

# **AZERBAIJAN: INDEPENDENT ISLAM AND THE STATE**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. THE SECULAR TRADITION.....	1
B. TERRORISM CONVICTIONS .....	2
<b>II. FOREIGN INFLUENCES .....</b>	<b>5</b>
A. MIDDLE EAST .....	5
B. DAGESTAN AND CHECHNYA .....	6
C. IRAN .....	7
D. TURKEY .....	8
<b>III. INDEPENDENT ISLAMIC GROUPS .....</b>	<b>10</b>
A. SALAFI GROUPS .....	10
1. Baku.....	10
2. North Azerbaijan.....	10
3. The <i>Khawarij</i> .....	11
B. INDEPENDENT SHIITES .....	12
1. Independent communities.....	12
2. Other independent trends .....	14
3. The Nardaran case .....	14
<b>IV. THE STATE REACTION .....</b>	<b>16</b>
A. STATE CONTROL OF RELIGION.....	16
1. Legal framework.....	16
2. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations.....	17
3. The reform of the Caucasus Board of Muslims .....	17
B. STATE REPRESSION .....	19
<b>V. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A. MAP OF AZERBAIJAN .....	21

## AZERBAIJAN: INDEPENDENT ISLAM AND THE STATE

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Claims that major terrorist acts were foiled in Azerbaijan at the end of 2007 have prompted discussion about the extent to which Islamic extremism is a genuine threat in the oil-rich land. Azerbaijan is a secular state with an overwhelmingly moderate (predominantly Shiite) Muslim population. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union and independence in 1991, independent Sunni and Shiite groups have emerged which refuse the spiritual authority of the official clergy. Some are political, but very few, if any, appear intent on employing violence to overthrow the state. The government, however, expresses concern about these “independents”, and tries to control them, including through repression. Its strategy risks radicalising peaceful activists and believers.

After 1991 Azerbaijan became a target of religious movements vying for influence. Missionaries and charities from Iran, the Middle East and Turkey, as well as individuals from Russia’s north Caucasus came to proselytise. Some reportedly were linked with militant Islamist networks, including al-Qaeda. Many were expelled, and only Turkish groups now continue to work relatively unhindered by the state.

Largely inspired and funded by foreign groups, independent religious communities have grown much more rapidly than official mosques. Salafism, largely unheard of in Azerbaijan twenty years ago, has gained a foothold mainly in Baku and the north. Groups of Shiites who refuse to recognise the state-promoted spiritual leadership have also become more numerous, but only a few could be considered political and even fewer militant. Nevertheless, the government is suspicious of all independent expressions of Islam. It tries to control such groups through the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRO) and the Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM) and generally represses manifestations of independence rapidly. Peaceful followers of groups outside CBM’s control are by their own accounts regularly harassed and detained.

The government justifies its tough approach by citing a need to combat extremism and prevent terrorism, and it claims significant success. In the early 1990s,

the state was relatively weak, and some extremist groups were apparently active. As the state has strengthened, it says it has become much more proficient at arresting and sentencing extremists. Whether those so treated actually had operational links with extremists is doubted by independent observers.

The government has employed excessive means to control peaceful religious activities and trials of alleged extremists are often held behind closed doors using evidence collected under duress. Independent religious communities as well as members of the political opposition say the authorities exaggerate the Islamic terrorist threat to gain the West’s sympathy and tolerance for its undemocratic proclivities. The government’s tactics at least run the danger of pushing otherwise peaceful groups towards jihad; radicalisation, if not yet overt violence, is becoming visible among a minority of the Salafi community. The challenge is to stop any groups bent on violence, while ensuring freedom of religion.

The government has taken some steps to strengthen cooperation with believers by improving religious education for young clerics and reforming CBM. It is trying to cultivate a home-grown Islam, based on local values and traditions, to halt encroachment of foreign beliefs, but it should extend its efforts to include non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and independent communities in a broad debate on state and religion. Most importantly, it needs to devise a method of dealing with independent groups that does not criminalise them and is more respectful of religious rights.

**Baku/Tbilisi/Brussels, 25 March 2008**

## AZERBAIJAN: INDEPENDENT ISLAM AND THE STATE

### I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, a crackdown on Islamist groups has raised fears that radical Islam is on the rise in Azerbaijan. The authorities have arrested activists allegedly planning violent acts. Media have reported terrorist threats to foreign entities. The reality on the ground, however, is complex.

Azerbaijan, as neighbour to Muslim powers that seek to export their cultural models (Iran, Turkey and Middle East countries), received a steady stream of missionaries and charity organisations until 2001. Under their influence, both Shia and Sunni groups emerged. The authorities have struggled with how to deal with these groups, which they perceive as challenging the secular state.

Several Muslim communities in Azerbaijan, especially Salafis, do not recognise the spiritual authority of the official clergy, the Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM). To the government's concern, their mosques attract growing numbers of believers. The overwhelming majority of Salafis are pious Muslims with a purist approach to Islam and no political aspirations. Only a small minority openly voice opposition to the government, but the state's strong control of religious activities through CBM and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRO) pushes some independent groups to dissidence.<sup>1</sup> Especially some small, independent Shiite communities have become active in advocating for religious freedom and have developed contacts with the secular opposition.

This report concentrates on the relationship between the independent Muslim communities and the Azerbaijani

state in an effort to determine whether the former present a security risk and what measures might best be adopted by the latter to guard against jihadist extremism.

### A. THE SECULAR TRADITION

Shiite Islam became the dominant faith on the territory of present day Azerbaijan after the sixteenth century, while northern Azerbaijan, where the Persian influence was less important, remained Sunni. Azeris living in Azerbaijan and Iran have been mostly cut off from each other since the 1828 Turkmenchay Treaty between the Russian and Persian empires.<sup>2</sup> Those in Azerbaijan were influenced by the Tsarist presence, which imposed Russification and gradually marginalised Islam,<sup>3</sup> then by Soviet rule, which further secularised society. The majority of mosques were closed and religious repression was harsh, particularly during the 1930s. In the 1940s Moscow established new institutions to manage Muslims and their religious activities.<sup>4</sup> Some believers in the Caucasus and Central Asia managed to develop underground practices which remained outside state control,<sup>5</sup> but by independence in 1991, most Azeris had lost their attachment to organised religion.

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<sup>2</sup> The treaty recognised Russian sovereignty over the Yerevan and Nakhchivan khanates and the remainder of the Talysh khanate and established the Arax River as the boundary between the empires.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Bayram Balci, director, French Institute for Central Asian Studies, Tashkent, August 2007; and S. Cornell, "The politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan", Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Washington and Uppsala, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Three new Boards of Muslims – Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Tashkent), the North Caucasus (Makhachkala) and South Caucasus (Baku) – were added in 1943 to the "Central Direction of the Muslims of the European part of the USSR", which became the Russian Board of Muslims.

<sup>5</sup> This report refers to unofficial Islam as "independent". Others use the term "unofficial Islam" – see J. Glenn, *The Soviet Legacy in Central Asia* (Copenhagen, 1999), p. 91 – or "parallel Islam" – see A. Bennigsen, *Les musulmans oubliés* (Paris, 1981) and T. Swietochowski, "Azerbaijan: the Hidden Faces of Islam", *World Policy Journal*, vol. 19, no. 3 (fall 2002), p. 73.

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<sup>1</sup> The Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM) and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO) are state institutions which oversee and control religious life. CBM, created in Soviet times and led by its chair Allahshukur Pashazade (since 1980), appoints clerics, monitors sermons and organises pilgrimages to Mecca. The SCWRO, established in 2001, oversees the registration and activities of religious communities. For more on these organisations, see Section IV.A below.

Today Azerbaijan is a secular state with a Muslim population of which only a minority adheres to Islam's basic tenets.<sup>6</sup> In a 2006 survey, 7.2 per cent of respondents answered positively the question: "are you a deep believer, know and carry out all the religious prescriptions"; 49.7 per cent said they "believe in religion, but do not know about religious issues and do not follow religious prescriptions".<sup>7</sup> Muslim identity tends to be based on culture and ethnicity rather than on religion. Some two thirds are Shia, one third Sunni. The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and relations between different faiths are generally good.<sup>8</sup> Almost all religious groups are peaceful, cooperate closely with the government and recognise the spiritual authority of the state-sponsored CBM. Only a small number can be considered "independent" – striving for autonomy from the government – and even fewer militant.

Though mosque attendance has not visibly increased, the population in northern and southern regions has always been traditionally more pious than the rest of the country. In Baku, most mosques have few visitors (the exceptions are discussed below).<sup>9</sup> However, young people in the capital and other urban centres are embracing religion more fervently than their elders as part of a search for identity.<sup>10</sup> This is often nurtured in high schools or university. Religion offers this urban elite "purity" and "freedom" but is not an expression of political disenchantment.<sup>11</sup> Young people who turn to religion due to political or economic grievances

tend to live in the north or the so-called Baku villages around Nardaran.<sup>12</sup>

## B. TERRORISM CONVICTIONS

Despite Azerbaijan's generally secular character, its strategic location – between Iran and Turkey and sharing a border with Russia's volatile Dagestan republic – makes it a target of competing foreign Islamic influences, both peaceful and violent. The government claims its close economic and political ties to the West increase its vulnerability to external Islamic extremists.

The authorities claim to have successfully confronted extremist Islamic movements since the 1990s. Reportedly, one of the first international terrorist organisations to operate in Azerbaijan was al-Jihad, which later merged with al-Qaeda.<sup>13</sup> Ibrahim Eidaous, an Egyptian citizen, established an Azerbaijani cell in 1995 and led it until 1997, when he moved to London, where he was arrested two years later.<sup>14</sup> An hour before al-Qaeda's 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassies in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi, a fax claiming responsibility was sent to a London cell from a Baku phone.<sup>15</sup> Later that year, security forces, together with the U.S. CIA, arrested Ahmed Salaam Mabrouk, the head of al-Jihad military operations, whom Azerbaijan extradited to Egypt. A computer disk with plans for 100 attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets was reportedly found during that operation.<sup>16</sup>

In 1999, security forces arrested fourteen members of Jeyshullah (Army of God)<sup>17</sup> for numerous serious crimes, including the murder of Etibar Erkin, chair of the Azerbaijani Association of Psychics, and his two sons; robbing the Baku office of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); and attempting to bomb the Krishna society headquarters in Baku.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In a 2004 survey, 63.6 per cent of respondents said they never pray; 13.2 per cent said they pray only occasionally. See H. Hajizade, "Religion and Freedom of Religion in Azerbaijan after September 11", *III Era*, no. 6 (2005), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Another 40.1 per cent said they believe in religion, have a notion about religious prescriptions but carry them out selectively. This survey, repeated in 2004, 2005 and 2006 by Puls, a sociological service, concluded that the number of respondents who claim to carry out religious tenets is stable and less than 50 per cent. "Azerbaijan in 2006, sociological monitoring", Puls/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Baku, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Azerbaijan has small Christian and Jewish communities.

<sup>9</sup> The Baku Shehidler Turkish Mosque attracts around 3,000 believers. Abu Bakr Salafi Mosque has the highest figures with, reportedly, 7,000 weekly (see below). The Lezgi Mosque in the Old City attracts some 800 every Friday. Some independent Shiite mosques, in particular the Dadash Mosque, attract in the hundreds as well.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dr Christine Hunner-Kreisel, Baku, September 2007; and correspondence, October 2007.

<sup>11</sup> "People need beauty and pureness. There is nothing to offer to the youth here apart from that", a member of an independent Shiite prayer group said. Crisis Group interview, Ilham (not his real name), Baku, September 2007.

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<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Azerbaijani regions, October-November 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Jihad, also referred to as Islamic Jihad, originated as an Islamic militant group in Egypt in the late 1970s. It had close links with al-Qaeda and merged with it in June 2001, see [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/aljihad.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/aljihad.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Indictment, *USA v. Usama bin Laden et. al*, at <http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/reports/pdfs/binladen/indict.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> S. Cornell, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> "Islamic group planned to use chem-bio weapons", *World Tribune.com*, 21 April 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Although a Salafi group, Jeyshullah, was said to have links with Iran. See S. Cornell, op. cit., p. 43; also "Major problem of Azerbaijan", *525ci gazet*, 15 August 2003.

<sup>18</sup> "Political Islam concealed in the Prayers", *Ayna*, 17 June 2006. Members of the organisation received prison terms between four and thirteen years; 32-year-old Mubariz Aliyev,

The first Hizb ut-Tahrir activists reportedly arrived in Azerbaijan in 2000 from the North Caucasus, and an Uzbek citizen, Abduresul Abdukerimov (Abdullah), founded an Azerbaijani branch in late August 2001. Later that year the organisation was outlawed and all six members of this group (five Azerbaijani citizens and one Ukrainian) were arrested for attempting to “chang[e] the secular character of the state, and plotting large-scale terrorist attacks aimed at foreign embassies and general population”.<sup>19</sup>

After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S., Azerbaijan sent a contingent to Afghanistan as part of the U.S.-led coalition and made its airspace available to U.S. and NATO operations. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the deputy al-Qaeda leader, cited Azerbaijanis as worthy of punishment for “aligning themselves with infidels”.<sup>20</sup> In 2004, National Security Minister Namig Abbasov claimed al-Qaeda was planning to sabotage construction of the BTC oil pipeline.<sup>21</sup> Also that year, a group of nine foreigners (Afghan, British, Jordanian and Russian) supposedly receiving instructions from Abu Hafis, al-Qaeda coordinator in the Caucasus, were arrested for planning terrorist acts.<sup>22</sup>

In March 2005, six Azerbaijani citizens led by Amiraslan Iskenderov were convicted for planning terrorist attacks and preparing a statement on behalf of al-Qaeda in the

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a renegade internal affairs ministry officer who founded the group in 1995, was sentenced to life imprisonment in the infamous Gobustan prison. Crisis Group interview, Elchin Behbudov, head of the Committee against Tortures, January 2008. Aliyev was reportedly beaten by a former head of the prison and lost all his teeth, see “Indifference of jail’s medical personnel”, Prison-Watch-Public Association, 12 December 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Hizb ut-Tahrir, a Sunni, pan-Islamist politically oriented organisation active in at least 40 countries seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate by peaceful means and is forbidden in many countries, in particular Central Asia, where it operates underground. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003. It advocates non-violence but has endorsed violence by others in some circumstances, [www.hizbuttahrir.org/](http://www.hizbuttahrir.org/). Abdullah fled the country, “Investigation on Hizb ut-Tahrir is Over”, *Bizim Asr*, January 2002, at [http://bizimasr.media.az.com/axiv\\_2002/yanvar/01/xeber.html](http://bizimasr.media.az.com/axiv_2002/yanvar/01/xeber.html).

<sup>20</sup> J. Nichol, “Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Security Issues and Implications for U.S. Interests”, Congressional Research Service, 1 February 2007, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> See G. Luft, “Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan: not yet finished and already threatened”, Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, 4 November 2004, at [www.iags.org/n1104041.htm](http://www.iags.org/n1104041.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Statement of the national security ministry, 5 July 2005, at [www.mns.gov.az/news/05.07.2005.19.05\\_ru.html](http://www.mns.gov.az/news/05.07.2005.19.05_ru.html). The accused were sentenced to prison terms between three and fifteen years in June 2005.

Caucasus threatening to carry out bombings in Baku. According to the national security ministry, their main aim was to force the government to change its “secular and democratic and anti-terror policy”.<sup>23</sup> However, “[a]fter a closed trial ... it is unclear whether any hard evidence was produced at the trial to substantiate those suspicions”.<sup>24</sup> According to a defence lawyer, some of the accused were arrested only because they were known to Amiraslan Iskenderov.<sup>25</sup> The ministry claimed that same month:

As a result of struggle against international terrorism the activity of terrorist organisations, such as al-Jihad, Caucasus Islamic Army, Hizb ut-Tahrir, [and] Jeyshullah was neutralised, seven humanitarian organisations suspected of entertaining links with international terrorist organisations were closed, 43 people [were] extradited and dozens of terrorists handed over to the relevant bodies of partner countries.<sup>26</sup>

In another closed-door trial, in April 2006, six members of a group called Jamaat al-Muvahiddun were sentenced to ten- to fifteen-year prison terms for buying illegal weapons, armed robbery, illegal border crossing, fabricating documents and resisting arrest. The ministry said they planned to bomb the U.S., Israeli and Russian embassies, the State Oil Company (SOCAR) building and the National Bank of Azerbaijan.<sup>27</sup> Also that month, sixteen Azeris, Turks, Russians and Yemenis received sentences in a closed trial of up to life in prison for illegal purchase and bearing of firearms and the July 2005 assassination of an internal affairs ministry officer. All were said to be al-Qaeda members and to have received military training in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge in preparation for fighting in Chechnya.<sup>28</sup> During the trial, defence lawyers and relatives claimed some did not know each

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<sup>23</sup> Statement of the national security ministry, 17 March 2005, available at [www.mns.gov.az/news/17.03.2005.16.14\\_en.html](http://www.mns.gov.az/news/17.03.2005.16.14_en.html). Iskenderov reportedly trained and fought with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan from 1999 to 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Azerbaijan Country Report, Freedom House, 2006, at [www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=47&nit=390&year=2006](http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=47&nit=390&year=2006).

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, Elman Osmanov, defence lawyer, February 2008.

<sup>26</sup> “Personnel of the national security structures of the Azerbaijan Republic have celebrated their professional holiday”, *Azerbaijan*, 29 March 2005.

<sup>27</sup> For the national security ministry statement, see [www.mns.gov.az/news/17.04.2006.15.33\\_en.html](http://www.mns.gov.az/news/17.04.2006.15.33_en.html).

<sup>28</sup> “Azerbaijan Jails Suspected Al-Qaeda Militants”, RFE/RL, 19 April 2006.

other.<sup>29</sup> Despite numerous local media reports referring to official sources, the official indictment did not assert an al-Qaeda link.<sup>30</sup>

Most recently, on 29 October 2007, the national security ministry announced it had prevented a “large-scale, horrifying attack” by a “radical Wahhabi group” against “several state structures in Baku, embassies and missions of the countries which are members of the international anti-terror coalition”.<sup>31</sup> The U.S. embassy suspended counselor operations on 29-31 October.<sup>32</sup> The Landmark business centre, which houses the Norwegian oil company Statoil, British Petroleum offices, the UK embassy and U.S. embassy support staff, was closed for two days.<sup>33</sup>

In the next weeks dozens of “Wahhabis”<sup>34</sup> accused of planning the attacks, including a renegade army officer<sup>35</sup> and an Arab allegedly associated with al-Qaeda and al-Jihad known as Abu Jafar, were arrested, as well as several associates. A young “Wahhabi”, reportedly an organiser, was killed evading arrest,<sup>36</sup> and some 100

Salafis were temporarily detained.<sup>37</sup> But officials downplayed the threat. The defence ministry said there were no “Wahhabis” in the army.<sup>38</sup> The internal affairs minister said, “there is no threat of religious extremism in Azerbaijan” and pledged law-enforcement agencies would not allow anyone to “cover up terrorist activities with religion”.<sup>39</sup>

In the context of Azerbaijan’s poor human rights record,<sup>40</sup> heavy-handed security services and non-independent judiciary, the closed trials of the alleged Islamic terrorists have led local and international observers to question the true extent of an extremist threat. By asserting links between local criminal groups and al-Qaeda, the authorities could be taking advantage of international anti-terrorism interests to legitimise a degree of religious repression.<sup>41</sup> At the least, the above events suggest the need to look closer at the delicate balance between legitimate security concerns and respect for human rights, including freedom of religion.

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<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, Elman Osmanov, defence lawyer, February 2008; and “Sentence given to Islamic radicals in Azerbaijan”, BBC Azeri.com, 19 April 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, Elman Osmanov, defence lawyer, February 2008.

<sup>31</sup> “Azerbaijan says it thwarts terrorist plot in Baku”, *International Herald Tribune*, 29 October 2007; and “Azerbaijan Terror Attack Foiled in Baku,” EurasiaNet, 29 October 2007.

<sup>32</sup> “US Embassy has entirely restarted all its activities”, *Day.az*, 31 October 2007.

<sup>33</sup> F. Ismailzade, “Azerbaijan’s leaders fear spread of radical Islam, especially in military”, Jamestown Foundation, 7 November 2007; and “Statoil company temporarily suspended its activities in Azerbaijan”, *Day.az*, 29 October 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Wahhabis, unlike Salafis, look to the Hanbali school of law for guidance, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005. The term “Wahhabi” has been used in the former Soviet Union to designate dissident Islamic trends, however, and is generally also mistakenly applied to all Salafis. Baku Salafi community members have a purist approach to Islam but do not consider themselves Wahhabi. See, about the Abu Bakr community leader Gamet Suleymanov, “I am not a Wahhabi”, *Today.az*, 30 August 2006.

<sup>35</sup> “Azerbaijan’s Ministry of National Security arrests radical Wahhabi group members, Senior Lieutenant Kamran Asadov and Farid Jabbarov”, APA News Agency, 10 November 2007; and “Azerbaijani National Security Ministry arrests last member of radical Wahhabi group plotting terror attack on US embassy in Azerbaijan”, APA News Agency, 21 November 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, inhabitants, Mashtaga, November 2007; Rovshan Ismayilov, “Azerbaijan Terror Attack Foiled in Baku,” EurasiaNet, 29 October 2007; and Temyr Guseynov, “Police and Wahhabis exchange fire in Baku - One died”, *Day.az*, 27 October 2007.

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<sup>37</sup> “Wahhabi war started”, *Azadliq*, 30 October 2007. Most were charged with resisting police, Crisis Group interview, Abu Bakr community member, Baku, January 2008.

<sup>38</sup> The SCWRO chair called the officer a Wahhabi, “Hidayat Orujev: Kamran Asadov, lieutenant of military unit in Khanlar is a Wahhabi”, APA News Agency, 29 October 2007. The defence ministry denied it, “Azerbaijani Minister of Defence: in the army structures ... there are no Wahhabis”, *Day.az*, 29 October 2007.

<sup>39</sup> “Minister of Internal Affairs: Propaganda of religious radicalism is very dangerous for Azerbaijan”, *Day.az*, 29 October 2007; and “Backgrounder: Islam in Azerbaijan”, BBC Monitoring, 30 October 2007, at <http://acturca.wordpress.com/2007/11/04/backgrounder-islam-in-azerbaijan/>. The foreign ministry said there had been no terrorist threat, *ibid*.

<sup>40</sup> “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2007: Azerbaijan”, U.S. State Department, 2008; and Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°40, *Azerbaijan’s 2005 Elections: Lost Opportunity*, 21 November 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local experts and activists, January-February 2008. See also A. Valiyev, “Al-Qaeda in Azerbaijan: Myths and Realities”, *Global Terrorism Analysis*, vol. 4, no. 10 (18 May 2006) and “The Two Faces of Salafism in Azerbaijan”, *Global Terrorism*, vol. 4, no. 40 (5 December 2007); “Zardusht Alizade: I do not see any risk of terror in Azerbaijan”, *Day.az*, 30 October 2007; A. Yunusov, *Azerbaijan in the Early 21<sup>st</sup> century: Conflicts and Potential Threats* (Baku, 2007), pp. 119-148; and H. Kotecha, “Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging Trends and Tensions”, July 2006, at [www.esiweb.org/pdf/azerbaijan\\_osceislamic\\_and\\_ethnic\\_identities\\_in\\_azerbaijan\\_Jul2006\\_23087\\_en.pdf](http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/azerbaijan_osceislamic_and_ethnic_identities_in_azerbaijan_Jul2006_23087_en.pdf).

## II. FOREIGN INFLUENCES

From 1991, when Azerbaijan gained its independence, Turkey, Iran, Middle Eastern states and extremist groups from southern Russia have vied for influence.<sup>42</sup> The official clergy, composed of Soviet-educated mullahs, was unequal to the population's spiritual awakening. Muslim states built some 150 mosques in a decade<sup>43</sup> and sent teachers and missionaries. Foreign missionaries also introduced Salafism, which had not previously been present. Some foreign activists had political agendas, and the government expelled many and tightly controlled others. Today mainly Turkish religious organisations are active. Ankara seeks to keep radical Islam from the Middle East and Iran out of the Turkic world,<sup>44</sup> and groups from Turkey have been welcome because its secular model resembles Azerbaijan's.<sup>45</sup> Recently, however, Baku has become more suspicious of some Turkish religious groups.

### A. MIDDLE EAST

Missionaries, young Azerbaijanis who studied in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or Egypt and pilgrims who went on the *Hajj* to Mecca in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought Salafi Islam to Azerbaijan, what Azerbaijani critics commonly call "Wahhabi" Islam.<sup>46</sup> Religious literature and websites facilitated propaganda and conversions.<sup>47</sup> Salafis have a transnational conception of the Islamic *Umma* (community), claim to follow the original Islam

and focus on the meaning of being a good Muslim.<sup>48</sup> In Azerbaijan, Salafism fills a vacuum created by the failure of the official clergy to satisfy the spiritual needs of youth.<sup>49</sup> It is unlikely there were more than 10,000 conversions, however.<sup>50</sup>

One of the most active groups in promoting Salafism was the Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage (SRIH),<sup>51</sup> which started working in Azerbaijan in 1994 but was banned in 2001 after members of its Pakistani and Afghani branches were accused of al-Qaeda links. SRIH renovated 62 mosques, mostly in central (39) and northern regions (seventeen), as well as Baku (four),<sup>52</sup> and financed construction of the Abu Bakr Mosque, the main gathering point today for Azerbaijani Salafis.

Humanitarian organisations which aided displaced persons (IDPs) from Nagorno-Karabakh also advanced Salafism.<sup>53</sup> Starting in 1993, the Saudi Arabia-based International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO)<sup>54</sup>

<sup>42</sup> O. Roy, "L'impact de la révolution iranienne au Moyen Orient"; and B. Balci, "Le chiisme en Azerbaïdjan post-soviétique: entre influences iraniennes et dynamiques internes", in S. Mervin (ed.), *Les mondes chiites et l'Iran* (Paris, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> R. Mehdiyev, "State and Society in an Era of Globalisation", *Azerbaijan*, September 2007.

<sup>44</sup> B. Balci, "Entre Islam et laïcité: la politique religieuse de la Turquie dans les républiques turcophones d'Asie centrale et du Caucase", in Balci (ed.), *Religion et politique dans le Caucase* (Paris, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> The Turkish Directorate-General of Religious Affairs, however, serves only an official version of Sunni Islam.

<sup>46</sup> There were marginal contacts with Middle East Muslims before independence. Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani believer, Baku, October 2007. The head of the biggest Azerbaijani Salafi community, Gamet Suleymanov, studied in Saudi Arabia and Sudan. In 1996, about 120 students officially studied theology in Egypt, Iran, Libya and Syria, R. Motika, "Islam in Post Soviet Azerbaijan", *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, July-September 2001, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, Azerbaijani scholar of Islam, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Salafism seeks to return to the seventh century practices of the Prophet, his companions and the two following generations. It rejects the four schools of Islamic law, adopts a rigid dress and personal appearance code and shuns formal organisation as a distraction from devotion to the faith. See Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> In many Arab countries, Salafism is popular with young people who no longer feel comfortable with a national identity. See O. Roy, "Islam en Europe, Choc des religions ou convergence des religiosités?" in K. Michalski (ed.), *Conditions of European Solidarity, Religion in the New Europe*, vol. 2 (New York/Budapest, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Estimates of Salafi numbers vary considerably. Gamet Suleymanov says 7,000 visit Abu Bakr Mosque regularly. Extrapolating an average of a few dozen per town elsewhere in the country suggests that 10,000 is a likely maximum.

<sup>51</sup> SRIH is a Kuwaiti NGO with a presence in many countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan where some members have been accused of being al-Qaeda activists and are held by the U.S. at its Guantanamo Bay detention centre. See "The Consolidated List of the United Nations Security Council's Al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee", UNSC 1267 Committee, p. 60, at [www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/consolist.shtml](http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/consolist.shtml).

<sup>52</sup> A. Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan* (Baku, 2005), p. 232.

<sup>53</sup> The Soros Foundation head in Azerbaijan said, "Kuwaiti organisations alone have financed the construction of 62 mosques, spending a total of €30 million. The financing has been carried out under unclear procedures without any government oversight", F. Asadov, "Faith-Based Charitable Activity and Islam in Azerbaijan", European Foundation Centre, 2003.

<sup>54</sup> Founded in 1978, IIRO works in twenty countries. Among its leaders is the Saudi Abd Al Hamid Sulaiman Al-Mujil (Al-Mujil), wanted by Interpol and called by the U.S. Treasury "the million dollar man" for fundraising in support of Islamic militant groups, see [www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement](http://www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement)



distributed food and provided medical care in Barda and Sumgayit, in cooperation with the State Committee for Refugees and IDPs. It came under scrutiny after one of its employees, Mahmoud Jaballah, was arrested on terrorism charges in Canada in 1999 after having flown there from Baku. While IIRO retains an office and a small staff in Baku, its activities have been suspended since 2006.<sup>55</sup> The Kuwaiti Asian Muslims Committee, a part of the International Islamic Charitable Organisation (IICO) and with a Baku office, has been helping IDPs and refugees and importing Salafi literature since 1995.<sup>56</sup> These charities have undoubtedly promoted the growth of Salafism, but it remains unclear whether they have any responsibility for radicalising a minority of converts.

## B. DAGESTAN AND CHECHNYA

Arab and Middle Eastern fighters on their way to Chechnya travelled through Azerbaijan<sup>57</sup> and in Dagestan, where Salafism had developed autonomously, contributed to its transformation into Salafi jihadism.<sup>58</sup> Ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan's north (Lezgins, Avars and Tsakhurs) with close ethnic links in Dagestan and some 10,000 Chechen refugees who came in 2000-2001 and have since left advanced Salafi Islam in Azerbaijan,<sup>59</sup> while small numbers of Azerbaijanis

joined Dagestani jamaats (militant groups) or Chechen fighters. In October 2001, the national security ministry claimed that some 300 Azerbaijanis received training in Salafi camps in Chechnya and Dagestan, and thirteen were killed during the second Russian-Chechen war. The Jeysnullah group reportedly received military training in Chechnya. A dozen Azerbaijanis recruited in the Abu Bakr Mosque to fight in Chechnya in 2001 by Kanan Shabanov, the leader of a Salafi-Jihadi group, were arrested and sentenced in 2002.<sup>60</sup>

In August 2003 security forces arrested a group of 23, mostly Azeris from Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent areas, who planned to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh. Dubbed in the local media "Karabakh partisans", they reportedly received training in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge and some fought in Chechnya.<sup>61</sup> In 2003 the authorities claimed that another 70 "Wahhabis", all Azerbaijan citizens, were arrested in 2001-2003; at least 45 were accused of joining Chechen rebels in the Pankisi Gorge.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to government claims, the Russian and Azerbaijani press occasionally report arrests or deaths of Azerbaijani fighters in the North Caucasus. In September 2006, Suleyman Muradov, a militant from Gusar, was reportedly arrested in Dagestan.<sup>63</sup> Rappani Khalilov,<sup>64</sup> the leader of the Chechen guerillas in Dagestan, was killed on 17 September 2007 in the Kizilyurt district along with his deputy, Nabi Nabiyeu, an Azerbaijani from Zakatala. Khalilov was reportedly replaced by

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/key-issues/protecting/charities\_execorder\_13224-i.shtml#m). It is on the list of "entities belonging or associated to Al-Qaeda", UNSC 1267 Committee, pp. 57-58.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, IIRO representative, Baku, January 2008.

<sup>56</sup> Based in Kuwait City, it mostly focuses on aid and development, but also education and training, see [www.iico.org/home-page-eng/index-eng.htm](http://www.iico.org/home-page-eng/index-eng.htm). In 2005 it sent fourteen tons of "Wahhabi" literature in Arabic and Russian as a "present" to the Caucasus Board of Muslims, prompting criticism from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRO), which accused the Board of supporting the spread of such material. "Books in Kazakh and Uzbek languages have been sent to Azerbaijan as humanitarian aid", *Ekspress*, 3 August 2005.

<sup>57</sup> S. Cornell, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>58</sup> Local religious figures developed their own spirituality based on Salafi literature without foreign influence. See M. Gammer, "Nationalisme, Islam et Politique au Daghestan" in Balci, *Religion et Politique*, op. cit., pp. 149-161; A. Matveeva, "Dagestan: Interethnic Tensions and Cross Border Implications", in M. Gammer (ed.), *The Caspian Region* (London, 2004); E. Suleimanov, "Chechnya, Wahhabism and the invasion of Dagestan", *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 4 (December 2005); and R. B. Ware, E. Kisriev, "The Islamic factor in Dagestan", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 19, no. 2 (June 2000), pp. 235-252.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tofiq Turkel, expert, Turan Information Agency, February 2008; also see A. Valiyev, "Azerbaijan Increasingly Caught Between Salafism and Iran",

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*Terrorism Monitor*, 11 October, 2007, at [www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373711](http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373711). Only some 2,100 Chechens now live in Azerbaijan, Crisis Group telephone interview, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) official, Baku, February 2008. More than 8,000 transited Azerbaijan after the Second Russo-Chechen war, "Refugees and displaced persons in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia", 6 February 2006, at <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Working Docs/Doc06/EDOC10835.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> Yunusov, op. cit., pp. 268-269; and Valiyev, "The Two Faces", op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> Members were charged with forming an illegal military unit and bearing and storing arms illegally and sentenced to prison terms up to life. Some were pardoned after repeated calls from domestic civil groups, but ten remain in prison. They were listed by such groups as persons "who are not considered political prisoners, but are victims of unfair trials" in a document presented to the Council of Europe in 2006. Crisis Group interview, Akif Nagy, chair, Karabakh Liberation Organisation, February 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Yunusov, op. cit., pp. 268-271; and "Major problem of Azerbaijan", *525ci gazet*, 15 August 2003.

<sup>63</sup> "Azerbaijani criminal detained in Dagestan", *Today.az*, 4 September 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Khalilov commanded the insurgent group that exploded bombs in Kaspiisk, on the Caspian coast, in May 2002, killing 43 and wounding 170. See "Khalilov Rappani", *Lentapedia on Lentu.ru*, 19 September 2007, at [www.lentu.ru/lib/14170687/](http://www.lentu.ru/lib/14170687/).

another Azerbaijani from Zakatala, Ilgar Mollachiyev,<sup>65</sup> whose brother, Vugar, was accused of participating in a 2002 terrorist act in Dagestan.<sup>66</sup> An Azerbaijan citizen, Mekhti Gurbanov, was reportedly killed with seven other fighters in November 2007 in Dagestan's capital, Makhachkala.<sup>67</sup>

In February 2008, Araz Balabekov, a militant from Azerbaijan's Gusar region, was killed by Russian forces.<sup>68</sup> Reports indicated he had been converted to Salafism by the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society in the early 1990s and, with his brother Babek, now hiding in Dagestan, belonged to the Forest Brothers, a violent group established by Kwase Jaffon, an Arab veteran of the Chechen war, and active in south Dagestan and north Azerbaijan.<sup>69</sup>

### C. IRAN

Although Iran was a source of spiritual guidance immediately after independence, its influence is limited today.<sup>70</sup> Shiites do not have an authoritative clerical hierarchy in Azerbaijan. There is no *marja al-taqlid* – the religious source which must be followed by believers; the Azerbaijani Sheikh ul-Islam is not an absolute interpreter of dogma or sacred law.<sup>71</sup> Because of this, Iranian religious authorities could in theory enjoy more spiritual authority among Azerbaijani Shiites, which may partially explain why independent religious communities reject the official clergy's spiritual authority. The Sheikh ul-Islam's inferior religious status may also have played a role in the government's decision to ban all Iranian religious missionaries by 2000.

Divisions among the Iranian clergy and between senior members of that clergy and the regime in Tehran influenced the flow of spiritual ideas into Azerbaijan. Private foundations around important Iranian *marja al-taqlid* distributed fellowships for religious education in Iran to Azeri students.<sup>72</sup> Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (now in Iraq) supervises the Ahli Beyt organisation, which is known for humanitarian activities and promoting religious ideas and is active in Azerbaijan and among Georgia's Azeris (in the border region of Kvemo Kartli). Another well-respected *marja al-taqlid* Fazil Lankarani<sup>73</sup> attracted Azerbaijani students to the Iranian theological center of Qom who later helped spread his ideas.<sup>74</sup>

Some foundations seem to have had more political agendas. The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation<sup>75</sup> helped Azerbaijan IDPs after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict but was believed to interfere in internal affairs and was criticised in the opposition press.<sup>76</sup> "Together with rice, they were bringing pictures of Khomeini, religious books and books about the Talysh identity", a camp inhabitant recalled.<sup>77</sup> In the south, the Committee was said to be linked to the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), founded in 1991 and based in the religious village of Nardaran.<sup>78</sup> The party, which had members in villages near Baku and to a lesser extent in the south, was initially very active, but the authorities feared Iran was using it to destabilise secularism and banned it in 1995. It still exists

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<sup>65</sup> "The head of MIA named the new head of fighters", *Lenta.ru*, 10 January 2008.

<sup>66</sup> "Kaspiiskii Terrorist Act: Were the Authors Found?", *Chernovik*, 30 April 2004.

<sup>67</sup> They were accused of several attacks on law enforcement in Dagestan and killed during a special operation on 13 November 2007, E.Kerimov, "Among the fighters killed in Makhachkala, there was an Azerbaijani citizen", *Echo*, 13 November 2007.

<sup>68</sup> "Azerbaijani citizen at large killed in Dagestan", *ANS-Press*, 7 February 2008, at [www.anspress.com/print58785.html](http://www.anspress.com/print58785.html).

<sup>69</sup> "Forest Brothers' have support in Azerbaijan", *Today.az*, 21 February 2006, at [www.today.az/view.php?id=23502](http://www.today.az/view.php?id=23502).

<sup>70</sup> Azerbaijan's Sheikh ul-Islam recognised the spiritual authority of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Khamenei, but changed his position in 1998 and now recognises Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, an Iraq-based moderate, Crisis Group interview, Altay Geyushev, Baku, September 2007. Azeris are now in process of choosing a new *marja al-taqlid* (source of emulation).

<sup>71</sup> On the political and religious hierarchy of the Iranian Shiite clergy, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°5, *Iran: The Struggle for the Revolution's Soul*, 5 August 2002.

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<sup>72</sup> There were only 70 to 80 acting imams in Azerbaijan at independence. Their low Islamic knowledge prevented Azerbaijan from developing its own jurists' hierarchy like Iran's. Many young Azeris accordingly went to Iran to study, mainly in Qom and Najaf. Motika, op. cit., pp. 111-124.

<sup>73</sup> He was an Azeri who studied in Iran and participated in the revolution. Until his death in 2007, he paid particular attention to Azerbaijan and issued some *fatwas* (religious edicts) against Azeri intellectuals. In 2006 he issued one against an Azerbaijan journalist for insulting the Prophet Muhammad in an article. See "Iranian Cleric issues Fatwa on Azerbaijani Journalist", RFE/RL, 30 November 2006.

<sup>74</sup> There are currently 200 to 250 Azeri students in Qom, mostly from the south. It is too early to know what effect they will ultimately have on Shiite Islam in Azerbaijan. See Balci, "Le chiisme en Azerbaïdjan", op. cit.

<sup>75</sup> See [www.emdad.ir/Homepage.aspx?lang=en-US](http://www.emdad.ir/Homepage.aspx?lang=en-US).

<sup>76</sup> "Azerbaijan Iranian relations", Far Centre, Monitoring Group, Baku, 1996, at [www.zerbaian.com/azeri/hhz3.htm](http://www.zerbaian.com/azeri/hhz3.htm).

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lenkoran, October 2007. The Talysh are a minority located on both banks of the Arax River, thus divided between Iran and Azerbaijan. Iran reportedly tried to use the Talysh minority factor to destabilise Azerbaijan.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, official mullah, Lenkoran district, October 2007.

unofficially, but the fact that the government no longer monitors it closely indicates how weak it has become.<sup>79</sup>

An Iranian-backed Islamic group calling itself Hezbollah was allegedly involved in criminal activities during the 1990s and was led by an Azerbaijani citizen, Tahir Ramazanov. In 2000, the authorities accused it of the 1997 assassination of a well-known Azerbaijani scholar, Ziya Bunyadov, and arrested seven people.<sup>80</sup> Ramazanov and several close associates fled to Iran, where they remain, except for one who was arrested in 2002 trying to return to Azerbaijan.<sup>81</sup> The motive for Bunyadov's murder remains unclear; some opposition leaders claim it had little to do with Islam.<sup>82</sup>

Some official and non-official Shiite communities alike maintain theological relations with Iran and other Shiite centres, but there are few real institutional links. The Iranian Cultural Centre and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation are still active, but Iran's religious influence has significantly decreased. In 2001, Azerbaijan closed all 22 Iranian madrasas in the country.<sup>83</sup> Iran's suspension of at least open proselytism may also result from an agreement between the two governments.<sup>84</sup> Azerbaijani officials say few new Iranian missionaries have come in

the past five years,<sup>85</sup> though other well-informed observers report continuing visits.<sup>86</sup>

Some marginal tensions remain. Iran allegedly maintains contact with the Talysh minority in the south, while the Iranian television channel Sahar, received in the south, transmits criticism of the Baku government and reportedly regularly raises Talysh minority rights.<sup>87</sup> This is unlikely to cause serious tensions in the near future,<sup>88</sup> but on 10 December 2007, fifteen individuals alleged to be members of a group called the Northern Imam Mehdi Army were given lengthy prison sentences for subversive activities. Headed by Said Dadashbeyli, a young Shiite cleric, they were accused of receiving extensive funding and training from Iran's Quds Force, a special unit of the Revolutionary Guards. Dadashbeyli insisted he was involved only in charity work. The case has caused a diplomatic rift between Tehran and Baku.<sup>89</sup>

#### D. TURKEY

Turkish Sunni Islam has found roots in Azerbaijan because it is perceived to best fit the country's secular model. "Turkish Islam is the only Islamic tendency compatible with the Azerbaijani secular state model", explained Rafiq Aliyev, the former head of SCWRO.<sup>90</sup> More than 3,000 people gather at the Baku Turkish Mosque every Friday. Turkish Sunni Islam's imprint is also visible in northern areas, where more people now frequent official mosques.

Azerbaijan cooperates on religious issues with Turkey, whose Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs) is mandated to promote Turkish Islam abroad.

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<sup>79</sup> The IPA was registered in 1992; in 1995 its chair, Haji Alikram Aliyev, was arrested and the party was banned, allegedly because it was being used by Iran to interfere in Azerbaijan's internal affairs. At least one IPA leader died in jail. Most senior party figures who were not arrested left the country. Yunusov, "Islam", op. cit., p. 212 (Russian version). As recently as 26 June 2007, IPA representatives were not permitted to meet in Gandja. Five were arrested, included the former leader, Hajiaga Nuri, and nineteen other party members spent a night at the police station. "Religion Bulletin", Turan News Agency, 9 July 2007.

<sup>80</sup> "Investigation on Hizbut-Tahrir is over", *Bizim Asr*, op. cit.

<sup>81</sup> K. Safaroglu, "Political Islam concealed in the Prayers", *Ayna*, 17 June 2006.

<sup>82</sup> Some opposition members and media have questioned whether there was any Hezbollah involvement and suggested Haji Mammadov, a former senior interior ministry official who was arrested in 2005 and pleaded guilty to numerous high-profile abductions and murders, may have played a part. Ganimat Zahid, "Bluff", *Azadlig*, 31 October 2007.

<sup>83</sup> A southern representative of SCWRO said there were "three madrasas here, one in Massali and two in Jalilabad. They were illegal, and we closed them down because they were propagating the ideas of the Iranian regime. The teachers were trying to make the children forget about their love of their Azerbaijani homeland and were telling them that Islam is their new identity", Crisis Group interview, south Azerbaijan, October 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Baku, September 2007.

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<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government and SCWRO officials, Baku, October-November 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, November 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Sahar TV, [www.saharirib.ir/](http://www.saharirib.ir/), is a satellite station funded by the Iranian government, which airs religious and political programming, Crisis Group interview, Lenkoran inhabitant, Lenkoran, October 2007; and "Iranian Diplomat Denies Tehran Promoting Separatism in Azerbaijan", *Day.az*, 11 January 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Both countries can play minority cards. There are some twenty million Azeri nationals in Iran. Islam has a minor role in minority tensions.

<sup>89</sup> The group was arrested in January 2007 and tried behind closed doors. The prosecution asserted it sought to overthrow the state and impose Sharia (Islamic law). Dadashbeyli was sentenced to fourteen years, the others from two to fourteen years. "Azerbaijan: Islamist Trial Sets Stage For Confrontation With Tehran", RFE/RL, 9 October 2007; and "Azerbaijan is expecting explanations from Iran on the case of the 'Said Dadashbeyli' gang", *Day.az*, 24 December 2007.

<sup>90</sup> B. Balci, "Le renouveau islamique en Azerbaïdjan", *Les études du CERI* (Paris, 2007).

Turkey has financed the construction of eight mosques, trains clergy and gives scholarships for study in its Islamic high schools and universities. A Turkish Islamic Faculty was set up at Baku State University, and Turkish teachers were sent to Azerbaijani towns.<sup>91</sup>

Independently of the Turkish government, the Nurcu groups distribute free religious literature through business people working in Azerbaijan. The authorities carefully watch their activities. Among these, the Fethullah Gülen movement<sup>92</sup> focuses on education, which is sponsored by a private company.<sup>93</sup> It runs prestigious Turkish high schools and Baku Caucasus University.<sup>94</sup> Teachers promote Turkish Islam among pupils. "I remember the way they succeeded to make us pray without requesting it", said Tengiz, a former student. "There were teenagers in the school identified as elders who were doing *namaz* [prayer]; we were supposed to consider them models and do everything

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<sup>91</sup> See the SCWRO website, [www.addk.net/aze/articles/turkiye.html](http://www.addk.net/aze/articles/turkiye.html), and Diyanet's, [www.diyenet.gov.tr/turkish/default.asp](http://www.diyenet.gov.tr/turkish/default.asp). The Turkish Islamic Faculty of Baku was opened in 1992-1993. Preparatory classes are at Dokuz Eylül University, İzmir. The first students graduated in 1996-1997. Baku Turkish High School was started in the same faculty, and another high school with religious education was opened in Nakhevan in 1994-1995. There are some 200 students in the Islamic Faculty and more than 300 in the Baku high school annually. Graduates receive the title "Theologist and teacher of Arabic", [www.ceebd.co.uk/ceed/un/az/az003.htm](http://www.ceebd.co.uk/ceed/un/az/az003.htm). Turkish teachers are in five Baku districts, two villages each in Apsheron, Balakan district and Saatli, and one each in Yevlak, Gusar, Khachmaz, Zakatala and Agdash. They cannot promote religion, but only "answer questions the people have" and are closely monitored. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish teachers, north Azerbaijan, October 2007.

<sup>92</sup> The Nurcu movement was created by Said Nursi, a scholar born in 1873 who spent many years seeking to awaken faith in secular, Kemalist Turkey. He authored a 6,000-page exegesis of the Koran, the *Risale i Nur* (Epistle of Light). After his death in 1960, the movement fractured. One of the most important branches, led by Fethullah Gülen, emphasises promotion of the philosophy through education. Gülen, born in 1938, received a classical religious education and after service as an official cleric, engaged in education and summer camps for youths. The first missions of the *Fethullahcılar* in the Caucasus and Central Asia pre-dated the end of the Soviet Union. Sentenced to three years in jail in 1971 for pro-Islamic activities and accused in 1996 of fomenting a plot against the state, Gülen moved to the U.S. but was acquitted in 2006. Balci, "Entre Islam", op. cit., pp. 85-92.

<sup>93</sup> Çağ Öğretim İşletmeleri A.Ş., Era Teaching Companies Ltd., see <http://cag.edu.az>.

<sup>94</sup> Ten high schools and preparatory schools each and one elementary school, gymnasium and university (Qafqaz University) each, teach primarily in English and follow Western (Turkish) and secular curriculums approved by the education ministry.

they were doing. That is how we all started to pray!"<sup>95</sup> Pious youths in Baku said teachers at Baku Caucasus University transmitted religious ideas through informal contacts. Also important is the Azerbaijani Youth Aid Foundation, which assists Nagorno-Karabakh IDPs. It was created by the Turkish religious leader Osman Nuri Topbaş and contributed to construction of the Zakatala branch of Baku Islamic University and Mosque.<sup>96</sup>

The relationship between Turkish state-sponsored religious organisations and those of private foundations is complex. Fethullah Gülen's activities were banned in Turkey until 2006, yet it promotes Turkey's cultural and religious influence throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus.<sup>97</sup> However, Baku's pressure on all activists propagating Turkish Sunni Islam, but particularly the Nurcu groups, has increased in recent months.<sup>98</sup>

In April 2007, two Nurcus were detained in Yevlakh region for organising religious lessons and "resisting police",<sup>99</sup> a provision widely misused by the authorities to suppress dissent. The Koran courses of an independent imam close to Nurcu philosophy were closed in the south in 2007.<sup>100</sup> And in a surprising comment, Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, the head of CBM, declared in November 2007 that Wahhabis and Nurcus are "not desirable" in Azerbaijan because "[r]adical Wahhabi, Nurcus and other criminal groups hurt sacred Islam".<sup>101</sup> Although he had expressed his dislike of Nurcus previously, this official statement was the first time they had been equated with Wahhabism. In January 2008 local media reported the October 2007 arrest of a Turkish politician, Mehmet Harun Kayaci, for illegal religious propaganda.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tengiz (not his real name), former pupil at Feytullah Gullen School, Baku, September 2007. Some Shiite parents in Lenkoran expressed unhappiness when their children began to pray in the Sunni style after a few months at a Fethullah Gullen school. Crisis Group interview, Hussein (not his real name), Lenkoran inhabitant, Lenkoran, October 2007.

<sup>96</sup> Baku Islamic University is distinct from Baku State University and Baku Caucasus University.

<sup>97</sup> Balci, "Entre Islam", op. cit., pp. 91-95.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sunni independent imam close to the Nurcu philosophy, October 2007.

<sup>99</sup> "Nursists arrested in Yevlakh region of Azerbaijan", *Day.az*, 27 April 2007.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sunni independent imam close to the Nurcu philosophy, October 2007.

<sup>101</sup> "Sheikh calls for fight against Wahhabists and Nurcu", *Zerkalo*, 17 November 2007; and "Radical Wahhabists and Nurcu Hurt Islam: Sheikh ul-Islam", Trend News Agency, 26 November 2007.

<sup>102</sup> R. Jafarov, "Turkish politician arrested in Azerbaijan may be extradited to the law enforcement bodies of the neighbouring country", *Echo*, 26 January 2008.

### III. INDEPENDENT ISLAMIC GROUPS

Azerbaijan's government is concerned about independent religious communities, whose members, though relatively few, have increased more than attendees in official mosques and in some instances have links to the foreign organisations discussed above. Most of the independent Muslim groups do not recognise the authority of CBM led by Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, and only a few have registered.

Independent Islam can be divided between Shiite communities, often linked to the Juma Mosque Community and its leader Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, and Salafi ones, led by Gamet Suleymanov of the Abu Bakr Mosque. A few other small groups meet in improvised prayer houses and private residences. Independent Sufi or Nurcu groups also operate and claim to be victims of government harassment.

#### A. SALAFI GROUPS

The number of Salafis – often pejoratively called “Wahhabis” – has steadily increased, especially in Baku and the north. Those in the north tend to have a more militant approach to Islam.

##### 1. Baku

Gamet Suleymanov is a highly respected, Medina-educated imam and since 1998 head of the Abu Bakr Mosque. SRIH financed construction, but he says it no longer has any ties to the congregation. Although the mosque was officially registered in 2002, Suleymanov has not been approved by CBM but is tolerated and functions as de facto imam, elected by the mosque community.<sup>103</sup> He claims to be apolitical and in his sermons instructs listeners not to criticise the government. Every Friday large numbers of young bearded men pray both inside and outside the mosque, which has become too small for the faithful.<sup>104</sup> During the week many attend the five daily prayers. The basement caters to darkly clothed and veiled young women.

Some of Suleymanov's followers visit the much smaller Lezgi Mosque in the Old City, where every Friday

several hundred pray on carpets outside, among them Azerbaijanis, Chechens, Turks and Arabs. An impressive fervour is palpable at both mosques. “[S]uch a pure crowd of believers helps to keep your faith awake”, a young Abu Bakr community member said.<sup>105</sup> Many of the young men and women belong to Baku's Russian-speaking intelligentsia – much Salafi literature is available only in Russian.

Asked why she joined the Abu Bakr community, Ilaha explained:

Allah puts us on the way to Islam. A few years ago, I suddenly felt a kind of internal emptiness. I heard a lot about Abu Bakr, and one day I went there. I was really surprised not to see terrorists as everyone says in the press but on the contrary clever and well-educated people. Then I started to go there regularly, to read a lot. I was taught there to know where the real sources of Islam are.<sup>106</sup>

The social opportunities offered by Abu Bakr's network and the young age of the believers make this mosque a very attractive place, an element that, many confessed, played a crucial role in their decision to adopt Salafi Islam. “The old imams smell like death to us. They are only for funerals, and only old people go to their Mosques. They had nothing to answer to my questions when I came”, Ilaha added.

Personal motivation rather than political ideas push the majority towards Salafism. “You know, I have my family, my small son, my work, and I do not have time to think about other things, in particular politics”, answered Dilber, a young Suleymanov follower.<sup>107</sup> Ilaha added that “in the Sunna, it is written that we do not have the right to go against the ruling power if they respect the believers”. Gamet Suleymanov repeatedly tells this to his followers.

##### 2. North Azerbaijan

A few dozen individuals in northern towns were converted to Salafism, allegedly by a Saudi humanitarian organisation in the 1990s. Inhabitants and local police say their number has significantly decreased in recent years. A few, very young bearded men pray in the Sheki, Zakatala, Balakan, Gusar and Guba mosques, where they are often viewed with

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gamet Suleymanov, Baku, January 2008. A mosque community may elect its imam, but the CBM has the right of approval.

<sup>104</sup> Suleymanov says 7,000 pray on a weekly basis at the mosque, which can accommodate 12,000 for important religious occasions, “Abu Bakr religious community leader Gamet Suleymanov: I am not a Wahhabi”, *Today.az*, 30 August 2006.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abu Bakr community member, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ilaha (not her real name), Abu Bakr community member, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dilber (not her real name), Abu Bakr community member, Baku, September 2007.

suspicion. They usually pray separately in the mosque. In Guba they even pray in Shiite mosques, though one Salafi follower confided, “we can go indeed, but all these representations of the Prophet or Imam Ali on their walls are not acceptable for us”.<sup>108</sup>

In the mountainous northern areas, where religious tradition was always stronger, Salafi missionaries first converted the *aksakals*.<sup>109</sup> “I learned Islam thanks to my grandmother. But after independence, we had access to new literature, new translations of Koran. I then understood that the way my grandmother was praying was not right!” explained an *aksakal* considered a “Wahhabi” in his town. “I do not consider myself a Wahhabi. I am a Sunni, and the only truth is Koran. I consider shrine visits wrong, but here the Turkish teachers consider it is acceptable. I never argued with them”.<sup>110</sup>

Many of the young Salafis said they not only respect all rituals required by Islam but also have good knowledge of the Koran. “Educated people in Azerbaijan are looking for truth in Islam”, explained Efendi, a Salafi from a northern town. “In Abu Bakr Mosque, people also have this desire”.<sup>111</sup>

Northern Salafis differ from those in Baku in not belonging to the urban, educated intelligentsia; many are market traders.<sup>112</sup> Unlike Suleymanov’s followers, they openly expressed political views. Efendi explained:

The Azerbaijani government does not allow some of the Koran’s *aiat*.<sup>113</sup> First, the Koran says that a Muslim has to redistribute his resources. But this government keeps everything in its pockets. Secondly, a veiled woman cannot go to school or even have a passport here. Very few people know in this country that a government must be supervised by God and not by a group of Mafiosi

people. And this government does not want the people to know that.<sup>114</sup>

Some elements of their discourse are similar from one town to another, suggesting they exchange ideas in meetings or use electronic means. However, this very heterogeneous community is not well organised, and every individual seems to have a personal approach to Islam. The majority share Suleymanov’s vision of Salafism but express political views. “But when you start to have political opinions, then you become a Wahhabi in their [the authorities’] mind, and they are free to harass you”, Efendi concluded.

### 3. The *Khawarij*

After Gamet Suleymanov adopted an apolitical line to protect his community, he was accused by some of his followers of collaborating with an infidel government. He decreed a *fatwa* against the dissidents, who are mainly in Baku and northern towns, calling them *Khawarij* (“expelled” in Arabic).<sup>115</sup> They are “the ones who belong to the Muslim *Umma* but rebel against it”.<sup>116</sup> They consider it permissible to rebel against the existing government and all Muslims who do not act like them to be infidels.<sup>117</sup>

The most important *Khawarij* groupings are in Sumgayit, Sheki, Guba, Gusar, some Baku villages and Baku itself, but they have deserted Zakatala and Balakan, and none would visit Abu Bakr Mosque today.<sup>118</sup> “You know, after a few years in Islam, you learn how to identify people”, explained Ayaz, a Salafi from a northern town. “We know, by the way they talk, that some guys here have joined Wahhabism. They are ready to kill. These people are out of any religion”.<sup>119</sup> Ramil, a more radical believer, explained that “it depends on everyone’s psychology. Maybe some are more able to take up arms than others”.<sup>120</sup> Suleymanov’s followers in the north know the *Khawarij* and consider them dangerous, not least because the police generally fail to differentiate between the two groups and harass both.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interview, a Salafi, north Azerbaijan, October 2007.

<sup>109</sup> Every village has elders whose authority is respected. In north Azerbaijan, these *aksakals* are the memory of religious tradition, which they transmit to younger generations. Foreign missionaries approached them first and converted some.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interview, elder converted to Salafism, north Azerbaijan, September 2007. Salafis and Shiites disagree on the spiritual value of shrines. Salafis argue that only the Prophet can be considered holy; Azerbaijani Shiites and some Sunnis also consider the graves and shrines of the Prophet’s relatives holy.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, Efendi (not his real name), north Azerbaijan, September 2007.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interview, SCWRO representative, north Azerbaijan, September 2007.

<sup>113</sup> An *aiat*, also called *verse* or *Sura*, is a precept extracted from the Koran.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, Efendi (not his real name), north Azerbaijan, September 2007.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group correspondence, Bayram Balci, Baku, November 2007.

<sup>116</sup> G. Suleymanov, *Attitude towards the Leaders* (Baku, 2001), p. 17.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gamet Suleymanov, January 2008.

<sup>118</sup> “Abu Bakr religious community leader Gamet Suleymanov: I am not a Wahhabi”, *Today.az*, 30 August 2006.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ayaz (not his real name), Salafi, north Azerbaijan, September 2007.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramil (not his real name), Salafi, north Azerbaijan, September 2007.

The *Khawarij* openly say God is their only authority, and they cannot respect the *kafir* (infidel) government. They want Azerbaijan to adopt Sharia (Islamic law), and some refuse to pay land taxes.<sup>121</sup> “The Brothers as they call each other, want an Islamic State”, explained Elchin Askerov, deputy head of SCWRO. “They consider bad Muslims those who do not agree with them”.<sup>122</sup> They are most likely influenced by Dagestan or the internet, but not Suleymanov, whom they consider a traitor. They told Crisis Group their models are the Dagestani villages of Chabanmakhi, Karamakhi and Kadar, where attempts were made between the two Chechen wars to run mini Islamic states.

For Kamran, a *Khawarij* from the north, “Islam is not a religion of peace, but a religion of fairness and laws. We used to respect Gamet Suleymanov, but after he wrote the book called *Attitude towards the Leaders*, we don’t recognise him. We don’t want to pay bribes to this government”.<sup>123</sup> While other northern Salafis are concerned that terrorism is erroneously associated with Islam, Kamran, when asked about the 11 September attacks, answered that “even if the terrorist attacks made innocent victims, only Allah can decide if these people were really innocent or not”. He also expressed solidarity with Muslim fighters: “I cannot go fighting in Afghanistan, because I am not in physical good shape, but I help with other things”. About the Aliyev government, he said, “it is not the right moment to do anything. They follow us too actively, we can not do anything right now”.

The *Khawarij* are the most likely to evolve into militant Islamist groupings. Small militant cells, such as Jeyshullah, discussed above, appear regularly and are dismantled by the state. However, less than 100 individuals can be identified as *Khawarij*. They have many differences among themselves and are not organised. Some tendencies are more radical than others; some groupings are purely local, with aims to change the nature of the Azerbaijani state. Some may get financial support from abroad. The means they are prepared to use are not uniform; some of the individuals are open to jihad, but most appear to be pacific.

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<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interview, with a Suleymanov opponent, Sheki, October 2007.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interview, Elcin Askerov, SCWRO deputy head, Baku, August 2007.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kamran, *Khawarij*, north Azerbaijan, November 2007.

## B. INDEPENDENT SHIITES

Independent Shiite groups which refuse CBM’s spiritual authority are active in Baku and some other towns.<sup>124</sup> Among them, three large independent communities in Baku have set up their own NGOs and publicly advocate for improved human rights standards and freedom of faith.

### 1. Independent communities

During the 1990s, the Juma Mosque Community became the most influential independent Shiite group in Baku. The elegant stone mosque in the Old City brought together some 3,000 faithful for Friday prayers but was closed on 30 June 2004 by the authorities, who planned to turn it into a carpet museum and tried to impose a new imam on the community.<sup>125</sup> They likely acted because the community’s imam, Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, was an outspoken critic and supported Isa Gambar, the opposition candidate, in the 2003 presidential election.<sup>126</sup> Ibrahimoglu was arrested on 1 December 2003, allegedly for organising the post-election protests. He received a five-year suspended sentence on 2 April 2004 and was freed the next day, after several embassies and NGOs intervened for him.<sup>127</sup>

The community was founded in 1992 by Haji Azer Ramizoglu, a self-educated religious figure, and Ibrahimoglu, a young, Iran-educated Azerbaijani, was elected imam. It rapidly drew large numbers, according to Ramizoglu, because “[o]ur aim was to show that Islam can be something different, that Islam is not only funerals and corrupted imams asking for money. I think the fact we had no collection box in the mosque played

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<sup>124</sup> Other independent Shiite communities are reportedly in Ganja, Khachmaz, Quba and Baku suburbs, Crisis Group interview, independent Shiite imam, Baku, October 2007. Other independent communities close to Iranian religious leaders are said to be in southern villages, Crisis Group interview, south Azerbaijan, October 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Police twice forcibly expelled hundred of believers and arrested some 80, “Police Storm Mosque, Expelling & Beating-up Muslims”, Forum 18, 30 June 2004; and “Twenty-Seven Juma Mosque Members Detained, Many Fined, Four Beaten”, Forum 18, 7 July 2004. The Juma Mosque refused to recognise CBM’s spiritual authority as required by the 1996 law on religious freedom.

<sup>126</sup> “I was not supporting Isa Gambar personally. I was against the Monarchy and genetic transmission of power”, said Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, head of the Juma Mosque Community, Crisis Group interview, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>127</sup> “Half-free Imam to Challenge Suspended Jail Sentence”, Forum 18, 5 April 2004.

a great role in our success".<sup>128</sup> It set up two NGOs, DEVAMM (Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion) to defend the rights of Azerbaijani believers,<sup>129</sup> and the Islam-Ittihad Society, on inter-religious dialogue and tolerance, which lobbied for the right to wear the *hijab* (headscarf) in photo identification.<sup>130</sup>

Rafiq Aliyev, the former SCWRO head, declared in 2004, "[r]ecently, he [Ibrahimoglu] has behaved as a politician and as a human rights defender more than as a religious person ... but he should not be at the same time a politician and a religious figure".<sup>131</sup> According to a follower, "the [CBM] was very unhappy with [us]. They consider that we are a political organisation because we don't respect their spiritual authority. It is just because we criticise corruption".<sup>132</sup> The community registered with the justice ministry in 1992 but did not try to re-register under the 1996 law. Ramizoglu said, "before 1998, when we had only religious activities and no human rights activities, we had no problems. But when we started to get involved in human rights activities and get support from Baku-based Western organisations, then the problems started. The media in particular started to criticise us".<sup>133</sup> He left Azerbaijan in November 2003 and now lives in exile in Georgia.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interview, Haji Azer Ramizoglu, former head of DEVAMM, Tbilisi, August 2007. All official mosques have a *nezir gutusu* (collection box) near their entrance. There are many rumours about how the money is spent.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> The community is involved in projects such as blood donation, anti-drug and alcohol campaigns, help to orphans and Islamic education. It also has a research centre, "Dar-Ul-Hikmet". See its website, [www.juma-az.org](http://www.juma-az.org). According to Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, hundreds of women could not vote in 2003 because they lacked valid passports. Women who refuse to be photographed without a *hijab* (headscarf) cannot renew identity cards. "Azerbaijan: Independent Muslim leaders safe, but pressure continues", Forum 18, 22 October 2003.

<sup>131</sup> "Azerbaijan: Rebellious Mosque of the Old Town", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 7 June 2004.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group interview, Fuad (not real name), member, Juma Mosque Community dissident branch, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interview, Haji Azer Ramizoglu, former head of DEVAMM, Tbilisi, August 2007.

<sup>134</sup> Ramizoglu was arrested in Georgia on 31 March 2006 on request of Azerbaijani authorities, who seek his extradition. He has been free on bail since 14 April 2006. In Azerbaijan he would be at risk of torture and ill treatment. Georgia has ratified the Convention against Torture, which prohibits forcible return of anyone to a country where there would be risk of torture. See "Georgia: Fear of forcible return/torture and ill-treatment: Azer Ramizoglu Samedov", Amnesty International, 20 April 2006.

Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is still active in Baku and claims more than 500 people remain in the community and attend his religious instruction weekly. He has not been able to return to the Juma Mosque but operates out of an office which is too small to meet the needs of all his followers. Asked to explain the aims of his community today, he stated: "We are religious people with a strong interest in civil society activism".<sup>135</sup> He condemns the government's human rights record, violations of religious freedom of religion and religious discrimination:

Today religious freedom is one of the most severely violated human rights in Azerbaijan. The state will not register religious communities that do not accept their choice of leader. The state threatens the leaders of independent religious communities, invades the homes of private citizens, beats and imprisons believers, and suppresses our public expression of religious belief. The victims are many – Muslims, Christians, and others. But the state's approach is short-sighted.<sup>136</sup>

He publishes widely in the Azeri press and on websites and has close ties to international NGOs dealing with religious freedom, including the International Religious Liberty Association and Forum 18. The community has its own weekly newspaper, *Deyerler*, and a website covering regional political and religious affairs.<sup>137</sup> Ibrahimoglu is the best known and politically vocal of Azerbaijan's religious leaders. Western observers generally consider him a moderate who uses European values of democracy and human rights to advance his cause.

Since the Juma Mosque's closure, the Dadash Mosque has become the largest independent Shiite place of worship in Baku. The community around Haji Shahin<sup>138</sup> has existed since the early 1990s, has had its own premises in a business district since 2002 and tends to attract wealthy and educated young people employed by nearby oil companies and international organisations. More than 800 attend Friday prayers, too many to fit inside the mosque, so many have to pray on the street. The community also has its own NGO, the Association for the Purity of Morality, which works on protection of religious rights, and its own newspaper, *Salam*.

The Dadash Mosque took advantage of more lenient procedures to register in October 2007. Haji Shahin

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<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interview, Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, head of Juma Mosque Community, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>136</sup> Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, speech, UN 61st Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, 5 April 2005. <http://www.beckettfund.org/index.php/article/381.html>.

<sup>137</sup> See [www.irla.org](http://www.irla.org), [www.forum18.org](http://www.forum18.org) and [www.deyerler.org](http://www.deyerler.org).

<sup>138</sup> He claims to be a self-educated imam but studied for some time in Iran, in Qazvin.



says the government has taken correct steps recently. “Radicalisation happens only when rights of believers are violated. It seems the state has understood. The radicals do not understand Islam and have no respect for differences”.<sup>139</sup>

The Javad Mosque Community in Baku also gathers hundreds of young people for Friday prayers in inadequate premises. It has its own NGO, Birlık, weekly newspaper and madrasa. Haji Namik, one of two imams, also teaches at Baku Islamic University<sup>140</sup> The community was refused registration in 1992 and 2001, reportedly because the government is suspicious of Haji Namik, who studied in Iran. Like the two other communities, the Javad Mosque is involved in developing civil society and promoting religious rights. “Today, our work is to develop civil society. We simply want to have rights, but we were told that we are radicals and that we want a revolution. Saying that, the government aims to decrease our popular support”, Haji Namik said.<sup>141</sup>

## 2. Other independent trends

Additional communities which do not recognise the authority of the Sheikh ul-Islam and CBM exist in Baku’s suburbs and other towns.<sup>142</sup> Most are unregistered and meet in flats. Ramizoglu said, “there is a boom of small, non-conventional religious communities that can hardly be controlled. They have political content, because there is no civil society in Azerbaijan. This radicalisation is a reaction to lack of democracy and state control”.<sup>143</sup> Some defy the authorities openly. After CBM declared Baku mosques could no longer play *azan* (call to prayer) in June 2007, Haji Abdul refused to obey: “Of course we did not stop playing *azan*. We even started to play it twice as loud so that CBM, which is close to our mosque, could hear it well”.<sup>144</sup> The ban caused an outcry and was soon lifted.

Official clergy also discreetly criticise SCWRO and CBM. Crisis Group met young clerics who played *azan* according to the Azerbaijani calendar in their mosques but, reflecting the greater respect many Azerbaijani Shiites have for Iranian religious leaders, prayed according to the Iranian one they considered “more righteous”.<sup>145</sup> More senior clerics expressed frustration that Shiite mosques cannot receive financial help from Iran, while Turkish mosques are entirely reconstructed, and Turkish Sunni Islam seems to be generally favoured by the regime.

In the south at least two communities do not recognise the Sheikh ul-Islam’s authority, but most local inhabitants are afraid to attend their mosques. “It is not a big issue, but it could become a problem if corruption continues in the government, because people are getting tired”, a local NGO representative said.<sup>146</sup> These communities, as well as the opposition and human rights NGOs, strongly criticised a December 2007 amendment to the education law that bans the wearing of veils and other religious attributes in educational institutions.<sup>147</sup> This is an example of Shiite NGOs rallying others to their causes. If discrimination against pious Shiites continues, they are more likely to mobilise politically and may even ally with repressed Sunnis or other religious communities.<sup>148</sup>

## 3. The Nardaran case

Nardaran, on the Caspian Sea, some 25km from Baku, is an important pilgrimage site and has become a centre of religious opposition to the state.<sup>149</sup> A self-governing village, with no official municipality structure, it is led by an assembly of elders promoting a strict version of Shiite Islam. Police are unable to enter – the villagers killed two who did enter in 2001 and “organized some provocations”.<sup>150</sup> In 2002, the police violently repressed

<sup>139</sup> Crisis Group interview, Haji Shahin, imam of Javad Mosque Community, Baku, October 2007.

<sup>140</sup> He was educated in Qom (Iran).

<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group interview, Haji Namik, head of Javad Mosque Community, Baku, October 2007.

<sup>142</sup> Important independent communities exist in Gandja, Sheki, Quba and southern cities. Some registered and formally recognise Pashazade’s authority; others still do not, and their names are withheld in this report to protect them.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interview, Haji Azer Ramizoglu, former head of DEVAMM, Tbilisi, August 2007.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interview, Haji Abdul, Baku, September 2007. Haji Abdul is imam of the Baku Hussein Mosque and leads the Tovbe Foundation, which helps youths to quit drugs and alcohol and has representations in many former Soviet republics. A well-known former member of parliament, he tried to stand for election several times but was repeatedly refused

registration as a candidate. His mosque was not registered after the 1996 amendments to the law on freedom of religion.

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Shiite official clerics, September-October 2007.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interview with NGO representatives, Lenkoran, October 2007.

<sup>147</sup> “MPs Cannot Reach Agreement upon Ban Imposed on Headscarves in Azerbaijan”, Trend News Agency, 27 December 2007.

<sup>148</sup> Haji Ilgar protects all believers in Azerbaijan, including Sunni groups and Christians, Crisis Group correspondence, Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, head of Juma Mosque Community, Tbilisi, January 2008.

<sup>149</sup> Nardaran’s opposition to state power dates to Soviet times.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interview, Alikram Aliyev, member of the elders’ assembly and former leader of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, Nardaran, September 2007.

riots there caused by social discontent.<sup>151</sup> One villager died and several were injured during the three-week operation. The leader of the movement Alikram Aliyev was arrested and sentenced to six years in prison.

“In Nardaran, the social question became a religious question”, Ramizoglu explained. “It got out of control for the first time in 2002, but the state reestablished control afterwards”.<sup>152</sup> Social frustrations in the village are expressed through religious slogans. “Islam is all we have left”, a resident told a BBC journalist in 2006. “If their government tries to come here, we will just kill them”, one shouted to Crisis Group analysts. “If they try to enter the village, we have a signal. We beat the gas pipes that cross the village. Then all young men gather on the central square. There is no way they can come here”.<sup>153</sup>

On 7 February 2006, the “caricature affair”<sup>154</sup> provoked some 100 Nardaran villagers to protest in the street and burn the Danish flag. On 9 February, Ashura day, 1,000 young protestors marched in the centre of Baku, chanting religious slogans, and delivered a complaint to the French embassy over re-publication of the cartoons by French media.<sup>155</sup> In November 2006, the journalist Rafiq Tagi published an article, “Europe and Us”, in which he wrote that Islamic values slow Azerbaijan’s development. Nardaran villagers were profoundly offended, organised protests and received Iran’s support in the form of a *fatwa* against the journalist.<sup>156</sup> The government arrested Tagi and the magazine editor, Samir Sadagatoglu, in November 2006; they were sentenced to three and four years’ imprisonment respectively, but were pardoned by presidential decree in December 2007. “Rafiq was not an opposition journalist; he was arrested because the government was really scared of a destabilisation manipulated by Iran”, a colleague said.<sup>157</sup>

The government has co-opted religious elites in surrounding villages, notably by financing mosque

reconstruction.<sup>158</sup> “We are not political here, that is why we have no problems with registering our madrasa”, said Djeyhuna, a woman from neighbouring Buzovna village who leads the only madrasa for women. “In Nardaran, they are totally politicised. We are not like that”.<sup>159</sup> Nardaran is an exception, but the tendency there to link Islam and social grievances could spread if discrimination against believers continues and economic grievances grow.

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<sup>151</sup> The protest started after the government cut gas to the villagers.

<sup>152</sup> Crisis Group interview, Haji Azer Ramizoglu, former head of DEVAMM, Tbilisi, August 2007.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bakhram (not his real name), Nardaran inhabitant, Nardaran, September 2007.

<sup>154</sup> Cartoons deemed insulting the Prophet and published in a Danish newspaper in September 2005 caused outrage across the Muslim world, “Muslim cartoon row timeline”, BBC News, 19 February 2006.

<sup>155</sup> See “Azerbaijan: Protesting for the Prophet, not for political change”, EurasiaNet, 17 February 2006.

<sup>156</sup> Mujtahid Fazil Lenkorani declared a *fatwa* against Tafiq Alyev and requested a death sentence.

<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rafiq Tagi colleague, Baku, September 2007.

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<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group interview, Busovna village, September 2007.

<sup>159</sup> Crisis Group interview, Djeyhuna (not her real name), Busovna, October 2007.

## IV. THE STATE REACTION

The Azerbaijan constitution separates religion and state, but two official institutions, CBM and SCWRO, oversee and control religious life. CBM has appointed clerics, monitored sermons and organised pilgrimages to Mecca since Soviet times. All religious communities must be registered by SCWRO and respect the spiritual authority of the CBM chair, Allahshukur Pashazade.

### A. STATE CONTROL OF RELIGION

After instability in the 1990s, when many foreign missionaries were allowed to propagandise with little oversight, Azerbaijan has retaken control over religious affairs mainly it says to protect national security.

#### 1. Legal framework

The constitution states that Azerbaijan is secular (Article 6), religion and state must be separate (Article 19), the education system is secular, all religions are equal before the law, and freedom of belief is guaranteed (Article 37). In practice, however, there is no full separation, as the state can interfere through the law on freedom of religion and SCWRO.

Independent religious communities consider the 1996 amendments to this law a significant infringement on religious freedom.<sup>160</sup> Based on them, the activities of foreign missionaries were banned, and the government required all religious organisations to re-register. According to new procedures, CBM is to identify and then recognise the status of the communities, which allows it to prevent registration of some independent and in particular Shiite communities.<sup>161</sup> CBM's monopoly is often criticised. "I consider there is a big lack of democracy in the obligation for all religious communities to respect the spiritual authority of Allahshukur Pashazade", an independent imam said.<sup>162</sup>

Until 2006, some independent communities reportedly benefited from rivalry between the SCWRO head, Rafiq Aliyev, and CBM to register without the latter's approval. But after Hidayat Orujov took over SCWRO in 2006,

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<sup>160</sup> Crisis Group interviews, independent clerics, Baku, October 2007.

<sup>161</sup> Juma, Javad, Dadash, and Top Karadj Mosque Communities were registered with the justice ministry before 1996. Only Dadash was registered under the new format, in October 2007, as was Abu Bakr Mosque. No Nurcu groups were registered.

<sup>162</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent imam, Baku, September 2007.

the institutions have coordinated better, and independent communities have rarely been allowed to register.<sup>163</sup>

These communities view state policy toward religion as unfair and full of double standards. "Under this law, every Jewish or Christian community can act freely, without having to respect a leader. But Muslim communities have to respect the Sheikh ul-Islam", the head of one complained. "There used to be many non-registered communities, but there are less and less now. All those who registered are more or less close to the government or to the Sheikh ul-Islam, and they are now toughly controlled. They are instructed on what to say", another said. "The law says, for example, that politics and religion must be separate. But prior to every election, the Sheikh ul-Islam openly supports the candidacy of the president. We are ready to collaborate with the state, but this is not fair", yet another independent religious leader said.<sup>164</sup>

Young religious students who studied in Turkey generally receive preferential treatment compared to those who studied in Iran. According to an SCWRO official, "we [SCWRO] have no problem with Iran and with students having studied there. There is no discrimination. We just make the difference between a neighbour [Iran] and a brother [Turkey]".<sup>165</sup> This has generated negative feelings in the Shiite communities, as an independent cleric underlined: "The policy of the state is not fair. On the one hand, they control all our religious activities, and, on the other hand, they allow all Turkish tendencies to enter the country". Some also complained that the government has closed their Koran courses, allowing only Turkey-sponsored ones to continue.<sup>166</sup>

Additional amendments to the religious freedom law have been considered since 2006, with the aim of tightening control over missionary organisations by further restricting registration and the activity of sects.<sup>167</sup> Some opposition and civil society activists urge provisions which would allow religious figures not paid by the state to run for office and free independent Islamic groups from the obligation to seek CBM approval.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Baku, October 2007; and correspondence, Islam scholar, Tbilisi, December 2007.

<sup>164</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent imam, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>165</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gunduz Ismaylov, religious affairs department head in the regions, SCWRO, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>166</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent Shiite imam, Baku, October 2007.

<sup>167</sup> Felix Corley, "Azerbaijan: Why and how will Religion Law be amended?", Forum 18, 14 August 2006.

<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, member of parliament Fazil Gazanfaroglu, member of Human Rights Commission and

However, religious communities, NGOs and research centres complain they are not being consulted. Discussion of the amendments, initially planned for early 2007, has been delayed several times. SCWRO's Orujov noted, "it is possible to make some technical changes, but overall, there is no need to change the [religion] law. I would even go further and say that in Azerbaijan there is no need for a law on religion".<sup>169</sup>

## 2. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations

SCWRO, the major state body charged with controlling the religious sphere, was established in 2001 to oversee registration and activities of religious communities.<sup>170</sup> It distributes a manual instructing how and what to preach to all registered communities and monitors religious activities daily. Gunduz Ismaylov, head of the department for religious affairs in the regions, explained:

We have a legal framework for religious communities. If they go out of that framework, we intervene. Because of the low level of Islamic education, some foreign missionaries are trying to fill the vacuum, sometimes with bad intentions. The state is trying to block this poisoning of minds. But it is very hard for us to treat the problem with administrative means. To me, the only solution is to fight against illiteracy and to educate national Islamic cadres. We cannot create a stable religious situation by using force. What we need is our own Islamic education so young students do not need to go abroad to study Islam.<sup>171</sup>

SCWRO does not control the exodus of young Azeris to study religion abroad, though it evidently would like to. "No one can now study religion abroad without informing the state. This results from agreements with Turkey and Egypt. If one goes without registering, no problem, but he will face difficulties in obtaining an

official clergy position when he comes back".<sup>172</sup> Particularly those who study in Iran rarely get such positions on return.

Although censorship was officially abolished in 1998, SCWRO's authorisation is required to publish religious literature. Only registered communities may publish, and their print run is limited.<sup>173</sup> There are also restrictions on importation of religious literature, although this concerns both Islamic and non-Islamic texts. SCWRO exercises strict control. In 2005, for example, it banned 92 religious books considered as promoting "political Islam". It maintains a confidential list of proscribed religious books, which includes works by the Iranian Ayatollah Fazil Lankarani.<sup>174</sup> In November 2007, the police prevented Koran sellers from working in the street and the metro by confiscating their books. Bookshop sellers confided that they were asked to remove religious books.<sup>175</sup>

Turkish groups are not immune from control. After the 1996 law changes, some nineteen Koran classes were closed throughout the country,<sup>176</sup> as were several madrasas. Nurcu mosques and madrasas have often been targeted, most recently in September 2007, when a madrasa in a southern Sunni village was closed. Closure of a Turkish teacher's Koran courses in a northern town in 2007 showed there is tight control over teachers sent by Ankara.<sup>177</sup>

## 3. The reform of the Caucasus Board of Muslims

"Official" Islam in Azerbaijan is managed by CBM, a nominally independent institution created in Soviet times. Its Shiite head, Sheikh ul-Islam Haji Allahshukur Pashazade, was appointed in 1980; his deputy, Mufti Haji Alaskar Musayev, is a Sunni. CBM supervises the appointments of mullahs, Islamic education and clerical salaries.<sup>178</sup>

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Haji Ilqar Ibrahimoglu, head of Juma Mosque Community, Baku, February 2008.

<sup>169</sup> "Hidayat Orujov: There is no need for a Law on Freedom of Religion", *525ci gazet*, 30 June 2007.

<sup>170</sup> Officially, SCWRO has four main functions: to guarantee the state's secularity and separation of religion and politics; to protect and develop religious tolerance; to ensure religious education within the secular model; and to control religious literature and ensure it does not damage relations between religions or the country's stability. It was also created to help counter Iranian influence on religious life. Balci, "Islam et politique dans l'Azerbaïdjan postsoviétique", op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>171</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gunduz Ismaylov, religious affairs department head in the regions, SCWRO, Baku, September 2007.

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<sup>172</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gunduz Ismaylov, religious affairs department head in the regions, SCWRO, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>173</sup> Under Azeri law, printers may not produce religious literature without authorisation for a specified number of copies from SCWRO. Imported literature is subject to inspection, "Why and how will Religion Law be amended?", Forum 18, 14 August 2006.

<sup>174</sup> A partial list of banned literature can be found at [www.islam.com.az/modules/news/article.php?storyid=242](http://www.islam.com.az/modules/news/article.php?storyid=242).

<sup>175</sup> "Is it forbidden to sell Koran in Azerbaijan?", *Day.Az*, 7 November 2007.

<sup>176</sup> A decree was issued by SCWRO, "Religious Bulletin", Turan News Agency, September 2007.

<sup>177</sup> See fn. 100 above.

<sup>178</sup> In 1989, the Soviet Spiritual Board of the Transcaucasian Muslims was renamed the Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM),

Official mullahs appointed by the Sheikh ul-Islam rarely enjoy popular respect. “Red mullahs” were considered Soviet government spies, and many retained their positions after the fall of communism. For this reason, and because of its monopoly on the organisation of pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, many consider CBM corrupt. “CBM is not a religious organisation, it deals with business”, said a Baku-based independent imam.<sup>179</sup> Pashazade’s involvement in domestic politics has further weakened CBM’s stature. He expressed unconditional support for ruling party candidates, particularly in the 1998 and 2003 presidential elections, and reportedly even threatened those who voted for the opposition.<sup>180</sup>

Many also believe CBM does too little to assist mosques and religious communities. Although it has considerable funds from organising pilgrimages and unaccounted donations from mosques it controls, most mosques have been rehabilitated through community self-help schemes or foreign help. “What is Pashazade doing for us?” asked an Astara woman. “He banned *azan*, he sends to the pilgrimage only people close to him, and he does nothing for our mosque. We repaired everything ourselves here!”<sup>181</sup>

CBM controls the Baku Islamic University and its four regional representations (Zakatala, Lenkoran, Sumgayit, Mingechevir), the only official sources of Islamic education. There is also a theology faculty, which operates independently of CBM at the state-owned Baku State University, but its quality is considered poor.<sup>182</sup>

In a bid to improve its image since 2002, CBM has reformed itself, prioritising the education of a new generation of clerics. First, it made efforts to attract young Azeris who studied religion abroad, in particular in Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and even Iran.<sup>183</sup> Secondly, new regional campuses of the Islamic

University<sup>184</sup> are producing a generation of well-educated clerics to replace many older mullahs. Crisis Group analysts found satisfaction with the new appointees, particularly in Sunni regions, where youth are attracted by their dynamism. Mehemmet Igidov, deputy head of the Zakatala/Balakan region clergy (*akhund*), said, “in the past, there was a low level of religious knowledge among the imams and a lot of corruption ... they could not even answer the religious questions people had. Now, these young mullahs can answer....This is the best way to eliminate radicalism”.<sup>185</sup> Thirdly, the CBM seeks to create a new national Islamic identity. Haji Saadi, head of the Lenkoran branch of the Baku Islamic University and a Shiite mullah from a traditional religious family, explained:

We do not want Turkish or Iranian tradition to govern us. We prefer to have our own traditions. We have now entered the internet generation, and Islam must adapt. Shiites always celebrate the Imam Hussein tragedy at Ashurah. They used to whip themselves. We put an end to that and replaced it with a blood donation.<sup>186</sup>

Not all these changes are appreciated by believers. Some of the old mullahs, although not educated in academic Islamic theological centres, were respected and supported. In some villages the mosques of newly appointed young mullahs are empty, while the old ones still celebrate funerals and tell believers their future.<sup>187</sup> And it remains difficult for Iran-educated clerics to gain CBM authorisation, so “many young graduates stay in Iran after they finish their studies”, Haji Saadi said.<sup>188</sup>

The reforms have resulted in better quality control over religious education, but they should go further to strengthen the formation of an independent and non-partisan clergy. CBM should appoint clerics based on

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with authority over all Shiites and Sunnis in the Caucasus. CBM is often accused of artificially increasing the cost of pilgrimages to Islamic holy sites and re-selling the unused Azerbaijani quota to Iran and Russian Muslims, mostly from Dagestan and Chechnya. See Yunusov, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-237.

<sup>179</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent imam, Baku, January 2008.

<sup>180</sup> Hajizade, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group interview, Astara Mosque congregants, Astara, October 2007.

<sup>182</sup> “But the level of education is very low”, the head of an independent community said. “Since there is only one university, everybody goes there. Because the state does not recognise the diploma, all young graduates have no other choice than to work in the CBM”, Crisis Group interview, independent community imam, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>183</sup> Crisis Group analysts met with some of the very few recently appointed official mullahs who have studied in Iran.

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<sup>184</sup> Branches were opened in Sumgayit and Mingechevir in 1997, in Zakatala in 1998 and Lenkoran in 2002, Crisis Group telephone interview, Baku Islamic University representative, January 2008.

<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mehemmet Igidov, deputy head of Zakatala/Balakan region *akhund* (member of the Islamic clergy), Zakatala, September 2007.

<sup>186</sup> The replacement of whipping by blood donation is an innovation also introduced in Iran. Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, the head of Juma Mosque Community, claims he first introduced this innovation in Azerbaijan and was copied afterwards by the CBM clergy.

<sup>187</sup> A traditional Muslim tradition in Azerbaijan by which mullahs may earn some money consists of paying a few manats to the mullah to write down some wishes in Arabic.

<sup>188</sup> According to Muslim tradition, a religious community elects its imam; CBM sometimes authorises a community to keep its elected imam; in other cases, it imposes its choice. Crisis Group interview, Haji Saadi, director, Lenkoran Islamic University, Lenkoran, October 2007.

merit and religious knowledge, rather than allegiance to the government.<sup>189</sup>

## B. STATE REPRESSION

In recent years, the authorities have repressed activities of some independent Islamic groups, in particular Salafis in the north, though other independent groups have also reported mistreatment.<sup>190</sup> Salafis are generally treated with suspicion: the media, government and official Shiite clergy all help to create an image of them as potential terrorists. Although civil society actors are aware of the risk that harassment could radicalise these groups, most NGOs do not strongly defend their rights.<sup>191</sup>

Most rights defenders come from the national-democratic camp and have strong secular traditions. They prefer to deal with other more popular cases relating to imprisoned journalists and freedom of speech. Few choose to deal with the unpopular job of defending the right to fair trial for the alleged Islamic radicals.<sup>192</sup>

Police mistreatment in the north began in 2001 with degrading beard checks, forced shavings of beards and beatings.<sup>193</sup> In a northern town, a police officer told Crisis Group the police have “strongly advised [Salafis] to shave their beards”, because their appearance “scares children”.<sup>194</sup> Successive “verification” campaigns have detained dozens of men in local police stations for two to seven days. “I was arrested and shaved three times”, confided Ekhtiram, a 70-year-old Salafi. “When I went to the police, they insulted me. We are all profoundly stressed with this pressure”.<sup>195</sup> In another town, a young man said without going into detail, “they are doing

humiliating things that a man cannot survive. If they beat, that’s fine, Allah will judge. But for the rest...”<sup>196</sup>

“They visit our houses, look for weapons....They do not even try to know who we are. They just tell us to shut up”, complained Alesker. “They came to my house three times. Even my neighbours are now looking at me suspiciously”.<sup>197</sup> Afyyadin added that several men were arrested and severely beaten in October 2007 in another northern mosque. “They were forced to sign a paper stating they hadn’t been beaten at the police station but on the street. During their arrest, they say they were insulted and repeatedly told they ‘are lower than dogs’. We explain to them that we are not *Khawarij*, but they do not make the difference. We are just so tired”.<sup>198</sup>

In October-November 2007, following a reported terrorist plot in Baku, the national security and interior ministries conducted a joint “verification” campaign countrywide. Dozens of Salafis, including Mirza Alibekov,<sup>199</sup> an imam in Devechi region, were arrested and detained at local police stations on charges of “resisting police”. Among them was Asker Rustamov, one of the former pardoned Salafi “Karabakh partisans”; he was also accused of illegal possession of arms after police found several bullets in his house which relatives say were planted.<sup>200</sup> A Baku journalist who has investigated such cases for years says many young Salafis have disappeared. “We do not even know if they were sentenced”.<sup>201</sup> Northern Salafis say their community used to be far bigger, but many young bearded men have left.<sup>202</sup> In December 2007, the penitentiary service head, Nazim Alekberov, said 60 to 70 Wahhabis are

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<sup>189</sup> Crisis Group observed in October-November 2007 that all CBM clerics have a portrait of President Aliyev in their offices.

<sup>190</sup> A highly regarded Sufi sheikh in Zakatala region said the police force men with beards to shave because they consider a beard the symbol of radical Islam. He said he must either be shaved or go to jail for five days. Police sometimes bring a barber to a bearded man’s home, he said. Crisis Group correspondence, foreign Islam scholar of Islam, Tbilisi, January 2008.

<sup>191</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil rights activists, Baku, February 2008.

<sup>192</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Leyla Yunus, human rights defender, February 2008.

<sup>193</sup> In Zakatala, Balakan, Sheki, Gusar, Quba and Khachmaz, Crisis Group interview, Elman Osmanov, defence lawyer, February 2008.

<sup>194</sup> Crisis Group interview, police representative, north Azerbaijan, October 2007.

<sup>195</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ekhtiram (not his real name), north Azerbaijan, October 2007.

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<sup>196</sup> Crisis Group interview, Fakhreddin (not his real name), north Azerbaijan, September 2007.

<sup>197</sup> Crisis Group interview, Alesker (not his real name), north Azerbaijan, October 2007.

<sup>198</sup> Crisis Group interview, Afyyadin (not his real name), north Azerbaijan, October 2007.

<sup>199</sup> “The imam of the Devechi wahhabis arrested”, APA News Agency, 29 October 2007. Mirza Alibekov was sentenced to fifteen days in jail. According to Anar Valiyev, “The two faces”, op. cit., he is a pious Salafi with no links to jihadi groups. Alibekov, along with four others, was detained again on 13 March 2008 on charges that remain unclear.

<sup>200</sup> Crisis Group interview, Akif Nagy, chair, Karabakh Liberation Organisation; also see, “Karabakh partisans now face persecution because of their religiousness”, *525ci gazet*, 22 November 2007.

<sup>201</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent journalist, Baku, October 2007.

<sup>202</sup> Northern Salafis reported that many “brothers” moved to Baku because of intense repression in the north. Some alleged that hundreds are now in jails. Crisis Group interviews, north Azerbaijan, October-November 2007.

currently in prison and added, “fifteen of them appealed to us, denouncing their previous beliefs”.<sup>203</sup>

Assessments of the threat of radicalisation vary. “I do not think that there is any danger with Salafis and Nurcus”, an official Sunni imam in a northern town said. “This is just a governmental ‘prevention’ policy”.<sup>204</sup> Gunduz Ismaylov of SCWRO argued that “among the *Khawarij*, there are two tendencies, a soft one and a radical one. The state accepts those who accept the law. But if they do not, then there is a reaction. Some of them want to implement a caliphate in Azerbaijan!”<sup>205</sup> Local police justified their actions as a fight against criminality hiding behind religion.<sup>206</sup> However, those actions suggest they rarely distinguish between peaceful and militant Salafis.

A number of interviewees warned that government actions provoke extremism among believers. Alesker, a young Salafi, said, “by beating us, they want to take out the faith from us, but they do not understand that it is not possible. They will obtain exactly the contrary. If you keep telling me that I am a bad person, I will become a bad person”.<sup>207</sup> An independent imam added, “such methods do not fight radicalism but actually facilitate its increase”.<sup>208</sup> “Look at Dagestan!” an independent rights activist seconded. “Do we want to have the same here?”<sup>209</sup> “The more injustice people see, the more they will resort to religion, trying to find the solutions that they did not find in the society”, a local expert concluded.<sup>210</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

The independent communities identified throughout this report do not appear to pose a genuine threat to the government or to a secular way of life. Almost no group in the country can be considered jihadist. The few groups that openly voice a desire to establish an Islamic state lack a significant following and a strategic vision of how to implement their goal. But exaggeration of the Islamic threat has been used to justify repression and control of religious life, which risks leading to politicisation and possible radicalisation of the many more who have suffered from police brutality even if they were originally apolitical and purely religious.

The government has started to strengthen respected moderate voices in the religious establishment, but it should do more, including putting greater effort into formal religious education of average citizens and aspiring clerics alike. A national public debate involving independent and official clerics, scholars and NGOs should be organised to define optimal relations between Islam, including independent Islam, and the state and the means to more effectively guarantee religious freedom. Independent religious communities, in particular Salafi groups, should in turn clearly warn their members of risks connected to terrorism and militantism and should engage in genuine dialogue with official clergy and Azerbaijani authorities.

**Baku/Tbilisi/Brussels, 25 March 2008**

<sup>203</sup> “Head of penitentiary service of Azerbaijan: There are some 60-70 Wahhabi prisoners in the country’s penitentiary institutions”, *Day.az*, 7 December 2007.

<sup>204</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sunni official imam, November 2007.

<sup>205</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gunduz Ismaylov, department head, religious affairs in the regions, SCWRO, Baku, September 2007.

<sup>206</sup> Crisis Group interview, police representative, north Azerbaijan, October 2007.

<sup>207</sup> Crisis Group interview, Alesker (not his real name), north Azerbaijan, October 2007. He added, “people here [north Azerbaijan] all want to grow a beard, but they cannot. We talk to them about religion, we explain to them what real Islam is. Unlike the police, we have something to offer them. Allah is all that we have left”.

<sup>208</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent imam, Baku, December 2007.

<sup>209</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent human rights activist, Baku, February 2008.

<sup>210</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tofiq Turkel, Turan News Agency expert, February 2008.

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF AZERBAIJAN

