

IMPACT OF IRAN ON AZERBAIJAN: MEANS OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE

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Abstract

Islam in Azerbaijan is a multifaceted phenomenon, which can be understood only in the context of a society in transition. 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 fights together with the ruling elite against their rival, political Islam. In many regards, Azerbaijan stands as an original study-case for an in-depth investigation on interaction between Sunnis and Shiites. The purpose of this research is to present some aspects of Islam – the Shia branch – within the former frontiers of the defunct Soviet Union, assuming that this issue 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.

Keywords: Shia, Iran, Religion vs. Secularism, Constructivism, Soft Power.

Introduction

The "Search for Identity"¹ is a common feature of ex-Soviet societies in transition and the need for reassessment of the country's past and

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¹ Raoul Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan" in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, No. 115, Jul. – Sep., 2001, pp. 111-124.

present emerged in this particular regions. Identity in Azerbaijan is complex, affected by physical geography, its location at a cultural crossroads and strategic interests in the region as a vital trade route and conduit for energy resources. Located historically on the fault line of territorial struggles between Persian, Ottoman and Russian empires, *identities* in Azerbaijan are complicated and dynamic variables, with differing levels of entrenchment and thus potential for change and/or mobilization².

Azerbaijan's location in the Islamic world is at a crossroad of, and surrounded by, a variety of theatres of Islam and range of Islamic identities: Iranian Shiite, Turkish (most of them belonging to Sunni branch), Russian (Dagestani), as well as Arabic³. In many regards, Azerbaijan stands as an original study-case for an in-depth research on Sunnis and Shiites within a heterogeneous national society. First, in terms of demographic weight, Sunnite and Shiite communities are quite balanced: the Shiite majority comprises approximately 60 to 65 per cent⁴ of the population of Azerbaijan. Second, throughout history, the country has long been a battlefield and terrain of competition between Sunnite Ottomans and Shiite Safavids, while the heirs of yesterday's regional empires – contemporary Turkey and Iran – continue to appeal to Sunnite and Shiite followers all around the Middle East. Third, traditionally Muslim Azerbaijan has only recently recovered from forced Soviet secularism and is only now emerging as a newly independent state with an extraordinary potential for reinventing a national identity. Since the early 1990s and the country's independence, the three-layered framework of Azerbaijani identity – Sunnite, Shiite and secular – means that this country is a unique laboratory to explore the various dynamics of Islamic revivals⁵.

² Helma Kotecha, "Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging Trends and Tension", pp. 1-58, July 2006, [https://esiweb.org/pdf/azerbaijan_osce-islamic_and_ethnic_identities_in_azerbaijan_Jul2006_23087_en.pdf], November 28, 2017.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Because of non-existing statistics these percentage may ne taken only as a guideline. Besides, the question remains open whether the Karabagh Armenians who are nominally Azerbaijani citizens have to be included or not.

⁵ Bayram Balci and Altay Goyushov, "Changing Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan and its Weighting on the Sunnite-Shiite Cleavage", in Brigitte Maréchal and Sami Zenmi (Editors), *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships*, London: Hurst&Company, 2012, p. 193.

However, a comprehensive approach of Sunni-Shia cleavage within the Azerbaijan borders would fall beyond the narrow bounds of this essay, therefore, this research will focus on the influence of the Shiite in the southern part of Azerbaijan, within the frame of the extended phenomenon of religious revival that has affected all of the former Soviet republics and societies. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to provide an insight into the impact of Iran on South Azerbaijan, implicit in the influence of the Shiite in the south of the latter. The close relationship between the Azeri population and the Shia religion is not only based on the common language spoken in Southern Azerbaijan and Iran, but is also built on a culture influenced by centuries of Iranian cultural dominance. This research will attempt to find an answer to the question: How did Iran influence Azerbaijan, from social and religious points of view? In order to formulate an answer for this question, few concepts must be defined.

Religion is one of the basic forces of the international relations, even if it is not acknowledge so, and often is treated as a secondary variable. Religion has a distinctive feature that fit uncomfortably within the concepts that are conventionally deployed to study international politics. Monica D. Toft usefully defines religion as a system of practices and beliefs that includes most of the following elements: belief in a supernatural being, prayers, transcendent realities such heaven or enlightenment, a distinction between the sacred and the profane, a view of the world and humanity's relation to it, a code of conduct, and "a temporal community bound by its adherence to these elements"⁶. Religious actors in politics may sometimes support the state, sometimes work for their own ends through the state, but sometimes radically challenge states and the state system. Religion is often transnational, but its ambit is far broader than of single-issue transnational activist networks. Like nationalism, religion is an imagined community that rationalizes self-sacrifice across space and time, but unlike nationalism, religion holds out the prospect of individual salvation and is less tied to territory. For these reasons, a conventional theoretical tool kit that is limited to the secular politics of states and nations may struggle to comprehend the role of religion in international relations⁷.

⁶ Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century. Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011, pp. 25-27.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Islam is one of the three Abrahamic, monotheistic religion, alongside Christianity and Judaism. It is the second religion in the world in terms of the number of followers, after Christianity, representing the religion of most Middle Eastern countries⁸. The general meaning of Islam is peace and obedience to Allah, the Creator of all things⁹ and is based on the Qur'an. Muslims have the belief that Islam is the supreme divine message, and that Mohamed is the last great messenger and prophet of Allah. The Great Islamic Schism of 655-661 – caused by internal struggles for the Caliphate leadership – between the loyal Muslims of Yazid and the believers of Husayn Ali (supposedly Mohamed's nephew and the founder of the Alawite sect), called in the Islamic sources "The Great Discord", does not fully explain the political, geostrategic or economic causes of this cleavage, but has become the perspective through which the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict is explained and understood nowadays. The two states currently arguing over the supremacy of Islam, namely Saudi Arabia (with Sunni majority) and Iran (Shi'a majority) use the sectarian division to justify their ambitions of regional hegemony.

There are three possible approaches to integrating religion into international relations theory. *The first* is to construct new theories. There are a significant number of scholars advocating this alternative, but it would fall beyond the limits of this research to introduce some new theories, which eventually would evolve into new paradigms of international relations. *The second* approach is to examine an existing international relations theory to fit religion into it in as many ways as possible. This approach has the advantage of keeping the insights from existing international relations theories. *The final* approach is to develop a comprehensive list of ways in which religion can potentially influence international relations, then to take this list and examine whether and how each item can be integrated into an existing international relations paradigm.

For the purpose of this essay the second approach will be used, mainly because the development of a new theory or a proposal of a premise that could later become theory would fall beyond the purpose of this research. Therefore, after a few common assumptions about religion in International Relations theories, the most suitable one will be discussed and applied.

⁸ John H. Lorentz, *The A to Z of Iran*, Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010, p. 463.

⁹ Octavian Isopescul, *Coranul* (translation), Chisinau: Cartier, 2006, p.2.

Even though the religion and its concerns stand at the center of the international politics the main international relations paradigms – realism, liberalism and constructivism – barely consider religion in their analysis of political subjects. One reason for this neglect is that mainstream international relations scholars find it difficult to integrate religious subject matter into their normal conceptual frameworks. The foundational statements of the three leading paradigms – by Kenneth Waltz for realism, Michael Doyle and Robert Keohane for liberalism, and Alexander Wendt for constructivism – offer no explicit guidance, and in some cases they even imply that a role for religion may not be allowable within the logics of their paradigms. Realists ask “how many divisions has the Pope?” liberals tend to accept the secular modernist presumption that religion is an atavism to be superseded and constructivism, with its central interest for identity, norms and culture, has provided more natural intellectual terrain on which to integrate religion into international relations theory¹⁰.

From the three main theories of international relations, *constructivism* seems to provide the friendliest terrain for the role of religion in international politics, because of its emphasis on ideas, norms, identity and culture. Although no single work captures constructivism’s full intellectual diversity, Alexander Wendt’s “Social Theory of International Politics” comes closest to being in the book’s index. Wendt refers to four “master variables”¹¹ that may change the culture of anarchy by undermining egoistic identities and promoting collective ones, namely interdependence, common fate, homogeneity and self-restraint. Religion might be relevant to all four: networks of theological diffusion, persuasion and emulation might enhance cultural interdependence; a sense of common fate might arise from being attacked by a powerful religion-based aggressor; homogeneity may be enhanced by the emergence of a common religious identity; and, finally, self-restraint could be enhanced by religious rules of behavior toward in-group members or toward all humans¹².

¹⁰ Jack Snyder (Ed.), *Religion and International Relations Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 343.

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 344-357.

For the proposed study-case, the religion is viewed as a political *soft-power* tool in bilateral relations, mainly because its actors are using the soft power rather than military (hard) power. Given that soft power is “attractive power and in terms of resources, soft-power resources are the assets that produce such attraction”¹³, the question is how religion serves as a component of attraction in transnational relations, because Azerbaijan is a region with complex transnational relationships and highly asymmetric dependencies from powerful neighbors and foreign forces.

It is also important, when discussing religion to also debate on *secularism*, especially in the proposed study-case of Azerbaijan, where, unlikely other Muslim countries, secularism prevails. While there is an ongoing debate about the nature and definition of secularism, it is clear that it is at least in part the negotiation of religion in the public sphere. While secularization theories are in crisis in that it is becoming increasingly clear that religion is not disappearing, the new reformulations of those theories remain firmly linked to the role of religion and the negotiations with it. Like religion, secularism is not monolithic and includes multiple trends. The difference among these trends is primarily the extent and nature to which each form of secularism seeks to remove religion’s influence on the public sphere in general¹⁴.

The posed question concerning the possibility for Islam in Azerbaijan to be a threat to democracy requires some clarifications. The Islam is partly social/identity-glue, historically (against Russia or Armenia, for example) and culturally; it is also a fundamental aspect of patriarchal traditionalism and conservatism, but also provides possibilities for allegiances to other countries interests. Profession of Muslim identity in Azerbaijan is almost universal, but religiousness means different things in different places and Islamic practice is not always dividable into *traditional-local* and *post-independence-new* (the usual categorization of Islam in the post-Soviet world). The purpose of this essay is to gain an insight into religious aspect of the post-Soviet Azerbaijan, particularly in southern Azerbaijan.

¹³ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power. The Mean to Success in World Politics*, New York: Perseus Books Group, 2004, p. 6.

¹⁴ Nukhet A. Sandal and Jonathan Fox, *Religion in International Relations Theory. Interaction and possibilities*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 10.

This essay aims to contribute to the broader discussion about the rising of religion significance, on both national and transnational level, especially because emotional ties created by religious proximity can influence domestic and foreign policy.

1. Relations Between Azerbaijan and Iran in the Post-Soviet Era

In June 1989 in Moscow – still capital of the former Soviet Union at that time – an Iranian delegation headed by Ayatollah Amoli met the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and handed him a message from the leader of the Islamic Revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini. The main idea sent through this message was about the end of communist era and pointed out: “from this time communism will be found only in museums of political history”¹⁵. The prediction came true just two years later and the Republic of Azerbaijan became a sovereign state free from the shatters of any ideology.

The recent history of the Azerbaijan-Iran relationship started on December 31, 1989, when the people living in the Nakhichevan republic removed the barbed wire obstacle along the Soviet-Iranian border. Not even today no one can tell whether that was a spontaneous act of protest or a provocation needed to use the army against the civilian population of Baku. What followed is known in the recent history of Azerbaijan as “black January”¹⁶.

Disintegration of the Soviet Union introduced a new stage into Iran’s foreign policy: the country was confronted with new geopolitical realities, therefore, any alliance had to be maintained and reinforced. When Azerbaijan became independent on October 18, 1991, the relations between Tehran and Baku acquired a new status. The Iranian consulate in the Azeri

¹⁵ *** “Imam Khomeini’s Historic Letter to Gorbachev Resonates Globally” in *Islam Times*, January 2, 2017, [<http://islamtimes.org/en/doc/article/596395/>], December 20, 2017.

¹⁶ “Black January”, also known as “Black Saturday” or the “January Massacre”, was a violent crackdown in Baku, on 19-20 January 1990, pursuant to a state of emergency during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. See: Robert Kushen, “*Conflict in the Soviet Union. Black January in Azerbaidzhan*”, New York: Humans Rights Watch, 1991, pp. 3-45.

capital was transformed into an embassy, while Azerbaijan opened its embassy in Tehran¹⁷.

Close in culture and different in ideology, pro-Western Azerbaijan and pro-Islamic Iran went, during the last two decades, through different levels of tensions, mostly caused by the Iran's sizeable Azeri minority, estimated to between 20 and 25 million. Iran has been traditionally upset and suspicious over the pro-Western policies of Azerbaijan, its engagement with NATO and the US military, the involvement of Western oil companies in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea, as well as the deep military cooperation with Israel¹⁸.

Religion was another issue that kept Azerbaijan and Iran apart. There is no concerted opinion about Islam in Azerbaijan, yet all agree that the republic is experiencing a religious revival. Although it is a fact that today Azerbaijan is noticeably more Islamic than it was 20 years ago, the country is still among the most secular of Islamic societies¹⁹. It has a pluralistic legislation that allows for the coexistence of many different religions and confessions. However, despite the fact that most non-Islamic religious leaders praise Azerbaijan for its religious tolerance, Islam itself and Islamic communities may become subject to restriction by the political authorities because of their affiliations with foreign powers²⁰, Iran being the most important one. On the one hand, Baku was declared the annual capital of Islamic culture in 2009, and on the other hand, the government adopted few restrictive measures, such as closing some of the mosques, outlawing *adhān* (the call to prayer) and *hijab* (the female headscarf), in the very same year. There was a censorship of all religious literature in Azerbaijan, which was explained by the authorities as a preventive

¹⁷ Islam Nazarov, "Relations Between Iran and Azerbaijan Today and in the Nearest Future", in *CA&CC Press (Publishing House Sweden)*, [http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2002/journal_eng/cac-05/10.nazeng.shtml], December 21st, 2017.

¹⁸ Robert M. Cutler, "Facing Growing Iranian Threats, Azerbaijan Deepens Ties To Israel", in *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 15 May, 2013, [<http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12730-facing-growing-iranian-ties-azerbaijan-deepens-ties-to-israel.html>], December 21st, 2017.

¹⁹ Vincent J. Cornell (Ed.), *Voices of Islam (Volume 1- Voices of Tradition)*, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007, p. 8.

²⁰ Elnur Ismaylov, *Islam in Azerbaijan. Revival and political involvement*, in Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jödicke and Evert van der Zweerde (Eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus*, New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 96-97.

measure against the spread of radical extremism. At the same time, the government has built new churches, synagogues and mosques. Between 2003 and 2013, the Azerbaijani government has constructed around 200 mosques and renovated more than 80²¹. Religious policies are an important factor which influences the current sensitive geopolitical position of Azerbaijan, a country that is located between three regional powers – Iran, Turkey and Russia.

For Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not just an ordinary country. First of all, Iran is the Azerbaijan Republic's southern neighbor. The 2 states share about 618 kilometers of land borders. These two countries border each other in the Caspian Sea as well. Both countries share values from their mutual past and some elements of a common culture. Azerbaijan has the second largest Shi'a population in the world, after Iran. The membership of both countries in Muslim and regional organizations like the Organization of Islamic Conference and ECO, is an indicator of the countries' affinities in terms of geography and religion. The history of direct relations for the last 10 years shows that such positive and binding factors as neighborhood and the same religion are not enough to create close relations between them. Other important factors, which affect current relations between Azerbaijan and Iran, exist as well.

2. Nature of Islam in Azerbaijan

According to a 2012 Gallup poll, Azerbaijan is one of the most secular and tolerant Muslim countries in the world and belongs to the top 11 least religious countries²². Azerbaijan is one of the few Muslim countries in which Islam is not the state religion, while secularism is enshrined in the constitution. However, secularity should not be understood as an expression of anti-religiousness: a secular tradition does not wholly preclude the existence of religious components in public life; rather involves the absence of ant religious influence on the political life and society. According to an official survey, 93% of over nine million Azerbaijanis are adherents of Islam and the remainder of the population

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²² Gallup Survey Frequency by Country, 2012, [<http://news.gallup.com/poll/151595/Gallup-Survey-Frequency-Country-2012.aspx>], December 22nd, 2017.

consists mostly of Russian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and followers of other Christian groups, as well as Jews and nonbelievers²³.

In the early 1990s, when newly independent states emerged from the ashes of the defunct USSR, the ideological and supranational vacuum provoked a deep and real upheaval in the redefining of the national, cultural and religious identity of the state, as well as individuals, and in redefining the relations of the former with the latter²⁴. Islam played an important role in the formation of the new independent republic and Azerbaijani Islam was intrinsically shaped by the specific circumstances that pertained in the country. It was different from Islam in other Islamic countries and international Islamic trends. If Islam in the Soviet period was viewed only as a set of holy rituals confined to funerals, after independence it was a form of cultural identity and historical heritage. The Muslim faith was at the center of this recovery of identity. However, the above-mentioned policies restored the role of Islam at the core of Azerbaijani national identity and cultural consciousness. Religious persons were free in their activities by comparison with earlier times²⁵.

Religiousness is mostly deep-seated and un-self-conscious, people's daily lives involve relationship with religion and they take it for granted. This has a twofold effect: it both makes them more resilient to efforts of outsiders telling them how to live their religion and it makes them more susceptible to persuasion towards supposedly more 'authentic' versions of their religion. Religiousness also increases the interest of the local population in religious philosophy and background. The local madrassah (which is both a school-level madrassah and has Baku Islamic University affiliated courses) has many students who are studying after school for additional degrees: while there are often fears that this madrassah is a haunt of the more fundamentalist or extreme in their beliefs. Polls and interviews show that it tends to be those more curious about their culture and society, rather than seeking religion as a solution to broader issues, political or social²⁶. While most Azerbaijanis regard Islam as being part of

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Bayram Balci and Altay Goushov, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

²⁵ Raoul Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan", in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 115/2001, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2001, pp. 1-16.

²⁶ Svante E. Cornell, "The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan", in *Silk Road Paper*, October 2006, pp. 14-22.

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.

The 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 Azerbaijan²⁷. 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 mobilizing power of Islam against a secular regime, however, exerted considerable influence by giving Azerbaijani religious activists self-confidence against the communist oppression. But, the Islamic Republic could never hope to get very far with its aspirations. First, due to the completely different structure of the Azerbaijani society from the Iranian one, like the nonexistence of a comparable clergy independent from the state and second, because of the different role religion plays in each country²⁸.

[https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2006_10_SRP_Cornell_Islam-Azerbaijan.pdf], December 22nd, 2017.

²⁷ Raoul Motika, 2001, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

As 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 missionaries²⁹. In autumn 1997 the government demanded re-registration of all religious communities requiring the approval by "traditional religious organizations". This was extremely difficult for certain groups³⁰. 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 organizations asking for registration approval by the semi-official "Administration of the Caucasian Muslims" (*Qafqazya Müsülmanlar İdarəsi*; hereafter: *QMI*) is mandatory. For obvious reasons the *QMI* 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 them³¹.

3. Religion – The Iranian Soft Power in Azerbaijan

As outlined just in the previous chapter, Azerbaijan is in a volatile geopolitical situation, as a secular, pro Western state whose southern neighbour is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its position is complicated by the fact that not only does Iran border Azerbaijan but also it hosts a large

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁰ Raoul Motika, "Foreign Missionaries, Homemade Dissidents and Popular Islam: The Search for New Religious Structures in Azerbaijan", in Rainer Brunner & Werner Ende (eds.), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times*, Boston: Brill, 2000, p. 289.

³¹ *Ibid.*

community of ethnic Azerbaijanis, estimated figures between 18 and 25 million³². Therefore, there is no surprise that Iran attempted (and still does) in numerous ways to bring Azerbaijan into its orbit of influence.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a change of paradigm in the relation between Azerbaijan and Iran. During the first years as independent republic, Azerbaijan considered the government from Tehran a natural ally. This was mainly due to the Ayatollah Khomeini's statement, which condemned the Soviet invasion in Baku, in January 1990. Also, the opening of the borders and the Iranian humanitarian assistance made Iran a hero in the eyes of the average Azerbaijanis. However, since 1993, the relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have fluctuated, but neither side risked crossing the point of no return or took harsh actions.

Nowadays, Azerbaijan-Iran relations are among the most complicated in the region, having experienced radical transformations over the last two decades. Cordial friends and brotherly nations at the end of the Cold War, a decade later Baku and Tehran almost engaged in an armed conflict in the Caspian Sea, over the Araz-Alov-Sharg oilfields. Both countries have several tools to exert their soft powers over each other, but it seems that Azerbaijan's tools are stronger. The presence of approximately 30 millions Azerbaijani ethnic minority in Iran seems to be a significant leverage, and Iran has been suspicious that Baku might use the ethnic card as a tool to burden Iran, especially because the secular regime of Azerbaijan attracts Iranian citizens, particularly the ethnic Azerbaijanis. On the other hand, also Tehran actively seeks to expand its soft power methods in Azerbaijan and the Shi'a factor remains one of the most important tools of Iranian soft power in the country³³.

Since the independence of Azerbaijan, the government from Tehran has been active in promoting its religious ideology in the country. When in 1992 the Popular Front came to power in Azerbaijan, Iran felt threatened by the increasing nationalist rhetoric of the Abulfaz Elçibey government. Proclaiming a Western, particularly Turkish orientation and accusing

³² Emil Souleimanov, Ondrej Ditrych, "Iran and Azerbaijan: A Contested Neighborhood", in *Middle East Policy*, Volume 14, Issue 2, June 2007, pp. 101-116, [<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2007.00300.x/full>], January 2nd, 2018.

³³ Anar Valiyev, "Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan: does religion matter?", in Ansgar Jödicke (Ed.), *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 85-89.

Tehran of violating the rights of Azerbaijanis in Iran, Elçibey alienated the Iranian establishment. Tehran was also believed to support Armenia against Azerbaijan in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh region, in spite of the Islamic bond between the two nations. Consequently, relations between Baku and Tehran remained tense even after the late president Heydar Aliyev came to power in 1993.

Iran's religious activities in Azerbaijan were initially conducted openly, and concentrated on the more conservative southern regions of Azerbaijan that border Iran; the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic bordering Iran and isolated from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenian territory; and several villages on the Apsheron peninsula where Shi'a Islam is traditionally influential. Tehran has also been active in proselytizing in the refugee and IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps that were scattered around Azerbaijan as a result of the Karabakh war. For religious propaganda, it used Iranian mullahs and sponsored pro-Iranian mosques both in the southern regions, and in villages of Baku such as Nardaran³⁴. In the late 1990s, President Aliyev banned and expelled Iranian mullahs who were preaching in Azerbaijani mosques. This, however, did not stop Iranian religious activity in Azerbaijan, but resulted in a change of tactics. Today, Tehran uses Azerbaijani mullahs who are sympathetic to the Iranian regime and often trained in Iran, and promotes its agenda through cultural and social organizations. The southern regions of Azerbaijan, the IDP camps, and the Apsheron peninsula remain a stronghold of Iranian activity. According to the State Committee for Work with Religious Structures "in every village of Masalli, Lankaran and Jalilabad regions there is at least one mosque and one religious community. Only in Masalli region the number of functioning mosques exceeds the total number of mosques in Neftchala, Salyan, Saatli and Sabirabad regions"³⁵.

Since 2001, the State Committee for Work with Religious Structures handles religious matters on the governmental level between Azerbaijan and Iran on the Azerbaijani side, and Iran's Organization of Culture and Islamic Relations. In Iran, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei who uses so-called 'cultural' bureaus to conduct his own foreign policy

³⁴ Svante E Cornell, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

³⁵ *** *The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Freedom of Religious Belief'*, Chapter 1, Article 1: "http://www.addk.net/eng/zakon_svooboda_e.html.", January 2nd, 2018.

independently from official Iranian diplomatic channels generally oversees the religious and cultural activities. The Islamic Propaganda Organization (*sazeman-e tablighat-e eslam*), the Hajj and Welfare Organization, and the Society for Reconciliation among Islamic Sects (*majma'-e jahani-ye baraye teqrib-e baine mazaheb-e eslam*) are also a part of Khamenei's network³⁶.

The Shi'a heritage of Azerbaijan represents the main source of Iranian power. As in Lebanon or Iraq, the Iranian foreign policy uses this factor, and is unlikely that Tehran will cease its action in this direction. Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan could grow if Shi'a Islam were to become a force that could monopolize the political and civil realms of the country, and this situation could be eased by the absence of an independent and educated Azerbaijani clergy. Nevertheless, despite the attempts of the Azerbaijani authorities to limit Iranian soft power, there are some signs that it has been growing in recent years. Yet, the strong secularization of Azerbaijan is yet an important factor that can limit the expansion of the Iranian influence.

However, Iran is likely to continue its religious activities in Azerbaijan by sponsoring cultural and social events and supporting pro-Iranian Azerbaijani mullahs. As the economic welfare of Azerbaijanis improves and the last IDP camps are dismantled, Iran's ability to attract poor and alienated Azerbaijani citizens could very well diminish. However, Tehran's activity will continue to flourish in more conservative areas such as villages around Baku and the southern regions of Azerbaijan. Iran will also remain as a leading country for students and scholars who want to study Shi'a theology and religious education.

Conclusion

By narrowing down the more extended phenomenon of religious revival that has affected almost all of the former Soviet republics and societies to the case of Azerbaijan, this essay tried to elaborate on the inherent elements and features of this revival process, and shortly assess how it affected the young auto-proclaimed secular state. Starting from the

³⁶ Eva Raket, "Paradigms of Iranian Policy in Central Eurasia and Beyond", in *Perspective on Global Development and Technology*, Volume 2, Issue 3, 2003, pp. 549-571, [<http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/156915003322986398>], January 2nd, 2018.

hypothesis that Shi'a revival in Azerbaijan benefits from foreign influential support, this research took up for study the Iranian influence in Azerbaijan.

The Iranian input in the Azerbaijani Islamic revival was particularly active between 1990 and 1995 among the Shiites, in the southern part of the country and in the landlocked autonomous province of Nakhichevan. Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan may take various forms and lead to different outcomes. Considering the recent softening of pressure on Iran, the government from Tehran could limit its soft power toward Azerbaijan and begin fully-fledged neighborly cooperation. If Iran feels secure enough not to perceive Azerbaijan as a threat, it may slow down its soft power activities. However, based on the actions of the two regimes, things could go also differently. Azerbaijani authorities and various agencies understood that due to the nature of the Iranian regime, Tehran would capitalize on Azerbaijan's vulnerability. Surprisingly, the source of Iranian soft power depends on Azerbaijan itself. Iranian soft power will grow if Azerbaijan statehood becomes weaker and the country will begin to experience economic problems. Thus, the future of Iranian soft power is contingent on the result of Azerbaijan's internal politics.

Islam in Azerbaijan is a multifaceted phenomenon that 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'³⁷. 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.

³⁷ Raoul Motika, 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

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