported relationship between the Gusar ExCom and Haji Magomedov, for instance, or reports of extortion, confiscation of land and selling of land and environmental resources for personal gain, combined with threatening Baku that the region was out of control due to ethnic rivalries and extremist religious groupings.

¹⁹¹ Teacher, Djar village.

This seems to reflect that it is largely through the memory and framework created in the Soviet period that political opinions are formed and expressed: consciousness of the geopolitical situation has engendered a particularly acute and nuanced outlook regarding political and criminal events, restrictions and political representation. It should also be borne in mind that analyses are also present in this region that consider Iran the 'manipulator', for instance as an exporter of religious groups which create social tensions, including, somewhat incongruously, 'Wahhabis'.

Political manoeuvring seems to play a significant role in the expression of people's identities and allegiances. The extent to which this is simply rhetoric for the public sphere, and there is in fact a basic underlying unwillingness to destabilise the region through taking real action, must vary and depend on various factors. Living in this region has created a consciousness of potential for destabilisation; one of the major grievances and emotive factors is, indeed, any attempt to manipulate them and this has developed into a certain defensiveness and assertion of 'tolerance' and harmony.¹⁹² Yet, persecution, harassment, ill-conceived policies and actions of private activities and economic interests stoke sensitivities and can provoke reactions.

¹⁹² This 'culture of conspiracy' accompanies the intense divided between public and private, the secrecy even between close friends on certain issues [eg. about Naqshbandi Sufism; between gang youths and their relations].

Concluding remarks

Since the dissolution of the USSR, Azerbaijan has seen significant change and the introduction of new stimuli. Geopolitical and local pressures have coloured contemporary understandings of religion and ethnicity. The transition period thus far has been characterised by an attempt to enforce control over the various strains of religion and ethnic identity by the government. Yet communities have strong belief in local understandings and their own ways of living. These relate both to local cultural history as well as to imported ideas, driven sometimes by a search for authenticity, self-definition and legitimation. State institutions are often perceived as arbitrary and functioning on self-interest and self-protection.

The principal movements and agitators are not overtly violent or even promoting aggressive mobilisation. Ethnic and religious groups are diverse and none can be considered to draw an overwhelming proportion of the population. A strong desire for a secular state in which religion is allocated to the private sphere, preoccupation with material needs and the powerful disincentive created by surrounding conflicts can act as mitigating factors to the plethora of sensitivities and social groupings in Azerbaijan.

Yet, as noted, Islam is frequently politically devised, influenced and voiced. Differences in understandings of Islam, external and internal assumptions and terminology create complex sets of potential sensitivities and insecurities. The ease and speed with which these can be aggravated, and the dialectic process through which outrage can be provoked, suggests this is not a static situation and deserves being treated with attention. Although diverse, religious and ethnic identities are often found in intense pockets. Presentations in the public sphere often hide differences that are expressed and experienced only privately. Ethnic minority and religious issues additionally serve as vehicles for expressing other grievances and manifesting criticism of the state. Leaving the issue open to manipulation and the development of factions will exacerbate grievances and allow the problem to grow and variegate.

During research the impression was created that official perceptions of the level of terrorist threat from religious or ethnic groups was dependent upon political expediency. Equally, the groups often employ the rhetoric to ensure their influence and positions. Rather than an indigenous source of potentially violent expression, social movements based on religious or ethnic identity appear to be susceptible to the culture/nature of communication between government and community. This is a dialectical process, the views coming from various levels of government authority having an impact on the reactions of the population and of belligerent groups. Those with other interests are able to exploit this.

Understanding this environment and the dynamic processes through which expressions of identity are changing is critical from several perspectives, to:

- develop ways to protect and deal with certain groups, provide structures for them to fulfil certain aspects of their identities (language, representation of local issues etc.) that makes them feel part of the state
- prevent the unnecessary provocation of outrage and marginalisation of certain groups and their seeking of solutions or allegiances outside the state model, including in the grey-economy.
- develop security policy that is based upon reality and not assumptions and is therefore more effective.
- prevent the rhetoric of 'human rights' being co-opted and associated with political positions which colour people's perceptions of the democratisation agenda.