In the conclusion, the journalist questions the effectiveness of Azerbaijan’s fight against radical Islam.

**Legislation in the field of religion**

In 1991, the independence of Azerbaijan was restored and freedom of religion was declared in the country. On August 20, 1992, President Elchibey signed Decree No. 281, which passed the “Law on Freedom of Religion”.

This law, which should be considered one of the most democratic legal acts in the history of Azerbaijan, recognized the freedom of all faiths, restored religious centers to believers, gave believers the right to freely disseminate the principles of their faith and create religious educational
institutions. However, not everything in the law was perfect. Fearing the growing influence of the ideas of the Iranian Islamic revolution, the law forbade spiritual figures to be elected to the national parliament of Azerbaijan.

Because of the fear of radicalization of the religious sphere, this law was changed several times in the following years under the current regime: on June 7, November 5 and December 27, 1996, on October 10, 1997, on November 23 2001, in 2009, in 2011, in the year 2015, the law was toughened and restrictions were imposed on it.

Tougher legislation that has taken place in the last 5 years prohibits foreigners from engaging in religious propaganda and people who have received religious education abroad to hold religious posts.


**Import of religion into independent Azerbaijan**

As mentioned above, after the restoration of independence in 1991, freedom of religion was declared in Azerbaijan, and with the fall of the Iron Curtain, missionaries from Muslim countries, especially from Iran, Turkey and the Persian Gulf countries began to come to Azerbaijan.

Charitable foundations, which in the beginning came to the country as humanitarian or charitable organizations, soon began to create religious educational institutions. According to the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cabinet of Ministers, in 1993-2003 there were already about 150 madrassas in Azerbaijan. The activities of foreign funds were conducted by different countries in three main areas. The Shiite current was conducted mainly by Iran, the Sunni movement mainly by Turkey and Egypt, Salafi propaganda was conducted by the funds of Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Persian Gulf.
As already noted, about 65% of Azerbaijan’s population consider themselves Shiites or come from traditional Shiite regions: Karabakh; Ganja and the areas around it; Aran; South Region; Mil Mugan; Baku and the surrounding areas are considered Shiite territories. Therefore, Iran’s religious activities have become particularly successful in these regions. I agree with official data, out of 150 madrasahs in the country 22 are under the control of Iran, 14 of them were registered by the Ministry of Justice. The most famous among them are madrasahs in Goychay, Lenkoran, Jalilabad and Nardaran.

There are also representative offices in the country

- Ministry of Culture of Iran;
- Propaganda of Islam;
- Madrasah Coordination Organization;
- Organization for International Cultural Relations;
- International publishing house “Al-Khuda”;
- Charitable Foundation “Imdad Khomeini”;
- Representation of “Bali Fagih” (representation of the Supreme Religious Leader of Iran).
- Iran’s prayer house in Baku – “Huseyniyya” is one of the most visited religious centers in the country.

The Ministry of Education of Turkey has opened five schools with a religious bias in the Turkish “Imam-Khatip” type in Baku, Sumgait, Shcheki, Mingechaur and Agdash.

According to the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cabinet of Ministers, in the following years, 26 mosques were built or restored to Turkish charity funds. In these mosques, events are held by Turkish religious figures.

In addition, under the auspices of Turkey in the country operate

- Madrasah “Khafizov and Islamic Sciences” in the cheeks,
- The Aliabad madrasah in Zagatala,
- Madrasah in Agdash
- and madrassas in Badamdar settlement of Baku.

The founders and long-time heads of the Faculty of Theology (İlahiyyət) of the Baku State University were the theologians invited from Turkey, the training was conducted according to the Turkish program, compiled according to the Sunni canons.

Another faculty of Theology was founded in the Guleni University “Caucasus” (today it is closed).

Some of the mosques of Baku Akhunds were appointed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Turkey. Aziz Makhmud Khudai (Youth Support Fund), Nur community (Sunuris), Fathulla Gülen communities developed active religious activities.

After the restoration of independence, especially in the mid-1990s, more than 15 Arab religious charitable organizations began to operate in Azerbaijan. The most active among them were the radical Salafist organizations.

Among the 65 mosques operating with financial support from the Arab countries, the 61st mosque was built by the “Fund for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage”. Among them – four mosques are built in Baku.

Other Arab religious charities include

- Organization of Help “Al-Haramain”,
- Committee of Muslims of Asia Kuwait (Kuwait),
- International Organization of Islamic Charity (Saudi Arabia),
- The World Islamic Youth Assembly (Saudi Arabia),
- International Islam Najat (Saudi Arabia),
- Dar al-Beer (United Arab Emirates).

Most of these organizations controlled the open or secret activities of the madrassas they built.

Control increases
Since the mid-1990s, the government has gradually begun to tighten religious legislation, but this did not prevent foreign missionaries from freely carrying out religious propaganda. However, since 1998, the authorities began to severely restrict the activities of Arab religious organizations. The most famous propagandist of Salafism in Azerbaijan, Sheikh Salim Zaharna (preacher of Arab origin) was deported from Azerbaijan. Pressure on Arab religious organizations increased after the events of September 11, 2001 in New York, many of them were closed, and their leaders were deported from the country. The last Arab organization Dar al Bir was closed several years ago.

It was during this period that the authorities of Azerbaijan were seriously concerned about the rapid expansion of the religious segment of society. In addition, in those years, reports began to be received that the Azerbaijanis began to join foreign religious armed groups in such regions of the Sunni “jihad” as Afghanistan and Chechnya. Serious concern was also caused by the increased religious influence of Shiite Iran.

The first arrests of radical religious activists began in the mid-1990s. It was during this period that the leadership of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA) was arrested, arrests were also made among members of Islamic extremist groups, such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

In 2001, by the decree of President Heydar Aliyev, the “Committee for Work with Religious Organizations” (hereinafter – the Committee) was established. A member of the Academy of Sciences, Professor Rafik Aliyev was appointed Chairman of the Committee. Immediately thereafter, by the government’s decision, 14 Iranian-controlled madrassas were closed. Gradually, the authorities closed all the independent and sponsored madrasahs and courses of the Koran, except for four madrasahs in Baku, Zagatala, Aghdash and Shcheka, controlled by the Turkish government.
The Committee received the right to register religious communities, formerly belonging to the Ministry of Justice, the right to examine religious literature, as well as control over the activities of religious communities.

During the times of R. Aliyev, the Committee began to take serious measures to streamline and monitor religious activities. Religious communities and mosques were required to register as official communities and soon more than 400 religious communities were registered. At the same time, according to the requirements of the legislation, the religious activity of foreign citizens was banned and these people began to be expelled from the country. This process continued until the expulsion of the last employee of the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs from the country.

The Committee also compiled a list of banned religious literature and banned the import and sale of several Islamic and Christian books “for propagating religious intolerance in them.” The government annually updated the list of banned literature. In addition, the Committee’s expertise department began to censor religious literature imported and published in the country.

Period of prohibitions (2006-2012)

In the summer of 2006, the new president, Ilham Aliyev, freed Rafik Aliyev from the post of the head of the Committee and appointed Hidayat Orujov, presidential adviser on national and religious issues. The period of 6 years after this became a period of restrictions and strict interventions of the state in the sphere of religion. The reason for this was the strengthening of religious radicalism in the Middle East (under the influence of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq), the intensification of the propaganda of jihad, the strengthening of radical religious appeals. As a result, bans in the religious sphere of Azerbaijan have become tougher from year to year.
The first acquaintance of our society with the real activity of radical Islamists occurred in connection with the newspaper article of the well-known publicist Rafik Tagi in 2006, in which the author unflatteringly spoke about the Prophet Muhammad. R. Tagi began to receive a large number of threats of violence by phone, and religious activists from Nardaran held a press conference, which already openly threatened Tagi with physical violence. As a result, Tagi and the editor of the newspaper Samira Sadagatoglu were arrested for a short time. On November 23, 2011, Rafig Tagi, who was released, was killed, no killers have been found.

In May 2007, the government banned the transfer of azan (a call to prayer) through radio amplifiers at the beginning in Baku, then and throughout the republic. The ban lasted several days and after a serious discontent of the religious community, the government formally abolished the ban. But despite this, in several mosques, the ban on the adhan still works. In the summer of 2007, the Committee, under the pretext of “the need for a new registration,” closed 19 courses of the Koran, working legally. A small number of these courses were registered inside religious communities.

In 2008, the government decided to destroy the “Fatimei Zahra” mosque in the village of Yeni Gunashli. And in 2009, the mosque “Our Prophet Muhammad” in Baku and the mosque on the Oil Rocks were destroyed, which was accompanied by active protests of believers.

In 2009, the parliament adopted an amendment prohibiting people who received religious education abroad to hold a religious office. The quota for participation in the pilgrimage to Mecca was reduced from 6000 to 2,000 people. Permission to deal with hajj organizations was given only to SAMC, it was forbidden to private companies.

In November 2010, the Minister of Education Misir Mardanov made a statement about the ban on wearing women’s head-covers
in state secondary educational institutions. This decision caused serious discontent and protests from believers. On December 10, 2010, on May 6, 2011, on October 5, 2012, protests were held in front of the Ministry of Education. Especially memorable was the last action, which ended with a clash with the police. As a result of 36 protesters were arrested.

**First armed religious groups and first arrests**

Lieutenant Kamran Aliyev, a member of the Salafi group, serving in Geranboy (on the front line with Armenia), fled his military unit, in October 2007, arrived in Baku and attacked several facilities, including a gas station. Soon he and members of his group were arrested.

On August 17, 2008, a grenade was thrown at the Salafi mosque of Abu Bakr in Narimanov district. The mosque was closed and as a result of the investigation it became known that the terrorist attack was carried out by a group of radical Khawarijas – “The Forest Brothers”. Members of the group were arrested, their leader Ilgar Mollachiyyev was killed.

A terrorist of Arab origin named Abu Jafar was arrested in Sumgayit. Two members of the group “Forest Brothers” were arrested in Pakistan and handed over to the Azerbaijani authorities.

In 2003, about 15 Azerbaijani citizens who arrived from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia to start partisan activities in Karabakh were arrested during the operation in Ganja and Baku. During the operation, a senior police lieutenant was killed. A large number of arms and ammunition were confiscated from the Raf car belonging to the group. Later, the leader of the group called “Karabakh Partisans” – Rovshan Badalov and all members were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. One of the members of the group received a life sentence. R. Badalov was released in 2011-2012, it was reported that he went to fight
in Syria, joined there the “Islamic State” and was killed during the fighting.

In 2007, about 30 people were arrested in Baku on the “Said Dadashbeyli case”. Some of the detainees were released after a while, and 11 people from this group of prisoners were sentenced to prison terms of 12 to 14 years.

In early 2011, the head of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan Movsum Samedov, senior management and regional representatives of the party were arrested. According to official reports, weapons and ammunition were found in their homes.

Shiites were also arrested, protesting against the ban on wearing the hijab in public schools.

These arrests lasted two years intermittently, dozens of Shiites were arrested under various pretexts. Even the moderate religious preacher Haji Shahin was arrested in 2011 but he was released six hours after the intervention of Sheikh-ul-Islam.

**Jihadism and radicalization**

The fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria led to the rapid spread of the ideas of jihad. The Sunni groups fighting against Bashar Assad declared their struggle sacred, that is, jihad.

For the first time in May 2013, a group of Azerbaijanis in Syria distributed a video on the Internet calling for compatriots to join the jihad in this country. Since then, it has become obvious that Azerbaijani citizens are participating in armed clashes in Syria. The press reported from time to time that many radical Salafis from the northern regions of the country, as well as from Sumgait and Mushvigabad settlement (near Baku) are or are sent to Syria to participate in the jihad against Bashar Assad.
At first, the authorities looked at the jihadists from Azerbaijan through their fingers, but by 2014 the flow of jihadists had increased, such an increase in extremism began to cause concern to the government. In January 2014, after the retreat of Asadov troops in northern Syria, a war broke out in this region for the supremacy between the radical Islamist groups “Islamic State” and “Front Al Nusra.” Soon, media reported about the death of hundreds of jihadists from both conflicting sides, among which about 30 Azerbaijani jihadists were killed.

After that, the authorities began to move. Silent earlier Sheikh-ul-Islam issued a fatwa against jihad in Syria. In the official press, active propaganda began against the jihadists. The legally operating Salafi of Azerbaijan under the leadership of the akhund of the Abu Bakr mosque Haji Gamet also made a statement that what is happening in Syria is not a jihad but a struggle for power and we should not interfere. Further, the authorities passed a law banning the participation of citizens of the country in illegal military formations abroad. After that, the first arrests began. In recent years, about 100 citizens of the country, who returned from Syria, were arrested.

The bloody clashes between Shiites and Sunnis in Syria and influenced the relationship between these religious communities in the country. Between the representatives of various branches of Islam, hostile appeals, mutual accusations, which could be read in social networks, intensified.

Shiite Taleh Bagirzade (Bagirov), who was released in the summer of 2015, was again arrested on April 26, 2015 during a police operation in Nardaran. During the operation, six people were killed, including two policemen. More than 60 believers were arrested both in Nardaran and in other regions of the country, including in Ganja and Lenkoran. Along with Taleh Bagirzade, activists of the movement “Muslim Unity” Zulfugar
Mikayilzadeh and Elman Agayev were also arrested.

Earlier, in 2011, the leader of the Islamic Party Movsum Samedov was arrested and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment; Abgul Suleymanov (arrested in 2011, sentenced to 11 years in prison); Faramiz Abbasov (arrested in 2011, sentenced to 11 years in prison).

**Government policy in the religious sphere: bans and pressures**

The powers of the country are more often trying to control the situation in the religious sphere through restrictions and prohibitions, generously using the power structures. But a marked increase in religiosity among the population and the emergence of ever new radical religious leaders cast doubt on the effectiveness of repression. Attempts by the authorities to establish a dialogue with the religious community are limited to communication with legally functioning religious communities and mosques.

Government agencies that are entrusted with the management and control over the activities of religious communities have received from 2014 the authority to conduct religious education and propaganda for the ideas of “true Islam.”

On February 28, 2014, the State Service for Multiculturalism, Interethnic and Religious Affairs was established. On May 15, 2014, the “International Baku Center for Multiculturalism” was established by the decree of the President of the Republic.

On October 20, 2014, the head of the Committee Mubariz Gurbanli held a meeting with a group of theologians and representatives of various religious denominations. At this meeting, it was announced that a new “Commission on Religious Studies” had been set up under the Committee, with a view to combating the ideas of religious extremism.

As the government’s interference in the religious sphere intensifies, there is a noticeable weakening of the influence,
fully supported by the authorities, of the SAMC (Caucasian Muslims Board), led by Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshyukyur Pashazadeh.

According to the current legislation, the Government has entrusted the management and control of the activities of the country’s Muslims to the Caucasian Muslim Board, which exercises control over mosques, appoints Akhundov and imams, and makes recommendations to government agencies on the registration of religious communities. But recently this practice is being revised. The main role in the management of the religious sphere was transferred to government agencies. Since 2014, the government has provided financial assistance to religious communities through the State Committee for Religious Affairs, not through the SAMK (the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Caucasus), as it was previously.

By the way, the Muslim Board as a non-religious organization, according to the Constitution, should not be funded by the state, but in fact, the state aid is as follows: annual Sheikh apply directly to the president with a formal request for financial assistance, and the President allocates funds from its fund maintenance of the SAMK apparatus 2-3 million manat (1.7 manats – 1 dollar). Akhunds and imams of local mosques work on a voluntary basis and live off donations from the population and payments for religious ceremonies, such as wake ceremonies and registration of religious marriages. In February 2013, 2 million manat was allocated from the presidential reserve fund for SAMK; in the summer of 2015 3 million manats; In the summer of 2015 1 million manat [2].

By the end of 2016, the deputy chairman of the Muslim Board Haji Sabir Hasanli said that only about 600 mosques already assigned akhunds and imams, while about 1,500 mosques expect purposes [3], due to lack of personnel. This shortage of personnel resulted from the above-mentioned ban on the activities of persons who received religious education abroad.
That is why, at the end of last year, the management of SAMK announced the creation of seven new madrassas in different regions of the country for the preparation of imams and akhunds for mosques.

According to the law, the akhunds and Imams in the mosque appoint the Caucasian Muslims Board, but this appointment is consistent with the State Committee for Religion. Buildings and land of mosques are considered the property of the state or municipality. According to the decision of the Cabinet of Ministers, most mosques (about two-thirds) are on the balance of municipalities. Municipalities provide these mosques to SAMC or the relevant religious communities for free rent.

Some mosques are on the balance of the “Office of the State Historical and Architectural Reserve” Icherisheher “(Old Town) in Baku.

Mosques, the architecture of which is of historical importance and considered historical monuments are on the balance of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Communities of mosques are registered in the State Committee for Religious Affairs and must report to this state structure.

So, the mosques and the legal sphere in the sphere of religion are managed by three different structures: the State Committee for Religion, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Caucasus and municipalities.

Conclusion

Facing such problems in the religious sphere as extremism and opposition to the authorities, the current government is trying to put religious activity (like any other independent public activity) under maximum control. The legislation is toughened, the possibilities of religious propaganda are limited and rigidly censured, not to mention the use of police measures.
The effectiveness of these measures is questionable because, first of all, the personnel potential and academic centers of the authorities are weak for carrying out an alternative – pro-government religious propaganda. And, of course, it is impossible to change the protest moods in a country that is in an all-embracing crisis with no propaganda. In recent years, independent religious activity has been carried out mainly outside the mosques controlled by the authorities – in illegal communities, prayer houses and independent courses on reading the Koran. Law enforcement structures from time to time expose the secret prayer cells, but this is only a small part in the overall process of spreading and radicalizing the Islamic religion in the country.

The activities of the State Committee for Religion and the “State Service for Multiculturalism” consist mainly of holding seminars and conferences among official organizations and loyal religious communities. The authorities try to influence the process from above, through the leaders of these communities and pro-government religious authorities. The effectiveness of such a policy is small and then, the last argument of the government in dealing with an independent religious community is the police.

It would seem that SAMK should have an important role in the process of resolving problems in the religious sphere, but this structure, left in the inheritance from the tsarist and soviet times, lost its authority among the population, it is passive and remains outside the process that develops with noticeable intensity.

Some important links

https://www.azadliq.org/a/prezident-qafqaz-allahshukur/27846544.html

http://www.az.azvision.az/Prezident_QMI-ye_3_milyon_-65951-xeb er.html
The Council, consisting of religious authorities

La crise syrienne vue d’Azerbaïjan, Bayram Balci (28.03.2013)

HRWF recommended reading