Azerbaijan and “Tolerant Muslims”
By Jennifer Solveig Wistrand, Washington, D.C.

Abstract
A great majority of the Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke over the course of the twenty-two months of ethnographic research1 I conducted in Azerbaijan perceived themselves to be, and publicly presented themselves as, religiously tolerant individuals, or “tolerant Muslims”. In this article, I suggest that there are two main reasons motivating Azerbaijanis to publicly express a religiously tolerant position. One is Azerbaijanis’ understanding of their country as a place that has, historically, been home to, and tolerant of, many different religious traditions. Another—and, I believe, a more important reason—is Azerbaijan’s proximity to Iran. Azerbaijanis know that Iran is perceived by many Western countries, whose recognition and respect they seek, to be a “fundamentalist” Muslim society— in other words, not committed to religious tolerance—and, thus, undesirable as a political ally and an economic partner. This knowledge is motivating Azerbaijanis to pursue a number of different strategies that are intended to help them project an image of themselves as “tolerant Muslims” so that they can position themselves to enter into political alliances and economic partnerships with Western powers and, in so doing, gain recognition and respect on the international stage.

Practicing Tolerance
One evening in April 2007, while I was eating dinner and switching back and forth between several different television channels, I caught a segment of AZTV’s (an Azerbaijani-language television channel’s) evening news program. It was airing an address President İlham Əliyev had made earlier in the day for Azerbaijan’s Christian community, wishing them a happy Easter weekend. While the President was speaking, a reporter commented for the television viewing audience that Azerbaijan is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country that respects different religious beliefs and practices. Since AZTV is an ostensibly pro-government channel, I was tempted to dismiss the President’s message as a purely political gesture toward a Christian minority in a country with an overwhelmingly Muslim population. There was, undoubtedly, a political element in the Easter weekend address. However, there was also, I believe, an element of sincerity. The President’s comments, and the reporter’s remarks, resonate with a great majority of the Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke who perceive themselves to be, and publicly present themselves as, religiously tolerant individuals, or “tolerant Muslims”.

For example, shortly after I arrived for a several-month research trip in an agricultural community in central Azerbaijan, Reyhan, the elder daughter of the Azerbaijani family who hosted me, and I spent an afternoon at her aunt’s home. After Reyhan, her extended family and I had watched a video of Reyhan’s cousin’s recent engagement party, Reyhan, her cousin, aunt, uncle, a couple of their neighbors and I had tea and chatted. While everyone was discussing Ramadan, which was going to begin in about one week, Reyhan’s uncle brought up his brother who, he mentioned to me, was a Christian. Surprised, I asked him how long his brother had been a Christian. He said he had converted to Christianity several years ago while living and working in Russia and Kazakhstan. One day, he explained, his brother picked up a Christian Bible and started to read it. Before he had finished it, he realized he was meant to be a Christian rather than a Muslim, so he converted. I asked Reyhan’s uncle if there were any other Christians in the area. He said there were around fifteen individuals with whom his brother got together in someone’s home on a regular basis to hold a religious service. Since it had been apparent from the discussion about Ramadan that Reyhan’s uncle was a Muslim, I asked him how he felt about his brother’s conversion to Christianity. He smiled and said: “We are free. We can practice any religion we want.” No one who was having tea disagreed with this statement.

Strategic Reasons for Tolerance
In this article I suggest that there are two main reasons motivating Azerbaijanis to publicly express a religiously tolerant position. One is Azerbaijanis’ understanding of their country as a place that has, historically, been home to, and tolerant of, many different religious traditions. Another—and, I believe, a more important reason—is Azerbaijan’s proximity to Iran. Azerbaijanis know that Iran is perceived by many Western countries, whose recognition and respect they seek, to be a “fundamentalist” Muslim society— in other words not committed to religious tolerance—and, thus, undesirable as a political ally and an economic partner. This knowledge is motivating Azerbaijanis to pursue a number of different strategies that are intended to help them project an image of themselves as “tolerant Muslims” so that they can position themselves...

---

1 The fieldwork upon which this article is based was conducted in Azerbaijan in Azerbaijani, Russian and English over the course of twenty-two months between January 2006 and April 2008; individuals’ real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.
to enter into political alliances and economic partnerships with Western powers and, in so doing, gain recognition and respect on the international stage.

As noted above, one of the factors that appears to be motivating Azerbaijanis to publicly present themselves as “tolerant Muslims” is history. The present-day territory of Azerbaijan has been inhabited by Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Caucasian Albanian Christians, Russian Orthodox Christians, Molokans, (European) Jews and “Mountain Jews”, among others. A large majority of the present-day population identifies, in some way, with Islam. (Reliable statistics are difficult to obtain. According to the CIA’s The World Factbook, 93.4% of the population is Muslim.) However, there are still active communities of, for example, the descendants of the Caucasian Albanian Christians, who are called Udis, living in Azerbaijan. Additionally, there are many visible reminders of the various religious traditions that have been or are presently practiced in the area. According to Azerbaijani scholar Anar Gafarov: “Given its long and complex history and its tradition of tolerance, Azerbaijan has on its territory places of worship for many different faiths past and present, including the ancient Albanian-Christian temples, Russian Orthodox Churches, and Jewish synagogues … At present, there are approximately 1,300 mosques in Azerbaijan, of which 220 have been built since 1991, some 40 churches, five synagogues, and other temples, and more than 500 other places of worship for those of other faiths.” (Gafarov 2010) In other words, a large number of Azerbaijanis are visually reminded on a daily basis of the different religious traditions that have co-existed for a long time within their country.

A second factor that seems to be even more strongly motivating Azerbaijanis to publicly convey a sincere expression of religious tolerance is the existence of two larger and more powerful neighbors with overwhelmingly Muslim populations—Turkey and Iran—and the desire to see Azerbaijan’s influence in political and economic arenas increase significantly. Many of the Azerbaijanis with whom I interacted spoke highly of the Turks, and their political and economic systems, and expressed an interest in seeing Azerbaijan develop similar institutions. At the same time, many of Azerbaijan’s school classrooms display a poster with side-by-side pictures of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (the founder of the modern Republic of Turkey) and Heydar Əliyev (the late president of Azerbaijan and father of the current president) that says “We are two states, One nation!” (Bizi dövle, Bir millətlik! in Azerbaijani), underscoring the cultural affinity between the two peoples. Most Azerbaijani homes that have televisions receive at least one Turkish-language channel. One can buy several different Turkish-language newspapers on the street in Baku. There are a fair number of Turks living and working in a variety of sectors in Baku. In sum, Turkey’s people and their social, political and economic practices are, by and large, welcome in Azerbaijan. Turkey is not generally perceived to be an impediment, let alone a threat, to Azerbaijan’s acceptance into strategic political and economic circles. The same cannot be said of Iran.

Since achieving independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan has seen the rise of a number of ostensibly apolitical organizations that are perceived, by some, to be disseminating fundamentalist Islamic messages, as well as several Islamic political parties. For example, the Imam Khomeini Assistance Committee is a humanitarian organization that has been operating in Azerbaijan since 1993. As of 2001, it had 415 branch offices throughout the country, most of which were focused on serving the refugee population (meaning, for the most part, internally displaced peoples from the conflict over Karabakh). While the Committee has provided relief aid for society’s more vulnerable members, however, it is also purported to have supplied them with various types of religious material from Iran. (Balci 2008; Valiyev 2005)

In a related vein, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA) emerged in 1991 in Nardaran, a town about thirty minutes by car north of Baku. It registered with the government the following year, as all political parties must do, and soon thereafter it was believed to have around 50,000 members, primarily among the less-urban and less-educated. In the mid-1990s, however, the IPA’s leader was arrested and imprisoned, and the Party’s registration was suspended. The IPA was purported to have been receiving significant financial assistance and spiritual guidance from Iran. In addition to advocating for an Islamic state, its members espoused anti-Semitic and anti-American rhetoric. The IPA has since resumed its activities, albeit illegally, since its registration has never been reinstated. In 2002, several of its members were implicated in an anti-government uprising that took place in Nardaran and which left one person dead and twenty, if not more, people injured. In 2008, the leader of the Party announced his desire to see the Israeli Embassy in Baku closed. (Bakir and Fuller 2007; Day.Az December 13, 2008 http://news.day.az/politics/140269.html; Swietochowski 2002; Valiyev 2005)

Seeking Ties with the West
In an effort to maintain a culture of religious tolerance that is consistent with Azerbaijanis’ perceptions of their history and, more importantly, I contend, conducive to cultivating political alliances and economic partnerships with the West, Azerbaijanis are pursuing a number of different strategies at both the national and the local level. A comprehensive examination of these strategies is beyond the scope of this article. However, two deserve some atten-
tion since they are intended to help distinguish, and distance, “religiously tolerant Azerbaijanis” from “fundamentalist Iranians” (not to mention “Wahhabs”).

Novruz is a highly anticipated holiday in Azerbaijan, and it was a recurrent topic of conversation throughout my research. Its prominence as a holiday is a recent phenomenon, though. During Soviet times, New Year (January 1) was the most important holiday in Azerbaijan. Novruz was barely acknowledged, certainly not publicly. Indeed, less than one generation ago, most Novruz celebrations took place within the home and were limited to preparing special pastries (goğal, şəkərbura and pəhləvə) which represent the sun, moon and stars, respectively) and exchanging gifts of new clothing. Now, twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Novruz is an extravagant—and highly publicized—country-wide affair. For example, the government erects hand-painted placards throughout Baku a couple of days in advance of a number of national holidays, such as October 18, which recognizes Azerbaijan’s independence from the Soviet Union. It does the same for Novruz. However, in addition, the television channels air a number of pre-Novruz programs. According to everyone with whom I spoke about the holiday, each year’s pre-Novruz broadcasts begin a little earlier, and are a little more elaborate, than the previous year’s. The radio stations also promote Novruz. Ten days prior to the holiday in 2008, while I was in a taxi on my way to interview a middle-aged Azerbaijani woman who lived in central Baku, I heard a several-minute-long Novruz “infomercial” in which an academic-sounding voice explained that the four Tuesdays that precede the holiday recognize the four main, or essential, elements of the earth.

The culmination of weeks of preparation for, and anticipatory celebrations of, Novruz is a multi-day national holiday that includes “trick-or-treating”, cockfighting and jumping over bonfires, among other activities. In 2007 President İlham Əliyev declared the holiday to begin on Friday, March 16 and to end on Monday, March 26, which was the most important holiday in Azerbaijan. Novruz was barely acknowledged, certainly not publicly. Indeed, less than one generation ago, most Novruz celebrations took place within the home and were limited to preparing special pastries (goğal, şəkərbura and pəhləvə) which represent the sun, moon and stars, respectively) and exchanging gifts of new clothing. Now, twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Novruz is an extravagant—and highly publicized—country-wide affair. For example, the government erects hand-painted placards throughout Baku a couple of days in advance of a number of national holidays, such as October 18, which recognizes Azerbaijan’s independence from the Soviet Union. It does the same for Novruz. However, in addition, the television channels air a number of pre-Novruz programs. According to everyone with whom I spoke about the holiday, each year’s pre-Novruz broadcasts begin a little earlier, and are a little more elaborate, than the previous year’s. The radio stations also promote Novruz. Ten days prior to the holiday in 2008, while I was in a taxi on my way to interview a government official, I heard a several-minute-long Novruz “infomercial” in which an academic-sounding voice explained that the four Tuesdays that precede the holiday recognize the four main, or essential, elements of the earth.

At the same time that Azerbaijanis are projecting a national—and, it is hoped, an international—image of themselves as “tolerant Muslims”, they are also monitoring the messages that their and their family members’, neighbors’ and friends’ day-to-day behaviors send. Over the course of my research, I conducted a number of formal and informal interviews with Azerbaijanis about their religious beliefs and practices. In general, those who self-identified, at least culturally, as Muslims and had been largely, if not exclusively, raised in the post-Soviet period were more interested in becoming “practicing Muslims” than were those individuals’ parents or grandparents, who were more interested in preserving the image of “religiously tolerant Azerbaijanis” distinct from “fundamentalist Iranians” (and “Wahhabs”). Obviously the two images—practicing Muslim and religiously tolerant individual—are not inherently incompatible with one another. However, as my final ethnographic example shows, some, and I would argue many, Azerbaijanis are concerned that the image of the practicing Azerbaijan Muslim does not necessarily signal a religiously tolerant individual and might harm, albeit unintentionally, Azerbaijan’s ability to develop strategic alliances and partnerships with Europe and North America and, ultimately, gain the international recognition and respect that Azerbaijanis desire.

One evening in late 2007 I had a conversation with a middle-aged Azerbaijani woman who lived in central Baku about her university-aged daughter’s, Pəri’s, developing interest in Islam. First, this woman listed a number of her relatives’ and co-workers’ children who had begun to pray (five times per day), underscoring the fact that few of their parents did so. I asked this woman why she and other members of her generation had not, like their children, begun to pray. She explained that during the Soviet period they were taught that there is no God and, consequently, they were not allowed to pray. Now, however, children are taught that there is a God and, she emphasized, they are encouraged to pray. This woman went on to say, as many of the other middle-aged Azerbaijanis with whom I spoke had said, that religious freedom was one of the greatest freedoms they had acquired in the post-Soviet period. That said, she cautioned, everyone should be free to practice—or not practice—his or her religion as he or she desires.

Pəri knew that her mother had some reservations about her resolve to become a “true” (xal, in Azerbaijani) Muslim, one who practices Islam in the “correct” (düz, in Azerbaijani) way. Indeed, several months after I interviewed Pəri’s mother, I interviewed Pəri, and her answers to my questions immediately touched upon those tensions. I asked Pəri when and from whom, or from what, she had learned about Islam. She said that she had learned about Islam. She said that she had learned about Islam.
simultaneously modern and religious. I asked Pəri to elaborate. She explained that this girl was stylish and well-traveled as well as educated about Islam, and she wanted to be like her. “She was not like those girls in Iran who are just religious,” Pəri stressed. While the number of young Azerbaijanis who are interested in becoming practicing Muslims is not insignificant, the desire to be, and to be perceived as, “tolerant Muslims” is still, I believe, paramount in the minds of most Azerbaijanis, including young religious Azerbaijanis, a great majority of whom, like their elders, desire to see Azerbaijan enter into political alliances and economic partnership with, and gain recognition and respect on the international stage from, Western powers—who publicly profess a commitment to religious tolerance.

About the Author
Jennifer Solveig Wistrand is currently a visiting Research Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars’ Kennan Institute in Washington, DC. She holds a PhD in anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis. Her research interests are Islam, migration, refugees and IDPs, education and gender in the former Soviet Muslim-majority republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Recommended Reading

OPINION POLL

Religious Tolerance

Figure 1: Do Any Of Your Close Friends Belong To A Religion Different From Yours? (%)

Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC

Figure 2: It Is Possible To Belong To Azerbaijani Society And Not Be Muslim? (%)

Source: 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey, CRRC