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VLADIMIR KIRICHENKO. SHIA ISLAM IN AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract. The article analyzes the history and current place of Shia Islam in Azerbaijan, where the majority of the population is Shia. The article provides a historical review of the formation of the main Islamic institution of Azerbaijan, the Caucasian Moslems Board, and discusses Azerbaijan's relations with neighboring Iran, a major Shia power.

More than 8.7 million Moslems live in Azerbaijan [1]. According to approximate estimates, 95 percent of the population of Azerbaijan profess Islam [2]. At the same time, 35 percent of the Moslem population are Sunnis, and 65 percent are Shiites [3].

Starting from the 7th century. Azerbaijan was part of the Arab caliphate. Gradually, Moslem states arose on the territory of

modern Azerbaijan. The first of them was the state of Shirvanshakhs (861–1538).¹ The title of Shirvanshakh has been known since the Sassanids² and was adopted by the Moslem rulers of Shirvan from the Mazyadid dynasties (799–1027) and Kesranids (1027–1382). Shirvanshahs adhered to Sunnism, however, in their states there was a Shiite minority [4].

In the last decades of the 14th century, Azerbaijan was invaded by the Central Asian ruler Tamerlane (Timur) (1336–1405)³ and his sons. Officially, Timur was a follower of the Hanafite Sunni Islam, but his mentor and closest adviser was the famous Shiite scientist Seyid Barack. In the first half of the 15th century the Sunni Shirvanshahs and the Türkiye Shiite Confederation of the Kara-Kounlu tribes (1375–1468)⁴ (“Black Tups” – due to the image of the Black Tup on banners) ruled. The latter ultimately defeated from the rival Türkiye Sunni tribal confederation “Ak-Kounlu” (1467–1501/1503) (“White Tups”)⁵ with a white tup on banners [5, p. 3].

The 16th century, the period of reign of the Sephevids,⁶ became the peak of the spread of Shiism on the Azerbaijani lands. During this period, both the Sunni and Shiite beliefs were adjacent at the territory of the state (which included the Azerbaijani lands). One of the rulers, Sheikh Safi ad-Din founded the Sufi Order of Safaviya, which fell under the influence of Shiism. It was during the reign of Sephevids (1501–1732) that Shiism was established in Iran. In the subsequent period (and before the beginning of the 19th century), small Azerbaijani khanates formed in the territories of the future Azerbaijan. At the beginning of the 19th century, as a result of military conflicts of 1804–1813, and the Russian-Persian war of 1826–1828 the territories of the Khanates – Baku, Ganjin, Derbent, Cuban, Talysh, Sheka and Shirvan – transferred to the Russian Empire. According to the Gulistan peace treaty (1813), Persia recognized the accession of these territories and Eastern Armenia to Russia. The Turkmanchai Peace Treaty (1828) confirmed the transition of these lands under the power of Russia. In the 19th century the

entire territory of modern Azerbaijan has become part of the Russian Empire.

On April 5, 1872, the Russian emperor Alexander II established the Office of the Transcaucasian Moslem clergy of the Shiite and Sunni teachings. The head of the Sunnis was a mufti, the head of the Shiites – Sheikh-ul-Islam. The powers of these bodies were also extended to the territory of modern Azerbaijan.

As researcher R. Huseynov points out in his article, departments performed the following functions: “considering complaints against decisions of provincial assemblies; observation of qadis⁷ who were supposed to provide information about mosques, schools and other institutions; preparation of annual reports and draft programs for Moslem schools; testing the knowledge of clergy; consideration of all cases sent to them by the highest Russian administration” [6, p. 88].

During the Soviet Union period (1920–1991), commitment to Islam was preserved mainly by rural residents and part of the urban population, but they usually lacked deep knowledge of the religion, and even mullahs usually had only rudimentary knowledge of Islam: they could only read the Quran, without speaking Arabic, and were familiar only with oral Islamic tradition. Moreover, even in the Soviet period, the population of the southern regions and Baku villages, where the Shiite population predominated) annually for 40 days observed mourning after the death of Imam Hussein.⁸ In the central regions of the country, mourning events in honor of Hussein were criticized, but they could not be banned.

In May 1943, during the Great Patriotic War the government has carried out several activities indicating a decrease in pressure on religion. In particular, the Spiritual Administration of Moslems of Transcaucasia was created (DUMZak), The residence of DUMZak was in Baku. The organization was headed by Sheikh-ul-Islam, who was elected from among the Shia Imami.⁹ These Shiites adhere to Jafarite madhhab.¹⁰ Deputy head of DUMZak – mufti – was a Sunni

religious leader. In fact, by 1991 DUMZak ceased to exist as a single structure. In 1992 it was replaced by the Caucasus Moslems Office (UMK) [7].

According to the Constitution, Azerbaijan is a secular state. However, in 2015, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, as a sign of respect for the religion of his ancestors, performed Umrah (small Hajj),¹¹ walking around the Kaaba, which was covered in state media [8].

Azerbaijan is characterized by the absence of contradictions between Sunnis and Shiites. Thus, in 2016, Azerbaijani Shiites and Sunnis for the first time in the world held joint Friday prayers in Heydar Mosque in Baku (named after former President Azerbaijan G. Aliyev). Services in this mosque are in turn carried out by imams belonging to different movements. The joint prayer was dedicated to the “Year of Multiculturalism”, announced by the country’s President Ilham Aliyev [9].

In one of the interviews, the President of Azerbaijan noted that “Azerbaijan is a secular state and values it very much”¹² [10].

It should be noted that ritual practice in Sunnism and Shiism has its differences.

Pilgrimage to the Kaaba, which is located in the city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, is considered one of the five main responsibilities of every Moslem. However, visiting the burial places of saints is also a very important tradition, especially in the Shia practice.

Hajj in Islam is a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, which every adult Moslem should do it at least once in his life. Hajj is the fifth of fundamental Moslem practices known as the five pillars of Islam. The ritual of pilgrimage begins on the 7th day of the month of Dhul-Hijjah (last month of the Islamic year) and ends on the 12th day. All Moslems who are

physically and financially able to make the pilgrimage, but only if their absence does not create difficulties for their family [11].

In 2022, a quota of 680 people was allocated for pilgrims of Azerbaijan. The cost of the pilgrimage was \$5,350 [12]. In 2023, 1,440 pilgrims from Azerbaijan made Hadj.¹³ [13].

Along with the Hajj, Shiites make a pilgrimage on the fortieth day after the third Shia Imam Hussein bin Ali (grandson of Prophet Muhammad) was killed in 680 by forces loyal to the second Umayyad caliph Yazid I.¹⁴ The Shiites highly value him and remember him for the battle against thousands of soldiers sent by Yazid to resist to him and his companions [14].

There are many reasons why more Azerbaijanis make an Arba'een pilgrimage (forty days of mourning) than Hajj. Firstly, Azerbaijani pilgrims during this period are not limited by external quotas, as in case of the Hajj. Azerbaijani citizens can travel to Iran and Iraq, where Shiite shrines are also located. There are no visa requirements for Azerbaijanis traveling to Iran. As for Iraq, getting an Iraqi visa is easier than a permission to travel to Saudi Arabia to worship in Mecca and Medina.

Moreover, unlike the Hajj, there is no internal monopoly on the organization of an Arba'een pilgrimage. Saints tours places in Iran and Iraq can be organized both by travel agencies and individual groups, the latter of which are usually formed and led by local religious figures. Arba'een pilgrimage is also significantly cheaper than Hajj [15]. In 2023, the cost of the Hajj pilgrimage package per person was USD 5,750 [13].

As noted at the beginning of the article, until the 19th century, territory of the present Republic of Azerbaijan was part of Iran.

Today, most of the Azerbaijani ethnic group lives in Iran. They mainly live in the provinces Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Zanjan, Qazvin, Merkezi and Hamadan. Their

number reaches 35–40 percent of the entire country population. During Soviet times, contacts between citizens of Iran and Azerbaijan were isolated, family ties were practically impossible to support. With victory of Islamic revolution in Iran, the situation became even more complicated [16, p. 53]. However, with Azerbaijan gaining independence in 1991, many family ties were restored. Azerbaijanis on both sides of the border advertised in Iranian and Baku newspapers in search of relatives with whom they had lost contact in the Soviet period. Azerbaijanis on both sides created families, and these marriages became an important means of restoring ties between Azerbaijanis. Azerbaijanis in Iran and in the republic who had common professions, established relationships and cooperation. So, in October 1992, the First Tabriz-Baku Conference on teaching foreign languages was held in Tabriz.

Iran initially welcomed cultural exchanges between its Azerbaijani citizens and their compatriots in the Republic of Azerbaijan and considered this as an opportunity to spread Iranian influence in the new Moslem republics and establish economic and other types of cooperation with them.

However, by the end of 1992, Tehran realized that cooperation, especially in the field of economics, can contribute to the development of Iranian economy. But at the same time this interaction can contribute to the growth of Azerbaijani self-awareness among Azerbaijanis in Iran. Tehran tried to regain control over these contacts and place them under central control, and from the end of 1992 began to limit contacts between Azerbaijanis of the two countries [16, p. 199].

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, religious organizations from Türkiye, Iran, countries the Arab world and the North Caucasus began its activities in Azerbaijan. In particular, since declarations of independence there were several pro-Iranian organizations in Azerbaijan. One of them, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA) was especially popular in the village of Nardaran near Baku, where it was founded in 1991. The IPA lost

registration in 1996, but still has influence in Nardaran. The ideology of the party is based on Islamic values and norms. According to the party program, it is Islam that must play consolidating role in the construction of the Azerbaijani state [17].

During the presidency of Ayaz Mutalibov (1991–1992)¹⁵ and Abulfaz Elchibey (1992–1993)¹⁶ practically no power controlled their activities. However, under Presidents Heydar Aliyev (1993–2003)¹⁷ and Ilham Aliyev (2003–present time) the activities of religious organizations began to be perceived as hostile to the state. Political Islamic parties were outlawed [18].

It should be noted that the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan played a leading role in organizing protests over living conditions in Nardaran in 2002. After the collapse of the USSR, Nardaran, residents of which were engaged in selling flowers throughout the Soviet Union, found itself in a deplorable socio-economic situation.

According to some experts, Iran is sending to Nardaran funds through IPA. However, party leaders deny receiving financial assistance from Iran. From its part, in 2011 Azerbaijani government trying to help the residents of Nardaran overcome economic difficulties, sent about 19 agricultural loans amounting to about 10,000 manats (\$12700) [19].

In 2015, an operation was carried out in Nardaran against members of the movement Moslem Unity, which in many ways is a heir to the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan. At the same time five Islamists and two policemen were killed. According to Minister of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan Ramil Usubov, the purpose of the activity Moslem unity was a “violent change of the constitutional system in the country, the creation of a religious state, governed by Sharia laws” [20]. Subsequently, the leader of the Moslem Unity movement Taleh Bagirzade was sentenced to 20 years in prison. His deputy Abbas Huseynov also received 20 years in prison [21]. In March 2013, Bagirzade was arrested for purchase and possession of drugs. This happened after he

criticized in his sermon the activities of Azerbaijani authorities. In the summer of 2015, he was released [22].

Despite the fact that the facts of any practical support of Nardaran activists by the Islamic Republic were not discovered, the movement experienced ideological influence from the side of the Islamic Republic. Its leader, Taleh Bagirzadeh, received theological education in the Iranian city of Qom, as well as in Iraq Najaf. Group members did not follow directions of the Administration of Moslems of the Caucasus, but focused on Iranian or Iraqi theologians [23].

At the beginning of 1997, the Azerbaijani branch announced itself Hizbullah (Party of Allah). It is this group that the February 21, 1997 assassination of orientalist scholar Zia Bunyatov¹⁸ is attributed to. Members of the organization accused Bunyatov of working for Israeli intelligence services and the spread of Zionist ideas in Azerbaijan [24]. As a result of the investigation, five members of the group were arrested and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. By 2002, the Azerbaijani intelligence services eliminated most of the Hezbollah cells in the country.

Another organization, Jayshullah (Army of Allah) was founded in 1995 with the goal of "cleansing" Azerbaijan of foreign influence and restoration of "true Islam". Located in mountains north of Baku, the group first collected information about their objects, mainly about foreign organizations. Then it distributed leaflets threatening to attack foreigners if they will refuse to leave the country. Between 1996 and 1999 members of Jayshullah organized an armed raid on the Baku office of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), laid a bomb at the headquarters of the International Organization for the Fight against terrorism and mined the headquarters of the International Krishna Society in Baku. In addition, the group committed murder of the chairman of the Azerbaijan Society of Psychics and his two sons. Members of Jayshullah attempted an unsuccessful attempt to hijack a military helicopter. In 2000, the

leader of Jayshullah and his associates were sentenced to various prison terms of imprisonment – from four to thirteen years.

The purpose of the organization Northern Mahdi Army was a struggle against the US and Israel and the creation of a separate Islamic state. The group presumably maintained secret contacts with the Iranian Revolution Guards Corps, and its members underwent military training in Iran. In 2006, it was liquidated by Azerbaijan security forces. The group members were sentenced to various prison terms [25].

Most of the cargo passes through the territory of Azerbaijan from Iran to Russia, relations with which are important for Iranians. In addition, the transport route corridor North – South runs through the territory of Azerbaijan (from Russia to India through Iran) [26]. All this makes Azerbaijan an important partner of Iran. Based on the results of 2022, trade turnover between Iran and Azerbaijan increased by 13 percent compared to the previous year and amounted to \$688 million. Iran supplies to Azerbaijan construction materials, agricultural products and chemical products, buys equipment, clothing and food products. [27].

Azerbaijan tops the list of Iran's export destinations among the coastal states of the Caspian Sea, sending to this country 121,338 tons of goods worth \$114.97 million [28].

However, during the new Karabakh war in 2020, there were allegations that Iran supports Armenia, which, in its turn, is supported by Russia. In social networks there appeared videos that allegedly showed military equipment transported to Armenia on trucks passing through Iranian border crossing.

Iran quickly denied the accusations, saying they were “baseless rumors” aimed at denigrating relations with Azerbaijan. Iranian state television broadcasted footage of border terminal Norduz, where the transport means in question could be found. It was proven that they were Russian trucks (Kamaz),

which, according to a local official, were acquired by Armenia before the conflict and transported through Iran. Moreover, it was alleged that the trucks were carrying spare parts for military equipment [29].

Relations between Azerbaijan and Iran deteriorated sharply in January 2023. The reason was the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan reported that a man with a Kalashnikov assault rifle in his hands broke through the post of embassy guards in Tehran just after 8 a.m. and killed the chief of the security services. Two embassy guards were also injured while trying to prevent the attack [30]. The attacker was detained by the police. Azerbaijani authorities considered the incident a terrorist attack.

On August 15, 2023, Amir Abdollahian, Iranian Foreign Minister, stated, that the perpetrator of the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy would be severely punished [31].

Azerbaijan's relations with Iran are negatively affected by Israeli factor. Azerbaijan has supported diplomatic relations with Israel for three decades. Friendly relations between the two countries are indicated by opening of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Israel in 2023 [32]. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov took part in the ceremony. The event caused outrage in Tehran, and therefore Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said: "The Islamic Republic has always tried to thwart efforts of ill-wishers to drive a wedge between two neighboring countries, and the Azerbaijani government is also expected to avoid the trap, placed by enemies of two countries. It is obvious that Iran cannot remain indifferent to the Zionist regime's plot against it from the territory of Azerbaijan" [33].

At the same time, against the backdrop of deteriorating relations, on November 14, 2022 it became known that the State Security Service of Azerbaijan exposed the spy network created by Iranian intelligence services. During the investigation, there were identified five Azerbaijani citizens who received money for

cooperation with Iranian intelligence services. Three of them visited some cities of Iran for various purposes such as treatment and religious training, after which they were involved in espionage activities against Azerbaijan [34].

In May 2023, law enforcement officials of Azerbaijan detained several people on suspicion of propaganda of religious radicalism on behalf of Iran. According to investigation, their social accounts contained many indisputable facts proving their involvement in these criminal activities [35]. In June 2023 the cultural center of Iran in Baku was closed [36].

Nevertheless, already in July 2023, relations between the countries began to improve when Iranian Foreign Minister Amir Abodollahian arrived in Baku to participate in the ministerial meeting of the Non-alignment Movement. The Iranian Foreign Minister met in Baku with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. This meeting took place against the backdrop of tense relations between Tehran and Baku. However, it gave both sides the opportunity to exchange opinions on a number of issues and contributed to improving relations between the countries.

The Iranian Foreign Minister emphasized the desire of the two countries to improve bilateral relations. "Given the positive atmosphere emerging in relations between the two countries, and especially overcoming some misunderstandings, the Islamic Republic of Iran declares its readiness to follow and implement all previous agreements," said the minister [37]. In turn, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov noted that "Azerbaijan has always been interested in positive development of relations with Iran. Recently there was tension between the two countries, and there were very serious reasons for it," Bayramov said. He added that "though we highly appreciate the visit of Iran Minister of Foreign Affairs. Hossein Amir Abdollahian to Azerbaijan, his participation in ministerial meeting of the Non-Alignment Movement, as well as its meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during this visit" [38].

In July 2023, a meeting of departments responsible for transport communications in Iran and Azerbaijan took place in the Iranian city of Astara. Based on its results, it was announced that by the end of 2024. Construction of the Astara cargo terminal (part of the international transport corridor "North-South") will be completed to the end of 2024. Also by this date, border and customs control infrastructure will be created on the road bridge over the Astarachay River (eastern border of Iran and Azerbaijan) [39].

Azerbaijan is a secular state in which Shiites and Sunnis get along peacefully. The country's authorities are trying to smooth out contradictions between representatives of different movements of Islam. At the same time, the state sharply suppresses radical manifestations of Islam in politics. Despite the fact that the majority of the population of Azerbaijan is Shia, the country's relations with Iran sometimes they are tense. However, bilateral cooperation is of great importance for both countries.

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Notes

1. State of the Shirvanshahs (861-1538) - a large medieval state of the Caucasus.
2. The Sasanians were a dynasty of Persian rulers who ruled Iran from 224 to 651.

3. Tamerlane (Timur) (1336–1405) – Türkiye-Mongol conqueror, founder of the Timurid Empire, which occupied the territory of modern Afghanistan, Iran, Mesopotamia, northern India and Central Asia.
4. Kara-Koyunlu – an association of Oguz Türkiye nomadic tribes, existing in the 14–19 centuries in Western Asia, on the territory of modern Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iraq, northwestern Iran and eastern Türkiye.
5. Ak-Koyunlu (1467–1501/3) – a Türkiye tribal association, as well as a state of the same name, which occupied the territory of modern Iran, Iraq, eastern Anatolia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.
6. The Safavid Dynasty is one of the most influential ruling dynasties of Iran, who ruled from 1501 to 1736
7. Qadi is a Sharia judge appointed by the ruler.
8. Hussein ibn Ali (626–680) – the youngest son of Ali and Fatima, grandson of Muhammad. The second imam of the Ismaili Shiites and the third imam of the Imami Shiites.
9. Imami Shiites (Twelvers) are representatives of the numerous and moderate sects of Shiism.
10. Jafarite madhhab is a school of Islamic law (fiqh). Twelver Shiites and Ismailis adhere to this school.
11. Umrah is a minor pilgrimage, different from the Hajj in time of visits, as well as the brevity of the rituals.
12. Ilham Aliyev: “Azerbaijan is a secular state.” // Russian newspaper. – 12/24/2004. – URL: <https://rg.ru/2004/12/24/aliev.html> (access date: 08/02/2023).
13. The last group of pilgrims of 130 people returns from the Hajj to Azerbaijan // Vesti.az. – 07/14/2023. – URL: <https://vesti.az/xeber/religiya/poslednyaya-gruppa-palomnikov-iz-130-celovek-vozvrashhaetsya-iz-xadza-493624> (date of access: 08/16/2023).
14. Yazid I (645–683) – the second Arab caliph from the Umayyad dynasty. Ruled from 680.
15. Ayaz Niyazi oglu (Niyazovich) Mutalibov (1938–2022) – first president of Azerbaijan (1991–1992).
16. Abulfaz (Elchibey) Gadirgulu oglu Aliyev (1938–2000) – second president of Azerbaijan (1992–1993).
17. Heydar Alirza oglu Aliyev (1923–2003) – third President of Azerbaijan (1993–2003).
18. Ziya Bunyatov (1923–1997) – orientalist, academician of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences.