

PLACE AND ROLE OF ISLAM IN REGIONS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, THE CAUCASSUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

IGOR DOBAYEV. ISLAM IN BLACK SEA-CASPIAN REGION:
GEOPOLITICAL ASPECT* // *The article was written for the
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Abstract. The article examines the state and development of Islam and the Islamic movement in the Black Sea – Caspian region and the influence of the re-Islamization process on geopolitical transformations. Islam is not monolithic in the region, it is represented by various trends, groupings, currents, sects, etc. The most dangerous of these forms are religious-political extremism and terrorism camouflaged by Islamic faith.

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In this article the Black Sea – Caspian region includes a vast subregion of Eurasia, that is, Iran, Turkey, states of the Southern Caucasus and the Southern part of Russia.

Today's Iran is the only Muslim country in the world whose state religion is Shia Islam.

After the victory of the February 1979 revolution in Iran power in the country was seized by the Shia clergy headed by the great ayatollah R. Khomeini under whose guidance the "Islamic state" was built. Its creation presupposed radical transformations in Islamization of all socio-economic and political institutions of the country, Legislative bodies were formed in accordance with the Sharia law, all branches of executive power were organized according to the Islamic model of society, including "Islamic economy."

The experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has existed under Islamic rule for almost forty years, is of a natural interest. The leader of the Islamic revolution, the great ayatollah R. Khomeini has undertaken an attempt to realize the concept of "Islamic rule," which he evolved but which contradicted the Shia dogma that just rule is impossible in an Islamic state until the arrival of the 12th imam ("mahdi"), inasmuch as according to the Shia dogma it is only through him that the connection between the Shia community and Allah is established and carried on. R. Khomeini broke up with that scholastic approach, having proclaimed the existence of the third Islamic development way on the principles of justice and welfare of the entire people as a result of the correct and just rule of one leader.

Despite non-acceptance of this concept by many high religious authorities in Iran, who uphold the principle of non-interference of the clergy in state management, Khomeini's initiative and practices are the determining ones in the state construction matters in Iran.

According to them, the bodies of power in Iran are organized in such a way that the leading position in the political system at all levels are held by high religious figures, and the main link of the entire system is the spiritual leader of the state – "rahbar" (first the great ayatollah Khomeini, and after his death – ayatollah

Khamenei). According to Article 110 of the Constitution of Iran, he has unprecedentedly wide powers in the legislative, executive and judicial spheres, takes decisions on solution of questions of war and peace, appointment and removal of official persons, etc.

Although the Constitution says (articles 58 and 114) that it is the people who elect President and members of the "Islamic Council" (or parliament) the major role in determining all aspects of politics is played by religious figures. They comprise the absolute majority at the Council, which fulfils mainly executive, rather than legislative functions - search for premises and grounds in "sacred sources," which would answer arising vital problems. It should be noted that the "Council's" work is supervised by the "Council of Experts" ("Observation Council", or "Council of Protection of the Constitution") consisting of experts on Sharia law. As a rule, they represent the conservative wing in the political spectrum of the Shia clergy in the country. Of its twelve members six are approved by parliament and the rest are appointed by the spiritual leader. This Council has the task of checking parliament's decisions and verifying their correspondence to Sharia laws. This body has the right of veto concerning any decision.

A characteristic feature of Iran's political course, especially after the victory of the representative of the reformist trend Khatami at presidential elections in 1997, is that the growing differences in the ruling upper crust become more evident over the years. They increased during the presidential rule of Ahmadinejad, but softened a bit in the period of the rule of Rouhani, the current President of Iran. Certain essential elements of Shia Islamic radicalis, which helped the promotion of the interests of the opposition to the Shah's dictatorship during the Islamic revolution, at present serve the interests of the conservative wing of their Islamists. This was why the liberal wing headed by M. Khatami was working to build "a civil society" within the framework of the present Islamic system and win certain democratic gains, for one, freedom of speech. Ahmadinejad went still further, having curtailed the political opportunities of the Islamic conservatives.

At the same time, during the past two decades the “export of Islamic revolution” has diminished. The “Islamic rule” in Iran turned from extremist ideas to Islamism in its moderate form.

From the beginning of the 16th century and for four centuries Turkey fulfilled the role of the leader of Sunna Islam, and Turkish sultans played the role of caliphs already in 1517. However, after the defeat of Germany in World War 1 and the following surrender of Turkey in October 1918, the new leadership of the country headed by Mustafa Kemal staked on the ideology and practice of Turkism, having abandoned the ideas of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism of the Ottoman Empire. Religion was separated from the state, and the Sharia system was replaced by a secular system of a western type. Islamic customs were banned, and Arabic alphabet was replaced by Latin. An important milestone of that process was the deletion from the Constitution in 1928 of the premise that Islam was the state religion of Turkey, and in 1937 it included the principle of a secular state, which should not be removed.

However, this huge work was only begun under Kemal Atatyurk, but it could not finally change the consciousness of the big masses of the rural population. The changes touched primarily the inhabitants of big cities. After Atatyurk’s death in 1938 the Islamization process began in the country. As a result, in the view of champions of secularization, there is very little what was left today from Kemalist secularization. School and university curricula now included special courses on Islam, many theological departments at higher educational institutions have been opened, new mosques are built with active state participation, religious communities and other organizations are revived, as well as legal Islamist parties, etc. One of the first such parties was the Islamist Party of Well-being – Refakh financed by foreign and local organizations and foundations. In the mid-1980s the party unfolded an active organizational and propaganda work, promising to establish in the country the Islamic “just order,” if it comes to power. Its social support broadened noticeably, which

enabled it to score great success at the national elections, and in July 1996, in a coalition with the Party of True Road, it entered the government headed by the leader of the Islamists N. Erbakan. He and his supporters proclaimed themselves ardent enemies of a pro-western course and came out against Turkey's membership in the European Union. At the same time they advocate the country's development in the family of other Islamic nations as one of its leaders.

During his stay in power which lasted from July 1996 to June 1997, the Erbakan government undertook resolute measures to implement its Islamist doctrine. For one, in the economic sphere in April 1997, to counter the existing "Seven" of advanced capitalist countries, the Islamic "Eight" was created, including Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt and Nigeria. Simultaneously, steps were taken to promote Islamization of the educational system. The number of imam-khatib schools was increased, as well as that of various Islamic courses and seminars. The Islamists have even persuaded the authorities to agree that officials in government offices and parliament adhere to Islamic standards and were dressed accordingly.

All this could not but cause opposition on the part of the circles interested in a secular way of life and in pro-Western course of Turkey's development. As a result, in June 1997 the N. Erbakan government resigned under pressure of the Turkish military.

Erbakan's resignation opened the road to further attacks on his party. In February 1998 the Constitutional Court took a decision to disband his party for "actions incompatible with the secular nature of the state proclaimed in the Constitution." However, instead of the banned "Refakh" party a new Islamic Party of Virtue - "Fazilet" was set up which was joined by deputies of parliament and former members of "Refakh." The new party came third in the parliamentary elections of 1999, but soon it was also banned and disbanded.

However, another Islamist organization came to replace it - the Party of Justice and Development, which won parliamentary

elections in Turkey beginning from 2007. Actually, the electoral hegemony of the PJD has been established in the country. Thus, the “old” Kemal political system was reformed through the expulsion of the military elite from it and the ousting of the PJD rivals from the political field. Apart from that, the present opposition has no real alternative program. To boot, Islamist tendencies were markedly growing in previously secular Turkey. The ruling Party of Justice and Development which won the presidential elections in August 2014 (T.R. Erdogan) is restoring its foundation of traditional Islamic values. One of its major gains was the neutralization of generals as a result of the referendum on changing the Constitution as a result of which the army was deprived of the ability to remove the country’s leadership from power. Thus, during the recent years the ruling party has succeeded to gain an upper hand over the old Kemal elite, having pushed it to the background from real influence and power and discredited it in the eyes of society.

Apart from that, it should be noted that in the activity of the ruling party we come across another paradox of Erdogan’s political strategy, namely, a combination of neoliberalism and paternalism. The ruling party has fulfilled its promise given back in 2002, namely, to lead Turkey along the road of new modernization, reform the social infrastructure and bring it to the European level. The definite successes of the Islamists in domestic policy doubtlessly enabled them to take a course at intensification of their foreign policy, which is now termed “neo-Ottomanism,” in as much as it is aimed at broadenings and deepening Turkey’s influence on the Middle Eastern states, which were earlier parts of the Ottoman Empire, continuing at the same time to move along the western vector. Experts note that the “New Ottoman Porta” successfully balances between East and West.

In the South Caucasus Islam is developed very unevenly. In Armenia the leading religious force is the Christian Armenian Apostolic Church. In predominantly Orthodox Christian Georgia there are regions, predominantly in Ajaria, Pankisi Gorge, and in some Eastern districts where groups of people believe in Islam.

On the whole, the influence of Islam in Georgia is gradually growing. But we turn our attention to Azerbaijan whose population believe in Islam. Part of the local Muslims was Sunnites, part – Shi'ites, and they were in constant confrontation with each other. In the 16th – 18th centuries the territory of modern Azerbaijan was the arena of sanguinary Sunnite – Shi'ite wars. Up to the beginning of the 19th century two-thirds of the local Muslims were Sunnites. However, as a result of Turkish-Russian wars by 1916 the confessional composition changed in favor of Shi'ites, and their number increased to 62 percent.

Besides, in the first half of the 19th century the territory of settlement of Azerbaijani Turks was divided into two parts: the smaller, northern part was included in the Russian Empire, and the bigger, southern part became part of Persia (later Iran). Practically immediately, the intellectual and political elites of the country unfolded a campaign for unifying these Azerbaijani lands. However, at the beginning the 20th century the Azerbaijani elite, split as it was into Sunnites and Shi'ites, divided still more into supporters of pan-Islamist ideology coming out under the banner of Islam, and into supporters of pan-Turkism fighting for unity by ethnic origin. These two factors (split into Sunnites and Shi'ites and into supporters of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism) multiplied by the factor of Soviet atheism have determined the mentality of many Azerbaijanis in the 20th century, and after the collapse of Soviet power in 1991 they played the decisive role in the religious-political processes in the country.

In 1991 Azerbaijan proclaimed its independence, but it could be regarded an Islamic country only formally. Real believers in that period (those who observed all rites and rituals) did not exceed one percent. Most people, although deemed themselves Muslims, did not have real knowledge and understanding of Islam and its main principles, did not attend mosque, did not pray, and did not observe the rites and rituals required by the Sharia law.

However, soon the process of "re-Islamization" began, when people were coming back to their faith. The number of believers

was rapidly growing. In ten years after gaining independence their number reached ten percent, and twenty years later – about twenty percent of the total population. It should be said that most of them are young people.

Serious changes have taken place within the Islamic community. Various Sufi tariqas have resumed their activity, and new ones appeared.

However, a special place in the Islamic life of Azerbaijan is taken by Islamic fundamentalists (Salaphites), who have never been in Azerbaijan's history. In turn, they have divided into moderates and radicals, which exerted influence on the politicization and radicalization of Islam in the country.

Serious changes have taken place in the Shi'ite community of Azerbaijan. Now, with the appearance of religious figures who have received religious education at Islamic institutions of Iran, the situation is becoming different. During the past years four Azerbaijani graduates from Iranian higher Muslim educational institutions received the religious status higher than the head of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Caucasus.

Thus, people in post-Soviet Azerbaijan turned to be divided into three big groups: Shia organizations, Salaphites, and a generation, oriented to western values and a secular model of statehood, which is supported by the political elite of the country.

Azerbaijani experts forecast the development of Islam in their country on the basis of the Turkish model, which is considered more acceptable inasmuch as it is more liberal and tolerant. However, in their view the official authorities use too harsh measures to oppose the spreading of political Islam, which leads to an increase in the number of radical Islamists. This is reflected, among other things, in a steadily growing number of young Azerbaijanian volunteers who take part in military hostilities in the Middle East, as well as in the North Caucasus. In other words, Islam during the post-Soviet period turned into a serious factor in the political life of Azerbaijan.

Prolonged historical contacts of Georgia with the Muslim world of the Ottoman Empire and Persia influenced not only the

ethnic composition of the population of Georgian lands and their confessional affiliation, but also the language, literature and culture of the Georgian people.

According to the population census of 2002, there were 433,784 (9.9% Muslims living in the republic). However, researchers claim that the real number is much higher and it reaches about 800,000. Georgian Muslims are mostly followers of Sunni Islam.

All questions connected with Muslim communities of the South Caucasus, and partly North Caucasus and control over their activity were supervised by the Board of Muslims of the Caucasus set up in Baku in 1993.

In 2011 the managerial system was changed. The higher level of professional training of the Muslim clergy, development of religious education, increase in the number of mosques and prayer-houses, and greater legalization of their judicial status have largely improved the activity of Georgian Muslim community. This called for the formation of the autonomous Spiritual Board of Muslims of Georgia.

As a result of a serious preparatory work a non-governmental organization – Board of Muslims of Georgia – was setup in May 2011. One of the basic tasks of the new body was to control the activity of the Islamic community, mosques and religious educational institutions of Georgia.

Under patronage and with support of Turkey and Iran local Muslim communities take part in building and opening new madrasahs and prayer-houses. Two Shia madrasahs for girls function in Tbilisi (capital of Georgia).

In Western Georgia 55 religious schools work under the supervision of mosques. In the foreseeable future a higher Muslim educational institution is to open in Georgia.

From the early-2000s two Shia Islamic cultural centers have been functioning in Georgia which are engaged in educational activity, publish journals and necessary literature in the Georgian and Azerbaijani languages

As to the Crimea which returned to the Russian Federation in 2014, it should be noted that the Crimean-Tatar movement on

the peninsula is not monolithic, but is split into several ethnic and religious groupings. The radicals are in a minority among the Crimean Tatars, however they are rather active and supported by outside forces. In their activity the ethnic and confessional factors merge, which increases the influence of the confessional factor on the political processes among Crimean Tatars.

After the Crimea has joined the Russian Federation the activity of the radical Crimean-Tatar organizations of Islamist and nationalist trends have been stepped up. Among these organizations experts name Milli Majlis, as well as Islamist organizations, groupings and sects – Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Crimea, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, “Wahhabis,” “Nursists,” “Gyulen-members, “Muslim Brothers” represented by “Ar-Raid” organization, etc.

The Crimean Milli Majlis, although it is situated beyond the bounds of the Crimea and is supported, by experts’ estimates, by less than twenty percent of the Crimean Tatars, today claims the right to represent the interests of all Crimean Tatars. The most active members of them – its leaders Ahtem Chaigoz, Lenur Islamov, Remzi Ilyasov, and others are supported by various American, European, Turkish foundations and other organizations and develop relations with the present Ukrainian authorities. As a result, the Milli Majlis leaders and the radical part of the Crimean Tatars supporting them continue to make provocative statements of an anti-Russian character, putting forward various demands. Among them – granting the Crimean Republic the status of national-territorial autonomy, adoption of laws guaranteeing the effective representation of Crimean Tatars in legislative and executive bodies of the Crimea, and recognition of the kurultai and majlis as representative bodies of the indigenous people of the Crimea.

The Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Crimea controls the activity of about 300 Muslim communities on the peninsula, and no less than half of them, are under the influence of radicals oriented to foreign Islamist groupings. The Board is financed by the international organization of “Muslim Brothers,” whose branches operate in many regions of Ukraine. The “Muslim Brothers”

finances various youth organizations, radical mass media, and sponsors anti-Russian actions in Ukraine. It also maintains contacts with other radical Islamist groupings in Ukraine and in the Crimea.

Experts emphasize that Milli Majlis does not represent all Crimean Tatars, and the Board is not the only religious structure in the Crimea embracing all Crimean Muslims. There is another organization – the Khabashite Spiritual Center of Crimean Muslims which opposes the Board of Crimean Muslims and is against politicization and radicalization of the Islamic movement in the Crimea.

Thus, Islam in the Black Sea – Caspian region is not a monolithic phenomenon, it is split into trends, fraternities, sects, religious-political groupings, and ideological and politicized currents. There is also a radical component. All this calls for further investigation of the processes going on in the above-mentioned geopolitical area.

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The author of the article examines certain specific features of the radicalization of Islam in the Crimea. Defining radicalism, he points out that it is aimed at attaining a definite social, political and