

Oppositional Islam in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This article discusses how the Abu Bakr and Juma mosque communities came to be seen as representatives of “Oppositional Islam”. The communities were labeled oppositional by authorities who feared a politicized religion and were provoked by their unwillingness to accept renewed state control of religion. At the same time, the communities saw themselves as oppositional in that they rejected the way religion was practiced and interpreted in state-controlled mosques and among the general public in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Pressure on the mosque communities brought their members closer together and reinforced this polarization.

Mosque Communities as Oppositional Troublemakers

Immediately after independence, interest in religion boomed in Azerbaijan, as in most other former Soviet states. Initially this “religious boom” brought about fewer restrictions on religion, but gradually the authorities reintroduced state supervision of religious communities. The state drew a distinction between official and unofficial Islam, with official Islam under state control and unofficial Islam remaining outside of it. Muslim communities questioning this line of action were deemed troublemakers and became targets of state intervention. Recent incidents, such as rallies against the informal hijab ban in public schools and arrests of members of the infamous Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, illustrate that there are lingering tensions between state and religion, but the most acute stage of this conflict appeared in the mid-2000s, between the state and the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities.

The major trouble for the Shi’ite Juma mosque community started when its members did not renew their state registration and questioned the authority of the Caucasus Muslim Board. When the mosque’s popular Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, was arrested during a political demonstration in 2003, the conflict escalated. After his release, he continued to loudly criticize the government for the lack of human and political rights in the country. In the summer of 2004, the Juma community was evicted from its mosque, which is located within the Old Town, a designated national heritage site that therefore allegedly belongs to the state. After the eviction, the mosque was closed for renovation and, since it reopened, the community has not been allowed to return. The Imam, in his own words, promotes a democratic approach to Islamic practice and worship, which made this congregation especially popular among young educated Azerbaijanis. That the Imam received his religious education in the Islamic republic of Iran, a country with which Azerbaijan’s relations are rather complicated, made him and his community suspect in the eyes of some. Others, especially during and just after

his prison term in 2004, see the Imam as something of a martyr, suffering for his work for human and religious rights. Despite obstructions, the members of the Juma community has not in any way discontinued their activities. They also took a step towards politics when they publicly joined forces with the democratic opposition block, Azadliq, during the 2005 parliamentary elections.

The other community is focused around the Abu Bakr mosque. Not only do its members belong to the Sunni branch of Islam in a Shi’ite-dominated country, they also follow a conservative strain of Islam prescribing a traditional lifestyle, unusual for post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Their lifestyle made community members suspect in the eyes of outsiders and the mosque has often been pictured as a hotbed of Muslim radicalism and extremism, sponsored by “foreign radicals”. In 2001, the Military Court for Grave Crimes sentenced a number of Azerbaijanis who planned to fight in Chechnya. All of these individuals were allegedly recruited in the Abu Bakr mosque and the Imam was summoned to testify. During another trial concerning the pan-Islamic Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement, prosecutors showed that its members had visited the Abu Bakr mosque. Thanks to the trials, the mosque received a lot of negative public attention, with critics labeling it “Wahhabi,” a synonym for extremist. Efforts to close the mosque as a result of these events proved unsuccessful, but restrictions were put on the community’s activities. The charges might have been dismissed, but the relationship between the community and the state was severely damaged. As a result, following the initial controversy, the community decided to “play by the rules”, doing its best to comply with the various demands raised by the authorities — registering with the Caucasus Muslim Board and in other ways co-operating with secular and religious officials when needed. This acquiescence improved relations with the authorities and secured a more accommodating atmosphere for the Imam and community members, at least in Baku. Things took a turn for the worse, however, when a grenade attack on the mosque in 2008, allegedly carried out by militant Dagestanis,

left two worshippers dead and many wounded, including the Imam. The event shocked the community and, to make matters worse, the mosque was closed for investigations and has yet to reopen (as of 2012). A ban on praying outside mosques, which was put in place after the explosions, has caused further frustration.

The Prevailing Notion of Official Islam

One of the keys to understanding the controversies described above is the idea, common among policy makers in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, that the combination of religion and politics, for a secular society, is something dangerous that might have catastrophic effects if left unchecked. State policy dictates a strict division between religion and politics, prohibiting “religious men” from taking part in any form of political activity. This rule is what put the Imam of the Juma mosque in prison and it has also been the justification for the authorities’ repeated targeting of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, whose leaders have spent most of the 1990s and 2000s locked up. This division appears ambiguous for various reasons. Not only is it difficult to grasp who exactly should be considered a “religious man”, but state controls on religion — via censorship, educational monopoly and registration of religious communities — makes it obvious that the authorities already are involved in the sphere of religious activities.

Even though this attitude is not unique to the former Soviet sphere, it was perhaps easier and more natural for post-Soviet states to turn this idea into a cornerstone of national policy. Many Soviet politicians continued on as leaders of the independent states, bringing with them their atheist ideals and communist experience. In the same spirit, the independent states kept in place many of the official and unofficial government organs dealing with religion to ensure that all religious activity took place under state control. The first such instance is the Caucasian Muslim Board to which all Islamic communities in Azerbaijan, just as during Soviet times, are subordinated. The role of this organization used to be to liaise with secular authorities and control all religious activity from above. In cases where the authorities suspected that the movement in question harbored political ambitions, they were labeled “oppositional” and dealt with accordingly. Today it is supposed to be an independent body, detached from the state, but its credibility in this respect has been seriously damaged due to political statements by the head of the Board, *Sheikh-ül-Islam*, in support of the Aliyev regime. Another means for keeping religious activity in line is the registration of all religious communities with the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA). This committee, and the cumbersome registration process itself, have faced strong

criticism from religious rights organizations. As mentioned above, the rejection of these efforts to re-institutionalize religion was initially the reason for the conflict between the Juma and Abu Bakr communities and the secular and religious authorities. Even though the Abu Bakr imam soon decided he was better off cooperating with the establishment, aspects of his congregation’s activities continued to make them contrarians in the eyes of the authorities.

The notion that state-controlled religion is apolitical and good, while independent religion is political and oppositional lives on, not only in formal institutions, but in attitudes and practices in society as well. In the Soviet Union, representatives of “official Islam” strived to establish a new identity that contained both Muslim and Soviet pieces. According to this method, certain Muslim rituals and celebrations became synonymous with ethnic traditions and de-Islamicized. The anti-religious propaganda was successful in the sense that outspoken religiousness outside this framework was viewed with skepticism as a symbol of an “old-fashioned” society. Being “Muslim”, official-Islam style, was a national identifier rather than an expression of religious belief.

This religious skepticism prevails and public displays of faith are frowned upon. One example is parents forbidding their daughters to wear the veil (a symbol of a backward society). Similarly the issue of the *hijab* and its place in secular society is an issue at the national level. In 2005 when their old Soviet identity cards expired, many women in Azerbaijan were affected by a law banning women from wearing head scarfs in photographs on all identity documents, including driver’s licenses and internal passports. While the authorities insist the rule was adopted to protect the secular nature of Azerbaijan, the right to wear the hijab as an expression of religious freedom has been advocated by many NGOs and human rights groups and is also one of the issues prioritized by the Juma community. In 2010 veiling again became a conflictual matter when an informal hijab ban in public schools brought on protests by religious activists. While there is no law against having a beard, this religious expression has likewise been seen as a symbol for something that is not commonly accepted in society and therefore should be opposed. Especially members of the Abu Bakr community report incidents of forceful beard shaving and physical abuse by certain local authorities objecting to this public display of faith.

A New Approach to Religion

Yet, being “oppositional” is not only a label put on these movements by others. The Abu Bakr, as well as the Juma, mosque community members describe themselves in terms of opposing old religious structures by rejecting

the way religion is practiced and interpreted in state-controlled mosques and among the general public. While in the Soviet system it was unthinkable that the young, enlightened and modern generations would, or would want to, pray, these communities, to the contrary, cater to the young and educated. As a result of the Soviet atheist policy, Muslim education in Azerbaijan suffered from a severe lack of educated teachers and instructional material and many citizens became totally ignorant of Islam. For example, according to official Soviet rhetoric, the polarization between Shi'as and Sunnis, present in many other Muslim countries, did not exist in Azerbaijan, an assertions that appears to be related to a lack of knowledge of what constitutes the differences between these two branches of Islam.

Attitudes are slowly changing as people, especially the young, are becoming more knowledgeable about Islam through, for example, religious studies abroad. Members of the Abu Bakr and Juma mosques describe "other" state-controlled mosques as uninformed, outdated, corrupt and dirty and "their" mosques, in contrast, as a place where religion is practiced correctly and high quality religious education can be achieved. The absence of payments for various religious rituals in the Abu Bakr and Juma mosques is another topic emphasized by community members. It is clear they were fed up with corruption as a permanent part of life in Azerbaijan. In this respect, the mosque became a "safe haven" for them. Similarly, those having difficulties at home defending their religious expression saw the mosque as a "free space", an alternative home, as well as a place to meet new friends.

The oppositional features of these communities were, however, never the main point on the agenda. Instead, the new approach to Islam was mainly seen as something positive among youth seeking alternative ways to understand their situation and express themselves. Still, it was

perceived as a threat by the authorities fearful of the mobilizational power of new movements. The interaction with state actors led the mosque communities in totally different directions. While the Abu Bakr mosque community became more introverted, making sure not to provoke the authorities further, the Juma Imam and his community tried to establish themselves in the political arena. Still, in neither case did formal restrictions or informal constraints, such as negative publicity or harassment, dampen the goings-on inside the community. Rather it seems that being singled out by others as "oppositional" has served to reinforce the movements' collective identity, as well as make them more visible and more popular.

Conclusion

The most intense phase of the conflict between the authorities and mosques is over. The mosque communities are continuing their activities albeit in other facilities as they do not have access to their respective mosques. The authorities are essentially letting them "carry on". It also appears the Soviet way of "being Muslim" is increasingly being replaced in Azerbaijan by a new informed way of believing as many more people are "finding religion". At the same time, the state control of religion has intensified. A number of mosques have been closed. As in the past, the publication, import, sale and dissemination of religious literature or items are strictly regulated by the SCRA, but the punishment for disobedience is now more severely enforced and can result in up to two years in prison. These measures are continuously justified by a fear of "foreign radicals", i.e. the ideas of politicized, oppositional religion disturbing the stability of Azerbaijan. The somewhat sad conclusion is that with old attitudes and practices prevailing among those in power, it becomes increasingly difficult for the people on the ground to simultaneously be a good Muslim and a good citizen.

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Further Reading

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