

[Navigation](#) – [Plan du site](#)

Logo EHESS

[Archives de sciences sociales des religions](#)

- [fr](#)
- [en](#)
- [es](#)
- [it](#)

[Accueil](#) > [Numéros](#) > [115](#) > **Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan**

[Sommaire](#) - [Document précédent](#) - [Document suivant](#)

[115 | juillet-septembre 2001 : Islam et politique dans le monde \(ex-\)communiste](#)

Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*

Raoul Motika

p. 111-124

[Résumé](#) | [Index](#) | [Texte](#) | [Bibliographie](#) | [Notes](#) | [Citation](#) | [Auteur](#)

Résumés

[English](#) [Français](#) [Español](#)

Islam in Azerbaijan is a multifaceted phenomenon which can be understood only in the context of a society in transition. One of the most important problems of Azerbaijani Islam is the relationship between Shi'ism and Sunnite Islam which is still dominated by an ecumenical and sometimes eclectic spirit. This situation is increasingly beleaguered by foreign missionaries on the one hand and put under pressure by the dynamic development of Azerbaijani society on the other hand. Nowadays Islam plays only a very limited role in the political sphere and only a small part of the population supports the idea of establishing an 'Islamic order'. This is due to the long tradition of secularism in Azerbaijan and to the fact that the strong nationalistic movement is secular in character and sometimes even

fighters together with the ruling elite against their rival, political Islam. But, on the longer run and if the political elite of Azerbaijan does not succeed in improving the disastrous standard of living of the vast majority of the people, the population may express its discontent through a politicized form of Islam.

L'islam en Azerbaïdjan représente un phénomène complexe qu'on ne peut comprendre que dans le contexte d'une société en transition. L'un des problèmes les plus importants de l'islam en Azerbaïdjan est celui des relations entre l'islam sunnite et l'islam chiite qui sont encore dominées par un esprit œcuménique et parfois éclectique. La situation est menacée par les missionnaires étrangers d'un côté et la pression d'une société en transition dynamique de l'autre. Aujourd'hui, l'islam joue un rôle peu important dans le domaine politique, et la majorité de la population de l'Azerbaïdjan ne favorise pas l'établissement d'un « ordre islamique ». Cela est dû à une longue tradition de sécularisation en Azerbaïdjan et au fait que le puissant mouvement nationaliste est lui-même sécularisé, et lutte côte à côte avec l'élite gouvernementale contre leur rival commun, l'islam politique. Mais, à long terme, et surtout si l'élite politique n'arrive pas à élever le niveau de vie, lamentable à l'heure actuelle, de la grande majorité de la population, celle-ci pourrait exprimer son mécontentement sous forme d'un intégrisme islamique.

El Islam en Azerbaijan representa un fenómeno complejo que solo puede ser comprendido en el contexto de una sociedad en transición. Uno de los fenómenos más importantes del Islam en Azerbaijan es el de las relaciones entre el Islam sunnita y el Islam chiíta, entre los que aún prevalece un espíritu ecuménico, y a veces aún ecléctico. La situación es tanto más grave en tanto hay misioneros extranjeros por un lado, y la presión de una sociedad en transición dinámica por el otro. Hoy, el Islam juega un rol poco importante en el ámbito político, y la mayor parte de la población de Azerbaijan no es partidaria del establecimiento de un « orden islámico ». Esto se debe a una larga tradición de secularización en Azerbaijan, y al hecho de que incluso el potente movimiento nacionalista está secularizado, y lucha codo a codo con la elite gubernamental contra el rival común, el Islam político. Pero a largo plazo, y sobre todo si la elite política no llega a elevar el nivel de vida de la gran mayoría de la población, lamentable en el momento actual, esta podría expresar su descontento bajo la forma de un integrismo islámico.

[Haut de page](#)

Texte intégral

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- * I would like to thank my Azerbaijani friends Dr. Sämäd Mirzoyev for his help during my research sta [\(...\)](#)

- 1 See for example FAR-Centre Monitoring Grupu, 1996, pp. 9-11 and the conception of the Azerbaijan P (...)
- 2 Cf. the examples presented in Raoul MOTIKA, 2000, pp. 128-140.

1The “Search for Identity” is a common feature of ex-Socialist societies in transition. Like in other republics of the former Soviet Union the dissolution of the communist system left the Azerbaijani society in an unexpected economic and sometimes humanitarian catastrophe. At the same time, the need for a reassessment of the country's past and present emerged in society. It goes without saying that religion, i.e. Islam, could and, according to many local intellectuals, should play an important role in the formation of the Azerbaijani nation.¹ Moreover, many common people showed an increasing interest in their formerly condemned Islamic roots and turned towards religion, some even by joining religious networks, in order to find spiritual as well as material relief to get through the hard times².

2The framework in which I would like to present some aspects of Islam in present-day Southern Caucasia is mainly defined by the borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In contrast to the opinion that Islam displays a more or less uniform character in all former Muslim Soviet republics, it is true to say that in these countries Islam was basically shaped by the specific circumstances of each republic, rather than by international Islamic movements and trends. This is particularly true in the case of Azerbaijan.

- 3 Because of non-existing statistics these information may only be taken as a guideline. Besides, the (...)

3We may assume that at present about 93% out of more than 7.5 million Azerbaijanis have a Muslim background and from this majority 65% to 75% are connected with Shi'ite traditions³.

- 4 Alexandre BENNIGSEN, S. Enders WIMBUSH, 1986, p. 139.
- 5 For detailed information about the ethnic composition of the population and their religious backgro (...)

4Azeri Turks form by far the largest Muslim ethnic group in Azerbaijan and belong mostly to the Twelver Shi'ite branch of Islam (about 75%)⁴. Next come the Lesgins, Talysh, Tatars, Kurds, Tats, Meskhets and some smaller Caucasian ethno-linguistic groups; historically all of them, except the Talysh and some Kurds and Tats, were Sunnites (belonging to the Hanafi school)⁵. Although religious knowledge is, for the most part, very poor, the inhabitants of the different regions of the country have preserved a memory of their Shi'ite or Sunnite background on varying levels.

- 6 Based on oral information given in September 1997 by a staff member of the FAR CENTRE (Centre of Ec (...)

5According to a quite reliable survey, 4% to 6% of the population may be called “active” believers, which means that they obey the various Islamic regulations of behaviour; 87% to 92% do consider themselves as Muslims, but comply with only a (quite often little) part of the religious regulations. Only about 3% call themselves atheists⁶. In general, the degree of religiosity is higher in some Shi'ite regions, i.e. in Southern Azerbaijan and on the Apsheron Peninsula (Baku and its outskirts) than in those areas inhabited by Sunnites; it is also higher in towns than in the countryside. Islamic marriage and funeral rites are widely followed whereas active participation in Muharram mourning is not that common despite a quite impressive number of visitors to the mosques during religious festivals.

- 7 This figure includes the unregistered places of worship ; some 16 (14 Shi'a, 2 Sunni) were under t (...)
- 8 Based on an oral information by the *Qafqazya Müsülmanlar darəsi*. However, the numbers given by dif (...)

6Whereas in 1976 there were 16 registered mosques and one *mädräsä* (Islamic school) in Azerbaijan, there were at the end of the Soviet period already about 200 mosques⁷, and until today this figure has increased explosively to more than 1,300 mosques⁸, innumerable Islamic schools, a working Islamic university, another, financed by the Saudis, in preparation and a Turkish sponsored *lâhiyat Fakü-Itesi*. The phenomenon of a “religious renaissance”, taking place in parallel with a “national rebirth” or “birth”, is a fact which cannot be ignored.

7Of special interest is the fact that Shi'ism as well as the common Azeri-Turkish ethno-linguistic background relates the Azerbaijani Azeri Turks closely to their brethren in Iran. The close relationship between both Azeri populations is not only based on their common language and a common Shi'ite background, but also built on a culture influenced by centuries of Iranian cultural dominance.

- 9 For detailed information on the history of the “Two Azerbaijan”, cf. Tadeusz SWIETOCHOWSKI, 1995.

8However, since Iran's loss of hegemony over the khanates north of the Aras river due to the advance of Czarist Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Azeris of that region have gradually developed several features differentiating them from the Azeri population of Iran. While a secularisation and Turkification process gained momentum in Russian Azerbaijan, Shi'ite Islam remained the dominating superstructure, along with an intensification of Irano-Persian cultural influence in Iranian Azerbaijan. A crucial period in this respect was the time of the Stalinist and the Pahlavi regimes, which isolated the two Azerbaijan from each other quite effectively⁹. The decisive historical event which fundamentally changed the relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan was the tearing down of the “Iron Curtain” in the winter of 1990 when the border fortifications were pulled down by the people of Nakhichevan.

9The pre-Soviet and Soviet processes of secularisation in Azerbaijan led to the general acceptance of a secular political and juridical system as well as a lay system of education. So, Islamic identity is a part of, or even subordinate to a mainly non-religious self-definition which is not only the product of Soviet nationality policy, but has much deeper roots. Secularisation and modernisation in Azerbaijan have their origins in the second half of the XIXth century, when Caucasian Muslims confronted with Czarist colonialism and growing Armenian nationalism started to re-define themselves and began to fight for a better position for their community. The slogan “Turkism, Modernisation and Islam” originating from *Musavat*, the leading party of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920) stands for its own. Today, the debate about the exact meaning of “Turkism”, which some see as a Pan-Turkish ideology opposed to “Azerbaijanism” and others interpret as Azerbaijani nationalism only imbedded into a greater Turkic cultural context, still continues. Obviously, Islam plays a crucial role in that vision, but only in third place.

- 10 Alexandre BENNIGSEN , S. Enders WIMBUSH, *op.cit.*, p. 140f give a figure of 300 major places and na ([...](#))
- 11 Alexandre BENNIGSEN , S. Enders WIMBUSH, *op.cit.*, p. 140.

10While most Azerbaijanis regard Islam as being part of their national identity, any intermingling of religion with the political sphere, however, is rejected by the vast majority of the population. On the other hand, one should not ignore the fact that Islamic traditions and beliefs are often an integral part of everyday life, but are primarily seen as national, not religious traditions. During the Soviet period religious praxis largely became individualised, e.g. the belief in magical practices became a widespread phenomenon and pilgrimages to the numerous holy shrines were and still are very popular¹⁰. This development is directly connected to the destruction of the clerical structures during the atheist campaigns of the twenties and the brutal Stalinist purges of the thirties. Since 1928 Soviet Azerbaijanis have also been isolated from the Shi'ite centres of religious learning in Iran and Iraq. As a consequence, in the middle of the 1980s the number of official mullahs throughout Azerbaijan was estimated at 50-70 men¹¹. Those had a comparatively low level of theological expertise caused by the restrictions on the Islamic institutions of learning in the Soviet Union. Therefore, Shi'ite Azerbaijan could not develop a religious hierarchy comparable to Iran or Iraq with Ayatollahs or even a *marjac-i taql d* ('source for emulation') at the top, a fact which in future will automatically lead to a growing orientation towards Qom, Najaf and other places of Shi'ite higher learning.

- 12 On January 7 1996 President Äliyev issued a decree forbidding missionary activities of foreigners ([...](#))
- 13 Interview with the leadership of the Party in Baku on September 12, 1997. Cf. also to the newspaper ([...](#))

11The so-called unofficial Islam was too heterogeneous a phenomenon to play as

such any decisive role. Most of the unofficial mullahs were private individuals with some religious knowledge and/or a religious family background. However, some of these religious men could gain political power in a number of traditional suburbs of Baku on the Apsheron Peninsula between 1988 and 1993, when the communist system broke down and the national-democratic People's Front ruled for about one difficult year. These were also the years when Iranian clerics and missionaries appeared in great numbers all over Azerbaijan set about helping to restore religious life in the country and influencing the future shape of Islam in Azerbaijan¹². They tried to use this period of change and instability, which was also a time of great curiosity about Islam, to build the basis for further agitation and influence. But 180 years of Czarist and Soviet rule as well as local traditions laid a very strong foundation for a distinctive perspective of Islam in Azerbaijan. And as nationalism in Azerbaijan is very much based on the specific idea of Turkism, Iran, despite the common Shi'ite background, could not serve as a model for a national state combining ethno-nationalism with Islam. The Iranian revolution of 1979-1980 perceived as an example for the mobilising power of Islam against a secular regime, however, exerted considerable influence by giving Azerbaijani religious activists self-confidence vis-a-vis the communist oppression. But, the Islamic Republic could never hope to get very far with its aspirations. First, because of the completely different structure of the Azerbaijani society from the Iranian one, e.g. the nonexistence of a comparable clergy independent from the state. Second, because of the different role religion plays in each country and third because of the bad reputation Iran has in Azerbaijan. The causes for this bad reputation are numerous, only to mention some: the Islamic Republic of Iran is perceived mainly as oppressor of the Azeri brethren living across the Aras river, even worse than the Soviet Union; the good relationship between the Islamic Republic and Armenia, Azerbaijan's arch enemy in the Karabagh war; years of anti-Iranian propaganda by the Soviet media; and the unattractiveness of the Iranian model. Insofar, copying the Iranian model was never a realistic option for the Azerbaijanis. Even Iran's close ally in Azerbaijan, the Islamic Party, sees no chance for the establishment of *vel yat-e faq h* in Azerbaijan in foreseeable future¹³.

¹²When Heydär Äliyev came to power in summer 1993, he restored order and finally expelled most of the Iranian missionaries with the exception of some mullahs working in refugee camps financed by Iran. Therefore the direct influence of Iranian mullahs on Azerbaijani believers is very limited and generally channelled through local pro-Iranian religious functionaries. Moreover, we ought not to forget that a considerable number of the higher Shi'ite clergy in Iran does not accept the idea of a theocratic regime and therefore when an Azerbaijani believer chooses a certain Iranian (or Iraqi) Great Ayatollah as spiritual leader, this does not necessarily mean that he or she backs an Islamist political stance.

- 14 Besides Islamic and Christian-evangelical missionaries who allegedly converted 2,000 people to Chri (...)
- 15 According to the head of the Committee for Religion at the Council of

Ministers of the Republic of (...)

- 16 Besides political reasons, financial ones can also cause severe problems for the different religious (...)

13As for the normative framework of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the laws regarding religion are quite clear. In Article 6 of the constitution, Azerbaijan is declared a secular state. This point is driven home in Article 19 with the statement of the separation of religion and state and the equality of all religions before the law as well as the secular character of the state educational system. In Article 37 religious freedom is proclaimed for individuals and groups. But, in principle all associations, both religious and non-religious, have to be registered by the state, although this was more or less a formality until 1997. Because of the activities of foreign, Christian-evangelical as well as fundamentalist Islamic, missionaries and because of the dynamic spreading of religious groups, in 1996 the Azerbaijani Parliament adopted an amendment to the law 'On Religious Faith' banning the activities of foreign missionaries¹⁴. In autumn 1997 the government demanded re-registration of all religious communities requiring the approval by "traditional religious organisations". This was extremely difficult for certain groups¹⁵. For this restrictive policy the Russian and Armenian religious laws may have served as a model. According to these laws so-called "non-historical religious communities" have no chance for official registration. Theoretically, for all Islamic organisations asking for registration approval by the semi-official "Administration of the Caucasian Muslims" (*Qafqazya Müsülmanlar darəsi*; hereafter: *QM*) is mandatory. For obvious reasons the *QM* strongly opposes all religious groups which want to stay independent and might emerge as its rivals. As long as these unregistered groups keep a low profile the state apparatus, however, does not show the slightest interest in actively impeding them¹⁶.

- 17 Cf. for example the speech of President Äliyev held on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday in th (...)

14Parallel to the leaders of other CIS-republics the Azerbaijani state leadership tries to use religion to strengthen its legitimacy. This is e.g. demonstrated by President Äliyev's widely celebrated *hajj*, Koran recitations during political festivities and the incorporation of religious holidays into the official calendar¹⁷. Besides some tiny successor organisations to the Communist Party, all other political parties, pro-government and opposition alike, pay lip service to Islam in one form or another, claiming that religion is part of their national identity as Muslim Azerbaijani Turks. Main components of this identity are the Azeri-Turkish language and the idea of a common history as well as a set of cultural norms stemming from the Islamic background. Thus, Islam is tightly bound up with the idea of an Azerbaijani nation which is part of the Turkic and Islamic world. Hence, it is not astonishing that the fact of nominally being Muslim served as a marker of difference to distinguish themselves from the nominally Christian Armenians during the bloody conflict about Nagorno Karabagh (the same is true for the constructed Armenian identity). This assumption, however, should not

lead us to interpret a mainly territorial conflict as a religious one.

- 18 The topic 'women and Islam in Azerbaijan' is treated by Nayereh TOHIDI, 1998, pp. 137-161 ; Nayere ([...](#))

15Another remarkable fact is that during the Soviet period the relational patterns of women and Islam changed considerably: since women were hardly represented in the male dominated Islamic hierarchy and men were much more integrated into the Soviet system, the destruction of the Islamic structures strengthened the role of women as guardians of religious tradition. In pre-Soviet times women traditionally expressed their religiousness mostly in private which after the Bolsheviks' takeover of the country helped them to escape persecution. As a result women more than men became safeguardians and conveyers of religious knowledge (often in a rudimentary form). Therefore holy places are mainly visited by women and some women even function as "female mullahs", a few even did before in Soviet times¹⁸.

16Thus, on the basis of my assumption that the face of contemporary Islam in Azerbaijan is basically shaped by the Soviet past, I want to present five different layers of Islam in Azerbaijan.

17*First layer:* the official hierarchy renamed after 1989 from *Zaqafqaziya Müsälmanlari Ruhani darəsi* ("Spiritual Board of the Transcaucasian Muslims") to *Qafqazya Müsülmanlar darəsi* ("Administration of the Caucasian Muslims") and since 1980 headed by the Shi'ite *eyhülislam* Hacı Allah ükür Pa azadä with a Sunnite deputy, the *Müftü* Hacı Äläskär Musayev, representing the 30-plus percentage of people with a Sunni background living in the Republic. The authority of the institution theoretically extends over all Shi'ites of the CIS and the Sunnites of all Caucasian areas. In reality its influence is limited mainly to the Muslims of Georgia, Shi'ite Azeris as well as Sunnite Adjars, and the Shi'ite Azeris of Daghestan. Besides, the *eyhülislam* head of the *Qafqazya Xalqlar Äli Din urası* ("High Religious Council of the Caucasian Peoples", founded 1993) consisting of representatives of the Islamic as well as of the Christian hierarchies.

18The *QM* is, in theory, controlled by a regionally elected body of 25 *Qazis*, the so-called *Qazilər urası*. There have been no elections held for years now and even the *eyhülislam* and the whole governing body of the administration should have been the subject of an election for several years now. That these elections have been postponed year after year indicates the complicated situation the official hierarchy is facing due to its bad image as an organisation, controlled by the KGB during the Soviet years, about which also rumours of corruption are going around. By many believers the *eyhülislam* is regarded as an opportunist because he welcomed every single political change during the last 15 years with the same degree of enthusiasm. When President Äliyev tries to show his respect to religion, he is using the leadership of the *QM* by calling them to deliver some prayers before his speeches on the occasion of a religious holiday. But, this attitude of the

QM leadership could also be interpreted as neutral behaviour towards the political power and acceptance of the supremacy of politics over the clerical structures, thus reflecting the framework set by the constitution.

- 19 According to an information given by the *eyhülislam* beginning of July 1999.
- 20 The fees asked from the population are a steady point of complaint. Even Abdülkadir Sezgin, the Tur [\(...\)](#)

19At present the QM seeks to extend its influence and to broaden its material basis. In 1999 there were some 1,300 Mosques in Azerbaijan of which about 1000 were under direct supervision of the QM [19](#). This process was backed by the state and positively influenced by the possibility of channelling foreign financial and material aid through the Institution's networks. But, in practice the mosques have to finance themselves; thus, most of the income of the local mosques still stems from fees rendered to them by the population for marriage and funeral services [20](#). In this context it is understandable that foreign mullahs and imams are unwelcome competitors for the scarce resources. In this struggle an important tool of control is the question of official registration of religious organisations by the state. In this matter the QM was able to get the right of veto from the state, at least with regard to Islamic institutions. A step which greatly enhanced its position. The situation is being complicated by the fact that a former deputy of the *eyhülislam*, Hacı Sabir, who is now Rector of the *slam Universiteti*, is at loggerheads with Allah ükür Pa azadä.

20The *Islam Universiteti* (a former *mädräsä* gaining its university status in 1992) was founded with the aim of preparing a new generation of well-educated mullahs to replace the self-declared ones. Another important goal is to become less dependant on sending religious students abroad for their Islamic education. Intentionally or unintentionally the education of Azerbaijani clergymen abroad shapes their future *Weltsicht* (vision du monde) and may serve as an important channel for influences alien to local traditions. In 1996 about 120 Azerbaijani students officially studied theology mainly in Egypt, Iran, Libya and Syria (in each country 25-45); only a handful in Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Most of them received grants from the governments or from organisations/foundations of their host countries. At present about 200 mostly male students study at the Islam University the traditional Islamic sciences, world history and foreign languages (Persian and English). Except for the *fiqh*-classes there exist no different curricula for Shi'a and Sunni students. As explained by an official of the University, the high tuition fees are, despite the economic misery and the low wages of the students' parents, no obstacle because of the good prospects for the graduates to get a post at a mosque. Since the appointment to a mosque or the taking over of a mosque from somebody else opens considerable possibilities for revenues gained by collecting the fees for marriage contracts as well as for funeral services, the competition in this field may be strong in the future.

- 21 E.g. in the Göy Mäscidi of Baku.

21 In regard to the religious ideology, the Board and the official Islamic University are trying to develop a national Azerbaijani brand of Islam by diminishing Shi'a-Sunni differences and fighting against foreign missionaries under the pretext of keeping the so-called unique peaceful coexistence of both branches of Islam. Azerbaijan may be the sole Islamic country where adherents of both sects pray together in the same mosque²¹, sometimes even led by the same mullah performing both prayer rites.

22 Representatives of this institution take part in the country's *Älmi slam urasi* ('Scientific Islamic Council') comprising of academics as well as of religious functionaries. Some members of this body of about 23 members, which is seeking to develop a national religious policy, publish commentaries and interpretations of important questions like the compulsory nature of the Islamic law and the status of women. Some of these interpretations are innovative and reform-minded.

23 When it comes to politics, the leaders of the *QM* pay their lip-service to the principle of a secular state, but demand at the same time the adoption of Islam as state religion, the integration of Islamic law into the legal system and try to widen the influence of Islam in the public sphere.

- 22 Interview with Hacı Nizam in *övälän* on September 21 1997.

24 The most important competitor for funds is the *second layer* of Azerbaijani Islam – *Popular Religiosity*. A spectacular example for this is the *Ziyarätgah* of Ät Aqa in *övälän* on the fringes of Baku. In 1992 a certain Hacı Nizam occupied the place to put everything in a proper order as he proclaimed. The shrine earns millions of Manats (the Azerbaijani currency) through a steady stream of pilgrims to the place. So, Hacı Nizam could afford to build really impressive buildings and feeds hundreds of poor people every day, a fact which secures him a large following. Up to now he could defend his position against the claims of the *QM*. This can mean that he has some protection by the ruling elite – perhaps because he shares the income of the shrine with them as some people spread around. It is not astonishing that he is backing the principle of a secular state and rejects the Islamic Party²².

- 23 Built by *He 'yat al- 'm l al-hayriyyet*.
- 24 Based on an oral information by a local.

25 In some places, shrines may also be in direct conflict with mosques like in the Sunnite village of Märazä where in 1997 representatives of the *Mas ed al-muh bbat al-Maraza*²³ unsuccessfully tried to make propaganda against the *ziyarätgah* of Diri Baba²⁴.

26 My impression is that these kind of shrines represent the most popular form of

Islam in Azerbaijan helping the people very much to bear the hardships of a society in transition. And if a religious entrepreneur organises the shrine properly this, in the eyes of the visitors, is also a proof of the “saint's” spiritual power. Visiting shrines is also a form of expressing religious feelings without getting into conflict with the secular society and the state.

- 25 Interview with Sheykh Äläskär on September 18 1997.

27 Many representatives of the *third layer* of Azeri Islam – the *self-declared mullahs or religious leaders* - are very much opposed to shrines and to popular religion connected to so-called non-Islamic behaviour. Some of them, like Sheykh Äläskär from Ämircan whom I am going to present here, are physically harassed by followers of the *QM* or Shi'ite Islamist groups. They themselves are strong enemies of the veneration of shrines and even of the setting up of graveyards. Besides the religious arguments that there must not exist a mediator between men and God and that nobody besides God is allowed to be worshipped, Sheykh Äläskär denounces the official mullahs as well as the shrine guardians as being nothing else than pure materialists. They in return use the invective “Vahabi” to denounce their rivals. Sheykh Äläskär with his alleged 500 followers is a typical convert who found his way to Islam at the age of about forty, learned Arabic by self-study and rejects everything besides the Koran as being a legitimate source for Islamic beliefs. Besides his charismatic personality and the spiritual needs of the people, an important cause for his large number of followers seems to be the solidarity ties in his community, based on the principle of *zakat*. He could manage to take over and restore a historical mosque used as storage during the Soviet period which his community defends against attacks by the local Shi'ite Mosque mullah's followers. An important feature is that he denounces the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam which he sees as a forbidden innovation to Islam (*bidca*). Sheykh Äläskär says that he does not have any problem with the state. Besides passivity on the side of the state apparatus this may be due to the fact that he objects to the Islamic Party with the argument that it is engaged in politics under the guise of religion²⁵.

- 26 The *Azərbaycan İslam Partiyası* was founded at September 2 1991 and one year later officially regis ([...](#))

28 When religio-political activities of pro-Iranian tendency in Azerbaijan are discussed, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan²⁶ as the most well known and largest group in this respect has to be presented. The Party – as *fourth layer* of Azerbaijani Islam – officially registered in 1992, experienced a major blow in May 1996 when its leadership was arrested under the accusation of spying for Iran and sending youngsters to the Islamic Republic for military training. It is true that the ideological outlook of this party, whose membership figures range between 20 000 and 70 000, is very much under Iranian influence and that it is the sole relevant Azerbaijani party propagating a close relationship with Iran. One of the main problems of the Party is that it lacks – despite the large number of partly young

followers -substantial support from intellectuals and the middle strata of the Azerbaijani society. An interesting fact is that the Party has a separate structure for women. Perhaps due to the harsh persecution by the state which lead to the death of some of the accused leaders or because of a change in Iranian policy, the currently leading fraction of the Party tries to show a more moderate face. Instead of propagating an Islamic state they have entered into a dialogue with other opposition parties to discuss co-operation. Regarding the differences between Shi'ite and Sunnite Islam, one of the Party's leaders stated in an interview that they are a product of Jewish conspiracy. The main advantage of the Party has always been that a lot of religious people in Azerbaijan understood the Islamic Party not as a political party but as the representative of Islam in the public sphere. However, this image has widely dwindled.

- 27 He regularly publishes articles on religious topics in the widely circulated opposition newspaper *A (...)*
- 28 *Baki*, July 11, 1992.

29The *fifth layer of Islam* in Azerbaijan are the Muslim intellectuals who also might be seen as Islamic modernists. They not only accept the secular state and stand for the democratisation of the society, but re-interpret the main sources of Islam in the light of the needs of a modern society. For example, the veiling of women is not considered as being compulsory. With regard to the Sharia they do not believe in its eternal nature and interpret it as created by men. Important representatives of this group are: Nəriman Qasimo lu, an Arabist who translated the Koran into Azeri and who stands close to the national-democratic People's Front Party²⁷, and the historian Professor Rafiq Əliyev who heads *ir ad* ("Guidance"), the Centre for Islamic Studies. This Centre was officially founded in November 1990 by a group of orientalists of the Academy of Science to study Islam, its history and culture as well as its spreading in Azerbaijan and the wider region. *ir ad* is well organised, has comparably much money and is integrated into an international network of moderate Islamic groupings. Besides the publication of books, textbooks and journals (e.g. a journal on 'Islamic medicine'), the Centre organises conferences with different Arabic, Iranian and Turkish Islamic institutions on topics like human rights in Islam, women in Islam and the 'Green Book' of al-Ghaddafi. Thus, the Centre finances its activities by the sale of publications, translations, supervision of Arab students and educational activities; Saudi organisations financially supported the new building of the Centre²⁸.

- 29 Fazil GEZENFEROLU, n.d. (post 1997), pp. 359f.

30It seems, however, that most of these intellectuals do tend to a puritanic, Sunni-inspired interpretation of Islam. Some of them like Nəriman Qasimo lu or Fazil Gəzənfəro lu fiercely reject Shi'ite Islam; they see it as an Iranian distortion of true Islam with pagan elements. Gəzənfəro lu even argues that Shi'ite Islam is alien to the Turks and as such separates the "Azerbaijani Turks" from their

Turkish kin. A fine illustration of Güzanfarolu's thinking is his comparison of the return to "real Islam" with Rodin's answer when asked how he created his famous statue "Le Penseur": 'It was very easy, I have taken the marble and chipped everything which was there besides the statue and threw it away'²⁹. This rationalist view of religion and type of argumentation could also be seen as a Soviet legacy; its puritanism seems quite close to the Islam of the so-called Wahabis. The main difference is that for these intellectuals only purified Islam can serve as an agent of modernisation, an argument which is insignificant for a Sheykh Äläskär, but which leads them also to disapprove popular Islam as 'unscientific' and as a distortion of 'true Islam'.

- 30 A product of such a conference is the special issue of the journal *III Era. Meždunarodnyj Ežekvarta* (...)

31A matter of discussion is whether even agnostic Muslim intellectuals, active in the field of religion, might be seen as belonging to this grouping. In Azerbaijan some liberal activists support the opposition striving to start a dialogue between Islamists and secularists³⁰ and fighting for religious freedom for the sake of all Azerbaijanis irrespective of their faith. For instance, they helped to organise "The Religious Women Rights Defence Committee", thus backing strict Islamic women claiming for the right of using photographs with covered hair in their passports which, according to the Supreme Court's interpretation of the law, is an illegal practice.

32As most Azerbaijanis consider Islam as being part of their national identity despite their poor knowledge of their traditional religion, these intellectuals might have a considerable influence in shaping the future outlook of Azerbaijani Islam.

33A common feature of all these five layers of Azerbaijani Islam is that they minimize the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam and try to find ways to unite the different sects within Islam.

- 31 *Gençlerin Gözüyle Türk Dünyasındaki Dinî Meseleleri (Forum)*, 1998, p. 21.

34Moreover, the competition for scarce resources adds to the difficulties met by foreign Islamic missionaries. An Azeri student of theology in Ankara explains that these missionaries played a considerable role during the first half of the nineties when "volunteer clerics and *cemaats* from Muslim countries carried out these tasks [religious propaganda and education] much more than the official structures"³¹.

- 32 On Turkish activities cf. Jean NOSEBE, 1999, pp. 385-402. For a Turkish-Islamic view of religious (...)
- 33 *Gençlerin Gözüyle...*, p. 85.
- 34 *Azadlıq*, n° 156 (907), 2.8.1997. The article is based on a report by the Turkish newspaper *Sabah*.

35 Discussing the matter of competition, the picture of Islam in Azerbaijan would not be complete without mentioning the competition between Iranian Shi'ite missionaries and their Sunni rivals mainly originating from Turkey – sent by the semiofficial *Diyamet Vakfi* – or from the Islamic Ecole of the *Nurcus*, e.g. disciples of Fethullah Gülen (Fethullah Hoca)³². Most effective in the field of education are semi-official Turkish organisations like the *Diyamet Vakfi* which, e.g. founded a theological faculty and opened highschoools, modelled on the Turkish *imam-hatip liseleri*, in Baku and Nakhichevan³³. They came, of course, to an agreement with the Azerbaijani state. Turkish religious influence can be seen also in northern and western Azerbaijan where Turkish organisations built mosques and provided religious personnel for a certain period. As reported by an Azerbaijani newspaper, in the early nineties, the Turkish Refah Partisi allegedly received 500 000 US\$ from Saudi Arabia to finance their activities in Azerbaijan. This information seems to point to a close co-operation of different religio-political Sunni organisations, with the objective of gaining influence in the successoring states of the former Soviet Union³⁴.

- 35 Sezgin, *Mänim Dinim*, pp. 34f. I thank Volker Adam for drawing my attention to this point.

36 To put it briefly, in the beginning official and semi-official Turkish structures seemed to make the race. But, during the second half of the 1990s the Turkish position became weaker. This happened due to the fact that the local believers gradually noticed that many of the *hocas* coming from Turkey were propagating Sunni interpretations of Islam which were in contradiction to their Shi'ite traditions. Some of them openly criticised Shi'ite popular practices, such as the *axsey-vaxsey* (the mourning about the death of Imam Hüseyin in Kerbala)³⁵, which has the potential to build up an antagonist atmosphere between the adherents of both branches of Islam. Besides, the above mentioned competition for the scarce resources mainly coming from marriage and funeral fees, inevitably brought the Turks in conflict with local religious structures. At present, however, at least eight 'Turkish' mosques exist in Azerbaijan. Owing to the fact that there are no Iranian mosques, we may conclude that Iran's religious position even in Shi'ite Azerbaijan is quite weak.

- 36 *Aynal/Zerkalo*, n° 31 (516), 9.8.1997.

37 An important channel of influence for foreign Islamic organisations are the various refugee rescue organisations and the financial means streaming into Azerbaijan's humanitarian aid. In 1996 out of 88 million US\$, 2.4 million came from Saudi Arabia, two million from Iran and one million from Pakistan and Kuwait. Parts of this money are distributed by the Azerbaijani state, other parts are directly spent by foreign organisations like the *Xomeyni Adinda mdad Komitesi*³⁶. One may foresee, however, that the strengthening of economic ties of foreign Islamists, Islamic companies and organisations, with Azerbaijani partners may be a more efficient tool to gain religio-political influence than full-time

missionary activities (37).

38As presented above, Islam in Azerbaijan is a multifaceted phenomenon which can be understood only in the context of a society in transition. One of its most important features is the relationship between Shi'ite and Sunnite Islam which is still dominated by an ecumenical and sometimes eclectic spirit, while being increasingly beleaguered by foreign missionaries on the one hand and put under pressure by the dynamic development of Azerbaijani society on the other hand. In conclusion it should be emphasized that nowadays Islam plays only a very limited role in the political sphere and that only a small part of the population supports the idea of establishing an 'Islamic order'. This is due to the long tradition of secularism in Azerbaijan and to the fact that the strong nationalistic movement is secular in character and sometimes even fights together with the ruling elite against their rival -political Islam. Yet, on the longer run, if the political elite of Azerbaijan does not succeed in improving the disastrous conditions of life of the vast majority of the people, the population may express its discontent through a politicized form of Islam.

[Haut de page](#)

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[Haut de page](#)

Notes

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1 See for example FAR-Centre Monitoring Grupu, 1996, pp. 9-11 and the conception of the Azerbaijan People's Front Party on Islam: *Azərbaycan Cəmiyyətində İslam Dininin Yerini Müəyyənlədirilməsinə Dair Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi Partiyasının Konsepsiyası*, unpublished manuscript, Baku, 1999.

2 Cf. the examples presented in Raoul MOTIKA, 2000, pp. 128-140.

3 Because of non-existing statistics these information may only be taken as a guideline. Besides, the question remains open whether the Karabagh Armenians who are nominally Azerbaijani citizens have to be included or not.

4 Alexandre BENNIGSEN, S. Enders WIMBUSH, 1986, p. 139.

5 For detailed information about the ethnic composition of the population and their religious background see Raoul MOTIKA.

6 Based on oral information given in September 1997 by a staff member of the FAR CENTRE (Centre of Economic and Political Research, Baku) which conducted several surveys and opinion polls in 1996 and 1997 comprising questions on religion.

7 This figure includes the unregistered places of worship ; some 16 (14 Shi'a, 2 Sunni) were under the Spiritual Board's control, cf. Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire*, p. 17f ; the given number of 200 mosques includes unregistered/illegal places of worship. Compare with the information on the development of the number of mosques given by Abdulla ÄHÄDOV, 1991, pp. 77, 87.

8 Based on an oral information by the *Qafqazya Müsülmanlar darəsi*. However, the numbers given by different informants show considerable variations up to 2000 mosques.

9 For detailed information on the history of the “Two Azerbaijan”, cf. Tadeusz SWIETOCHOWSKI, 1995.

10 Alexandre BENNIGSEN , S. Enders WIMBUSH, *op.cit.*, p. 140f give a figure of 300 major places and name the most important 14 places of pilgrimage.

11 Alexandre BENNIGSEN , S. Enders WIMBUSH, *op.cit.*, p. 140.

[12](#) On January 7 1996 President Əliyev issued a decree forbidding missionary activities of foreigners (be they Christians, Muslims or adherents of other religion). Cf. *Ayna/Zerkalo*, n° 36, 469, 7.9.1996.

[13](#) Interview with the leadership of the Party in Baku on September 12, 1997. Cf. also to the newspapers close to the Party like *slamin Säsi*(banned 1996).

[14](#) Besides Islamic and Christian-evangelical missionaries who allegedly converted 2,000 people to Christianity, there are Bahais and Hare Krishna adherents active in the Republic.

[15](#) According to the head of the Committee for Religion at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan until December 1997 more than 250 religious organisations were registered. Hikmet Hadjy-zadeh holds the opinion that currently new registrations are very difficult ; cf. Hikmet HADJY-ZADEH, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[16](#) Besides political reasons, financial ones can also cause severe problems for the different religious communities in Azerbaijan ; e.g. Hadjy-zadeh describes the case of alleged bribery of an official of the Committee for Religion by an activist of Jehova's Witnesses to receive official registration which led to a three-years suspended sentence. Hikmet HADJY-ZADEH, 1998, p. 3.

[17](#) Cf. for example the speech of President Əliyev held on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday in the Təzəpir mosque and published as a booklet with a circulation of 10,000 under the title *Allahin Yolunda Hamimiz Bir Olaq*, (Baku, 1993) in two Azeri Turkish versions (one in Cyrillic, the other in Arabic script), in Russian and in English accompanied by some photos. For the problematic relationship between the state leadership and Islam cf. EXPERTS GROUP, 1995, pp. 1-2.

[18](#) The topic 'women and Islam in Azerbaijan' is treated by Nayereh TOHIDI, 1998, pp. 137-161 ; Nayereh TOHIDI, 1997, pp. 147-167 ; Tamara DRAGADZE, 1994, pp. 152-163.

[19](#) According to an information given by the eyhülislam beginning of July 1999.

[20](#) The fees asked from the population are a steady point of complaint. Even Abdülkadir Sezgin, the Turkish author of a Baku-published volume propagating Islam, sharply criticizes profit-seeking Azeri clergymen. Cf. Abdülkadir SEZGIN, 1994, p. 21.

[21](#) E.g. in the Göy Məscidi of Baku.

[22](#) Interview with Hacı Nizam in *övəlan* on September 21 1997.

[23](#) Built by *He 'yat al- 'm l al-hayriyyet*.

[24](#) Based on an oral information by a local.

[25](#) Interview with Sheykh Äläskär on September 18 1997.

[26](#) The *Azərbaycan slam Partiyası* was founded at September 2 1991 and one year later officially registered (22.9.92), cf. smayil VƏLİYEV, Cavid HÜSEYNOV, 1995, p. 16 ; in 1995 the registration was withdrawn on the grounds of mixing politics with religion. During their arrest some of the Party leaders died in prison under questionable circumstances ; cf. e.g. *Ayna/Zerkalo*, n° 22 (445), June 1 1996 and n° 24 (560), June 20 1998 ; *Hürriyet*, Baku, n° 69 (227), September 19 1997. For the political ideas and the programme of the Party cf. *Azərbaycan slam Partiyasının (A P) Mərəmnamə və Nizamnaməsi*, 1997, and the different issues of Häblullah. *Azərbaycan slam Partiyasının nformasiya Mərkəzinin Bülleteni*, until 1996 the Party's newspaper *slamin Səsimay* also be consulted. More recent developments in the Party are described by HADJY-ZADEH, « Freedom of Belief », pp. 4-6. An interview with some leaders of the Party was made by the author on September 13 1997.

[27](#) He regularly publishes articles on religious topics in the widely circulated opposition newspaper *Azadliq* ; some of them are collected in his book *Ayä Aydmli unda*, Baku, 1999.

[28](#) *Baki*, July 11, 1992.

[29](#) Fazil GEZENFEROLU, n.d. (post 1997), pp. 359f.

[30](#) A product of such a conference is the special issue of the journal *III Era. Meždunarodnyj Ežekvartalnyj Analiti eskij Žurnal*, n° 3 (3), 1998, *Äqidä Azadli i vä Dövlät ; Din ve Siyasät/Freedom of Belief: Religion & Polilics/Svoboda Sovesti ; Religija i Politika* (Baku, 1998).

[31](#) *Gençlerin Gözüyle Türk Dünyasimn Dinî Meseleleri (Forum)*, 1998, p. 21.

[32](#) On Turkish activities cf. Jean NOSEBE, 1999, pp. 385-402. For a Turkish-Islamic view of religious co-operation and missionary activities cf. Sabahaddin ZAIM, 1997, esp. pp. 105-114.

[33](#) *Gençlerin Gözüyle...*, p. 85.

[34](#) *Azadliq*, n° 156 (907), 2.8.1997. The article is based on a report by the Turkish newspaper *Sabah*.

[35](#) Sezgin, *Mänim Dinim*, pp. 34f. I thank Volker Adam for drawing my attention to this point.

[36](#) *Ayna/Zerkalo*, n° 31 (516), 9.8.1997.

[Haut de page](#)

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[Haut de page](#)

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[Haut de page](#)

[Sommaire](#) - [Document précédent](#) - [Document suivant](#)

Navigation

Index

- [Auteurs](#)
- [Mots-clés](#)

Présentation

- [À propos des ASSR](#)
- [Correspondance Rédaction](#)
- [Modalités de publication](#)
- [À tous les lecteurs et collaborateurs du Bulletin Bibliographique des ASSR](#)
- [Vente au numéro et Abonnement 2017](#)

Derniers numéros

- [179 | 2017](#)
[Sociologies catholiques. Référentiel islamique](#)
- [178 | 2017](#)
[Le prophète de l'islam](#)
- [177 | 2017](#)
[Mondes juifs en mouvement](#)
- [176 | 2016](#)
[Bulletin Bibliographique](#)
- [175 | 2016](#)
[Figures de l'entrepreneur religieux - Vatican II : un concile pour le monde ?](#)
- [174 | 2016](#)
[La force des objets - Matières à expériences](#)
- [173 | 2016](#)
[Edmond Ortigues : théologie, philosophie et sciences sociales](#)
- [172 | 2015](#)
[Bulletin Bibliographique](#)
- [171 | 2015](#)
[Chrétiens au Proche-Orient](#)
- [170 | 2015](#)
[Religions et dictatures](#)
- [169 | 2015](#)
[Philosophie et religion](#)

Numéros en texte intégral

- [168 | 2014](#)
[Bulletin Bibliographique](#)
- [167 | 2014](#)
[Postérités Allemandes](#)
- [166 | 2014](#)
[Leszek Kołakowski](#)
- [165 | 2014](#)
[Les capitales catholiques](#)
- [164 | 2013](#)
[Bulletin Bibliographique](#)
- [163 | 2013](#)

Soigner l'esprit

- [162 | 2013](#)
[L'orthodoxie russe aujourd'hui | Varia](#)
- [161 | 2013](#)
[Messianismes et anthropologie entre France et Italie | Figures et substituts de saints](#)
- [160 | 2012](#)
[Bulletin Bibliographique](#)
- [159 | 2012](#)
[Durkheim : *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* \(1912\)](#)
- [158 | 2012](#)
[Varia](#)
- [157 | 2012](#)
[Christianismes en Océanie](#)
- [156 | 2011](#)
[Bulletin Bibliographique](#)
- [155 | 2011](#)
[Le consensus des experts | Inattendus pèlerinages](#)
- [154 | 2011](#)
[Varia](#)
- [153 | 2011](#)
[Prisons et religions en Europe | Religions amérindiennes et New Age](#)
- [152 | 2010](#)
[Bulletin Bibliographique](#)
- [151 | 2010](#)
[Fondations des lieux de culte](#)
- [150 | 2010](#)
[Écritures radicales au Grand Siècle](#)
- [149 | 2010](#)
[Varia](#)
- [148 | 2009](#)
[Bulletin Bibliographique](#)
- [147 | 2009](#)
[Traduire l'intraduisible](#)
- [146 | 2009](#)
[Les laïcités dans les Amériques](#)
- [145 | 2009](#)
[Des expériences du surnaturel](#)
- [144 | 2008](#)
[Varia](#)
- [143 | 2008](#)
[Christianismes du Sud à l'épreuve de l'Europe](#)
- [142 | 2008](#)
[Varia](#)
- [141 | 2008](#)

- [Mémoires](#)
- [140 | 2007](#)
[Varia](#)
- [139 | 2007](#)
[Prophètes, messages et médias](#)
- [138 | 2007](#)
[Varia](#)
- [137 | 2007](#)
[Varia](#)
- [136 | 2006](#)
[Les Archives... cinquante ans après](#)
- [135 | 2006](#)
[Réveils du soufisme en Afrique et en Asie](#)
- [134 | 2006](#)
[Varia](#)
- [133 | 2006](#)
[Catholicismes](#)
- [131-132 | 2005](#)
[Varia](#)
- [130 | 2005](#)
[Les Saints et les Anges...](#)
- [129 | 2005](#)
[La République ne reconnaît aucun culte](#)
- [128 | 2004](#)
[Varia](#)
- [127 | 2004](#)
[Max Weber, la religion et la construction du social](#)
- [126 | 2004](#)
[Varia](#)
- [125 | 2004](#)
[Autorités religieuses en islam](#)
- [124 | 2003](#)
[Varia](#)
- [123 | 2003](#)
[Varia](#)
- [122 | 2003](#)
[Varia](#)
- [121 | 2003](#)
[Régulation de la religion par l'État. Nouvelles perspectives](#)
- [120 | 2002](#)
[Varia](#)
- [119 | 2002](#)
[Varia](#)
- [118 | 2002](#)
[Varia](#)

- [117 | 2002](#)
[Les religions afro-américaines : genèse et développement dans la modernité](#)
- [116 | 2001](#)
[Varia](#)
- [115 | 2001](#)
[Islam et politique dans le monde \(ex-\)communiste](#)
- [114 | 2001](#)
[Varia](#)
- [113 | 2001](#)
[Varia](#)
- [112 | 2000](#)
[Âme et corps : conceptions de la personne](#)
- [111 | 2000](#)
[Varia](#)
- [110 | 2000](#)
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[Tous les numéros](#)

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- [1990-1999](#)
- [1980-1989](#)
- [1970-1979](#)
- [1960-1969](#)
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- [Une nouvelle rubrique...](#)
- [2018](#)
- [2017](#)
- [2016](#)
- [2012-2015](#)

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- [Crédits](#)
- [Politiques de publication](#)

Archives du Groupe de Sociologie des Religions

- [Projet](#)
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