

# Salafi Movements and Perceptions in Azerbaijan (in the Context of the Syrian Conflict)

Matevosyan Harut A.

YSU, Faculty of Oriental Studies, Master's degree

harutmatevosyan9@gmail.com

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## Սալաֆիական շարժումները և ընկալումները Ադրբեջանում (սիրիական հակամարտության կոնտեքստում)

Մաթևոսյան Հարություն Ա.

ԵՊՀ Արևելագիտություն ֆակուլտետ, մագիստրանտ (Երևան, ՀՀ)

harutmatevosyan9@gmail.com

**Ամփոփագիր.** Այս հոդվածում հիմնական շեշտը դրվում է Ադրբեջանում սուննիականության ավելի կոնկրետ սալաֆիական շարժումների գոյության և զարգացման վրա Ադրբեջանում 1990-ական թթ.-ից, ինչպես նաև դրանցի հետո այդ ընկալումների անմիջական ազդեցությունը Սիրիական հակամարտությունում: Ադրբեջանը մուսուլմանական ինքնությամբ, աշխարհիկ քաղաքական համակարգ ունեցող երկիր է, ինչն ամրագրված է պետության սահմանադրությամբ: Ադրբեջանի մուսուլման բնակչության մեծամասնությունը շիաներ են: Անկախությունից հետո սուննիների և շիաների թվային համամասնության մասին գիտավերլուծական աղբյուրներում տարբեր տվյալներ են հրապարակվել: Սակայն վերջին շրջանում ավելի ակտիվ գործունեություն են ծավալում սուննիական, ավելի կոնկրետ սալաֆիական շարժումները: Այս գործընթացներին մասնակցում էին ոչ միայն բուն Ադրբեջանում, այլ տարածաշրջանում ընդհանրապես: Այս միտումները սպառնալիք են հանդիսանում ոչ միայն տարածաշրջանի համա, այլ լուրջ խնդիրների են բերում նաև հենց ադրբեջանական իշխանությունների համար, քանզի իշխանությունը ավելի պահպանողական ուժերին անցնելու հավանականությունը ավելի մեծ էր: Տարածաշրջանային կոնտեքստում ավելի ակնհայտ է սիրիական հակամարտությունում ներառված և մասնակցություն ունեցող ադրբեջանցիները, որոնցից շատերը ևս շարունակում են համագործակցել տեղի ահաբեկչական ուժերի դեմ:

**Հանգուցարաներ՝** Ադրբեջան, իսլամ, սալաֆիականություն, ջիհադ, Կովկաս, սուննիականություն, շիա, Իրան, Թուրքիա, Սիրիա

## Салафитские движения и восприятия в Азербайджане (в контексте сирийского конфликта)

Матевосян Арутюн А.

ЕГУ, факультет востоковедения, магистр (Ереван, РА)

harutmatevosyan9@gmail.com

**Аннотация:** Эта статья посвящена существованию салафитских движений в Азербайджане с 1990-х годов, а также их прямому влиянию на сирийский конфликт. Азербайджан – страна с мусульманской идентичностью и светской политической системой, закрепленной в конституции государства. Большинство мусульманского населения Азербайджана – шииты. В последнее время в Азербайджане наблюдается активизация суннитского фактора, проявляющаяся в суннификации определенных слоев азербайджанских шиитов и резком увеличении количества суннитских мечетей. Примечательно, что к суннитской версии ислама склоняются и некоторые слои интеллигенции. В свою очередь, государство со дня обретения независимости поощряло расширение идушего из Турции суннизма, в том числе пытаясь нейтрализовать религиозное влияние иранского шиизма в Азербайджане. Эти тенденции представляют угрозу не только для региона, но и для властей Азербайджана. В региональном контексте азербайджанцы, вовлеченные в сирийский конфликт, продолжают сотрудничать с местными террористическими силами.

**Ключевые слова:** Азербайджан, ислам, салафизм, джихад, Кавказ, сунниты, шииты, Иран, Турция, Сирия.

### Introduction

The spread of Islam in the Caucasus region dates back to the early Islamic period, from the middle of the 7th century. In some parts of the Caucasus, this process took place in different stages [1, pp. 20-21]. As a result, Sunni Islam outweighed in the North Caucasus, particularly its Hanafi-Shafi'i

directions. Chechens, ingush people and dagestanis belong to the Shafi'i direction and hanafiism is widespread in the central and western parts of the North Caucasus.

In recent years, there has been an increase in Sunni Islamic radical sentiment (mood swing) in the Caucasus region. They reasons for the emergence of

Islamic extremism in the Caucasus are religious intolerance, intercivil tensions, the violent actions for solving this or that problems in the internal life of the Muslim community and in external relations [2, pp. 7-8]. This process stopped in the 20th century in a sense, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has expanded and moved forward with renewed vigor. This process became more obvious in two regional countries, Georgia and Azerbaijan. During the period of independence, various Salafi<sup>1</sup> directions became active in Azerbaijan, including Wahhabism, which originated in the 18th century in Najd and then filtered the Caucasus. In the post-independence period, it became more active in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, mainly as a result of the Karabakh war (1991-1994) and the Russian-Chechen wars (1994-1996, 1999) by students of sunni-salafi preachers, chechen refugees settled in Azerbaijan and through the students educated in Azerbaijan, in various Gulf countries and in Saudi Arabia. Azerbaijan's border with Dagestan facilitates penetration of Wahhabi commentary of Sunni Islam in northern regions of Azerbaijan which became a transit point for both Wahhabi preachers and jihadist fighters of "fighting Islamism" imbued with those ideas [3, pp. 112-113]. In the first half of the 1990s, various Islamic charities of Arab origin opened branches throughout Azerbaijan. [4, p. 75]. Salafist preachers found "fertile ground" mainly in northern Azerbaijan where the population is traditionally a follower of Sunni Islam including ethnic minorities (Lezgins, Avars, Kachurs, etc.) living along the border with the Russian Federation. Salafi preaching centers are being established in major cities such as Baku and Sumgait.

The Syrian crisis has increased the opportunities for the involvement of the Salafi movement. In March 2011 Syria's government, led by Pres. Bashar al-Assad, faced an unprecedented challenge to its authority when pro-democracy protests erupted throughout the country. Protesters demanded an end to the authoritarian practices of the Assad regime, in place since Assad's father, Hafiz al-Assad, became president in 1971. The Syrian government used violence to suppress demonstrations, making extensive use of police, military, and paramilitary forces. Opposition militias began to form in 2011, and by 2012 the conflict had expanded into a full-fledged civil war.

<sup>1</sup> Salafism (al-Salaf al-Salihun-الصالحون السلف) was a new wave of Islamic reform in Egypt in the late 19th century aimed at converting Islam to the tradition of the orthodox ancestors of the first four caliphs, the orthodox ancestors. (See The Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition, Under the patronage of the international union of academies, Volume VIII, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1995, p. 900).

### **Salafism in Azerbaijan and its Impacts on the Syrian conflict**

Regional instability (Chechen wars, Karabakh conflict, etc.) has become "fertile ground" for Islamic radicalism in recruiting militants and waging jihadist struggle. Islamists representing the Caucasus are involved in active jihadist struggle both in the Caucasus and abroad. Most of the foreign Islamists fighting in the Middle East come from the Caucasus region.

The emergence of new national-state units, especially in the Caucasus region after the collapse of the USSR, also contributed to the spread of Islamic, including radical, ideas in these areas and to the filling of the resulting socio-political vacuum. One of these factors is the spread of radical Islamic ideas by some Muslim countries and in some cases, funding and support for Islamic extremism [2, pp. 9-10].

Since religion was seriously restricted during the Soviet period, foreign proselytism of any faith was an almost non-existent phenomenon in Azerbaijan. However, the few people who went on the Hajj pilgrimage from Azerbaijan during the Soviet times, as well as those Azeris working in Arabic countries through the USSR as diplomats and interpreters became acquainted with the Wahhabi-Salafi movement.

Comments made by some of these Azerbaijanis, such as well-known public figures Rafiq Aliyev and late Rafiq Ismayil and Vafa Guluzadeh during their discussions with the authors of this article about Salafism demonstrated that they became acquainted with this movement in Arabic countries. However, the initial stage of the arrival of Salafism in Azerbaijan was related to the activities of students from Arabic countries in Baku. In 1970-1980s there were many foreign students from Arabic and African countries studying in various Azerbaijani universities.

In the late 1980s, in Baku, those Arab students who espoused Salafism, who were mostly studying at the Oil Academy (the then Azerbaijan Institute of Oil and Chemistry) and the medical sciences [6], began their religious proselytism after the Perestroika-era relaxation of anti-religious policies in the USSR. Our interlocutors personally knew some Salafi proselytizers from Sudan, Algeria and Yemen.

Along with traditional Salafis, there were also Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) groups among the first Sunnis that came to Azerbaijan, whose members consisted of Arab students. However, Salim Zakharna, the first leader of the traditional Salafi group, stood against them. In general, following the Salafi tradition, the Azerbaijani Salafis demonstrated a vocal anti-Brotherhood agenda in the following years.

Meanwhile, the rapid expansion and spread of Salafi propaganda in Azerbaijan took place with the support of various Arab foundations.

Despite the fact that Azerbaijan, according to its own constitution, is a secular state, the country's

authorities use the Islamic factor to strengthen their own position. The pilgrimage to Mecca by President H. Aliev in 1994 received a great response in the country. Politicians, pro-government or opposition, use Islamic rhetoric. All Islamic holidays (Ashura, Uraza Bayram, Mavlud) are celebrated in Azerbaijan. There are hours dedicated to Islam on TV and radio, excerpts from the Quran are recited during national ceremonies. There are about 1300 mosques in the country. The issue of training religious staff has always been a serious problem in Azerbaijan. An Islamic university was established in Baku in the early 1990s with the support of Saudi Arabia for this purpose. From 1992 the faculty of Islamic Theology started operating at Baku University. Azerbaijani students received religious education mainly in Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan [5].

Wahhabism, particularly Salafism, in Azerbaijan greatly promoted by the sponsorship of a Kuwaiti benefactor in 1997 and the Construction of the Abu Bakr Mosque in the Narimanov district of Baku on behalf of the Kuwaiti Organization of Islamic Renaissance Heritage.

After the events of September 11, 2001, under the banner of the global fight against terrorism, the Azerbaijani state machine began to take precautionary measures to limit the influence of Wahhabi propagandists on Azerbaijani society. In particular, The Abu Bakr Mosque was closed in August in 2008, after when there were two people killed and ten were injured, including Haji Gamet as a result of terrorist attack. On the other hand, the fight against terrorism was used by Azerbaijan to establish control over opposition political circles [6, pp. 343-345]. It should be noted that the authorities have always seen the danger of Wahhabism. Of particular concern was the fact that militants were recruited in some Wahhabi-oriented mosques for participating in conflicts in adjacent areas and the Middle East. Religious motives for participation of Azerbaijani militants's mercenaries in international conflicts become one of Azerbaijan's main concerns finding response in both inner and international press.

Proof of this was the fact that radical Islamic extremist groups operating in Azerbaijan were also involved in terrorist attacks outside the Caucasus, such as the bombings of US embassies in Kenya, Tanzania, and others in 1996. [7, pp. 415]. In this context, it becomes clear that in some parts of the Muslim world, active Islamic radical organizations already have their long-established cells in Azerbaijan (for example, "Islamic Jihad", "al-Qaeda", etc.).

It should be noted that there are conflicting data on the number of Sunni Salafi followers in

Azerbaijan. Some authors estimate the number of Salafis even up to one million. From the other hand, the problems of jihadism in Azerbaijan within the framework of Salafism were a matter of concern not only for the Azerbaijani authorities, but also for Iran and Russia. The weakening of Shiite positions is a blow, first of all to Iran's political positions in Azerbaijan [3, p. 116]. After Azerbaijan's independence Turkish-Iranian conflicts arose in order to spread their influence in this country. Iran has invested serious financial resources in the construction of mosques and other religious institutions in Azerbaijan, as well as training personnel. Tehran's efforts to neutralize nationalism in Azerbaijan and activate the Shiite factor had their own political overtones. Tehran was concerned about the growth of nationalist sentiments in Azerbaijan, which could stimulate national or separatist movements in the Iranian Atrpatakan.

Nevertheless, the situation has become completely different after the revolutionary processes of the "Arab Spring"<sup>2</sup> in the region. Azerbaijani Islamists did not stay away from radical Islamic processes, taking a direct part in the jihadist struggle in international armed conflicts. Azerbaijanis participated in jihad in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other parts [8, pp. 130-131]. In particular, Azerbaijani Shiites fought alongside government forces in Syria, and Sunni Azerbaijanis were part of Islamic groups, mainly the Sunni opposition camp [9, p. 175].

At first, the Azerbaijanis were involved in the radical Islamic group "Jaish al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar", later they were involved in the fight against the Syrian government forces as part of other radical Islamic groups. In 2013, armed groups manned by Azerbaijanis with Azerbaijani jihadist leaders were spotted in the middle of Syria. They called on their compatriots to join the jihad in the Middle East. In 2013, the Azerbaijanis were initially united in the "Azerbaijani Jama'a" (Azerbaijani grouping), operating as part of the group "Jaish al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar. The latter was guided by Abu Yahya al-Azeri, after whose murder Azerbaijani jihadists were distributed among a number of Islamic groups. One of the first structures staffed by Azerbaijani Islamists fighting as part of the Islamic State was the Jundullah group, in which, in addition to the Azerbaijanis, the Turks were also involved. The group operated in the Syrian province of al-Raqqa and was actively involved in Islamist attacks on Kobani, a Kurdish town in northern Syria. Another

<sup>2</sup> The "Arab Spring" is a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and rallies in the Middle East and North Africa that began in the Arab world on December 18, 2010. It started with the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and continued in the form of civil wars in Libya and Syria.

group, staffed by Azerbaijani and Turkish jihadists, was the Khatab group active in Iraq (called the leader Khatab al-Azeri). Some Azerbaijanis also operated as part of the Abu Kamil group, which is mainly staffed by Chechens. Despite the fact that a significant part of Azerbaijanis were involved in Islamic groups operating as part of the IS, there were many Azerbaijanis in other radical Islamic structures active in Syria, in particular as part of the JN [9, pp. 176-178].

In Azerbaijan, four villagers were killed during clashes between police officers and believers in the village of Nardaran and the assassination attempt on the mayor of Gandzak on July 3, 2018. The State blamed Islamist organizations and opposition forces supporting them for the murder of two policemen killed during a protest after this attempt in order to gain additional votes during the subsequent elections. At the same time, in a statement about the demonstration, the authorities described it as "a gathering of extremists, the murder of a policeman by them." The Azerbaijani authorities reported facts that Safarov, accused of the murder, had been training in Iran and Syria for several months. Since the emergence of the Islamic State organization, Azerbaijan has been trying to control the flow of terrorists from Syria and Iraq. Reforms of a number of regulatory legal acts during 2009-2015. They were aimed at maximum prevention of the terrorist threat and its further spread. In particular, according to the addendum to the Criminal Code, "foreign soldiers" traveling to Syria face 15 years in prison. According to another amendment to the same Code, the punishment for religious propaganda was set for two years instead of the previous year [6, pp. 348-349].

It should be noted the recent persecution of Islamic extremist groups by Azerbaijani special services in various parts of the country, including the capital Baku, the arrest of persons accused of collaborating with Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic organizations, leaders and unity in the Islamic world. Their absence has a certain impact on the activities of extremist Islamic radical groups in Azerbaijan.

However, the problems existing in Azerbaijan, the violence and persecution of the authorities against opposition forces (including Islamic radicals), the disproportionate distribution of profits from the sale of energy resources, corruption on a huge scale, the violent pressure of any dissent, the fruitless policy of the Aliyev clan in the Karabakh conflict further aggravate the social crisis in the country, which radical Azerbaijani Islamists can take advantage of.

In addition, the Syrian conflict remains unresolved. This is an opportunity for the

development of radicalism, the inclusion of new regions, in fact, while a number of Azeris continue to be involved in these processes, which poses a threat not only to Syria but to the entire region.

### Conclusion

Thus, the extremist movements and perceptions in Azerbaijan remain quite active in Azerbaijan. It gained a great momentum after the independence of Azerbaijan. In addition, as a result of the externalization of Turkish-Arab, religious penetrations, as well as the influence of the value transformation typical of the period of independence, circles emerged with a new religious identity. It is obvious that the Azerbaijani authority was primarily trying to stimulate the activity of this process, but the extremists in the country began to pose a specific threat to them and this was followed by the first pressures on them. The predominance of Shiites in Azerbaijan did not hinder the activation of Sunni, more specifically, Salafi movements in the country. It is supposed that in the coming years the construction of Sunni mosques, the development of Sunni theology, the deepening of Sunni perceptions in the society will gain more momentum in Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Salafism in Azerbaijan will soon need new adaptation mechanisms in order to maintain a balance with "Turkish Islam".

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