



**"An Apparatus of Mediators"
Religion in Azerbaijan**
by Thomas Liles - 18.03.2013

Throughout Azerbaijan's two decades of post-Soviet independence, relations between the country's secular government and the country's independent Islamic organizations have ranged from tenuous to openly hostile. However, following a steep deterioration in relations in recent years the Aliyev regime has taken steps ostensibly to revamp relations with Islamic organizations and improve its image among Azerbaijani believers.

In May 2012, President Ilham Aliyev appointed Elshad Iskenderov as the new head of Azerbaijan's State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO). Created by the Azerbaijani government in 2001, the SCWRO is tasked with registering religious organizations in Azerbaijan and regulating their activities. The SCWRO also works in conjunction with the state-affiliated Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM), which is led by the Shia cleric Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade and controls the appointment of Azerbaijan's official clergy. Islamic organizations which do not recognize the spiritual authority of the CBM technically operate outside of the state's purview and are thus considered "independent".

Iskenderov's appointment came at a particularly consequential juncture for government-religion relations in Azerbaijan. From approximately 2006-2012, authorities' relations with Azerbaijan's various independent Islamic groups steadily deteriorated, due in large part to restrictions on the activities of mosques as well as frequent imprisonments of Islamic leaders and clerics. Additionally, the Ministry of Education banned the wearing of Islamic headscarves in Azerbaijan's public secondary schools and universities in 2010. Known by most Azerbaijanis simply as the "hijab ban", this policy has also had negative implications for government-religion relations.

Iskenderov is seen by many Azerbaijani Islamic leaders as a competent and professional figure, and thus his appointment signaled a potential willingness by the government to engage with independent Islamic organizations in a more constructive and multilateral manner. Nearly a year after the appointment, however, religious leaders have become increasingly doubtful as to whether Iskenderov can develop a more positive working relationship between Azerbaijan's authorities and Islamic organizations. Both independent Shia and Sunni leaders indi-

cate that, in fact, the government has done little to bring closure to the most pressing problems affecting their respective religious communities.

By most accounts, Azerbaijan is still a largely secular state. According to data from the 2012 Caucasus Barometer survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center—Azerbaijan (CRRC), only 5 percent of Azerbaijan's 99-percent Muslim population claimed to attend religious services on at least a weekly basis, while an additional 5 percent stated they attended services at least once a month and 34 percent said they attended only on special holidays.

Nevertheless, Caucasus Barometer data also suggest that interest in Islam and conceptions of personal religiosity are growing. Between 2010 and 2012, for example, the combined percentage of Azerbaijanis who claimed they were "very" or "quite" religious increased from 16 percent to 22 percent. Likewise, during the same time period the combined total of Azerbaijanis indicating that religion played a "rather" or "very" important role in their daily lives increased from 71 percent to 80 percent.

Despite Azerbaijan's dominant secular tendencies, therefore, it is in the Azerbaijani government's best interests to engage constructively with the increasingly religious segments of Azerbaijan's population as well as those independent Islamic organizations that claim to represent them.

Islam and the State under Ilham Aliyev

Government-religion relations became an especially salient point of contention under the tenure of President Ilham Aliyev. Islam served as an increasingly strong mobilizing force and theme in public discourse following Azerbaijan's presidential (2003) and parliamentary (2005) elections, both of which were marked by electoral fraud as indicated by observers such as Human Rights Watch. According to historian Arif Yunus, these watershed electoral events prompted greater numbers of Azerbaijanis to turn to Islam as a form of political and social expression. This was because of popular discontent toward the Aliyev regime as well as increasing skepticism towards Azerbaijan's liberal opposition parties and western democracies' relationships with the Aliyev regime. Accordingly, the early-mid 2000s saw an uptick in the

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political activism of independent Shia groups in Azerbaijani as well as continued proselytizing by foreign Sunni groups among the country's urban populations and northern ethnic minorities.

To counteract religious activism and foreign proselytizing, the Azerbaijani government has asserted increasing control over religious life in the country since 2006. From 2006-2008, authorities canceled a number of Islamic television programs as well as Koranic education courses, all the while placing greater restrictions on the sale of Islamic literature in book stores. Places of worship have also been the subject of government initiatives, as Azerbaijani authorities closed a number of mosques and prayer rooms throughout the country in these years. Additionally, restrictions were briefly placed on the call to prayer in Baku's mosques as well as access to Sunni mosques during Ramadan. Moreover, greater administrative controls were introduced in 2009 following the SCWRO's implementation of stricter re-registration requirements for religious organizations.

Currently, the three most consequential issues for government-religion relations in Azerbaijan include the ban on hijabs in secondary schools, the arrest and imprisonment of clerics and believers, and the lack of mosques in Baku and other major cities. Azerbaijan's Education Minister Misir Mardanov introduced the hijab ban in Azerbaijan's public schools in December 2010, leading to emotional reactions among many religious Azerbaijanis, particularly in the staunchly Shia village of Nardaran. The hijab controversy has continued to serve as a mobilizing issue since the ban's inception, as witnessed by protests in front of the Ministry of Education in October 2012.

Authorities have also imprisoned Muslim leaders and clerics with greater frequency over the past several years. Notably, in January 2011 the chairman of the banned Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), Movsum Samedov, was jailed along with the IPA's deputy chairman and several party activists. The crackdown on IPA leaders coincided with the arrest of other Muslim leaders. This included four Iranian-trained Azerbaijani Shia clerics whose religious training and authority technically outranks that of Allahshukur Pashazade. The four were detained and sentenced to varying prison terms on

charges of hooliganism and weapons possession. Other prominent Muslim clerics have also been detained on similar charges and remain in custody.

Finally, the lack of mosques in Baku and other cities has become an especially salient issue for Azerbaijan's Sunni community. In this vein, authorities have closed a number of Salafi mosques in Baku, Ganje, and Gusar raion in recent years.

The authorities' desire to curtail the influence of foreign and radical Islamic elements in recent years is understandable. Religious identity in independent Azerbaijan has remained relatively underdeveloped and thus theoretically vulnerable to radical influences from Iran, the Arab Gulf states, and to a lesser extent Turkey. From a security standpoint, therefore, the state should be expected to prevent the expansion of foreign religious groups with radical goals in Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, some independent Muslim leaders claim that government policy vis-à-vis independent Islam has become a wider source of contention and alienation. As a result, Azerbaijani authorities have taken a number of seemingly pragmatic steps since 2012 to mend relations with independent Islamic organizations and improve the government's image among Azerbaijani believers.

Government Initiatives and the Independent Islamic Response

The appointment of Elshad Iskenderov as chairman of the SCWRO counted as the government's chief strategy of improving relations with religious groups. Younger, more dynamic, and experienced in religious affairs, Iskenderov presented a stark contrast to his predecessor, Hidayat Orujov, who had minimal background in religious issues and whose relationship with Azerbaijan's Islamic groups was distanced, at best.

Rauf Arifoglu, editor-in-chief of the opposition newspaper Yeni Musavat and a devout Muslim himself explained the situation by saying that "At the time of Iskenderov's appointment, the situation between the government and religious groups was critical. The

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authorities wanted to create an apparatus of mediators between themselves and religious groups in order to show that they were ready to work with these groups."

In addition to holding prominent leadership roles in Azerbaijani youth organizations in the 1990s, Iskenderov served as secretary general of Azerbaijan's Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation previous to his most recent appointment. Moreover, according to journalist and religion expert Kenan Rovshanoglu, Iskenderov was known to attend prayers frequently in the 1990s and enjoyed a pious image among many Islamic leaders in Azerbaijan. He was seen by many to be a prime candidate to serve as a mediator between Azerbaijani authorities and religious groups

Iskenderov has spearheaded an impressive number of international and interfaith public events and initiatives since his appointment. In October 2012, he held interfaith discussions with representatives from the Georgian Orthodox Church and the French Jewish Community in which he underlined Azerbaijan as a model for interreligious tolerance, given the generally positive relations between the country's majority Muslim population and miniscule Orthodox Christian and Jewish communities.

In late 2012, Iskenderov likewise appeared before the British Parliament in London and participated in several meetings with the US government and non-government officials in Washington, DC. In both cases he touted Azerbaijan as a model for religious tolerance. Furthermore, Iskenderov participated in several conferences in Baku where he discussed the social and political aspects of Islam in Azerbaijan, and in December 2012 he announced the creation of the "Baku Platform", which is a proposed network of scholars, politicians, public figures, and religious leaders with the aim of strengthening "religious tolerance and mutual respect" in Azerbaijan

Although Iskenderov's promotion of tolerance and interfaith dialogue is a positive step, the SCWRO's progress in facilitating improved government-religion relations within Azerbaijan has been limited. Internally, the SCWRO has seemingly taken greater initiative in terms of improving relations with Azerbaijan's various Islamic groups. According to Arifoglu, "Iskenderov and his apparatus initially began meeting with various Shia

and Sunni groups, particularly in the format of lunch and breakfast meetings. Until then, nothing like this had happened, and the feeling emerged among religious groups that the authorities were going to soften their stance on Islam."

Nevertheless, nearly a year after the SCWRO's internal changes, many Muslim leaders in Azerbaijan doubt whether the committee can deliver on meaningful reform.

Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is one of the most prominent independent Shia voices and an especially vocal figure on the issue of government-religion relations. Having received brief religious training in Iran in the early 1990s, Ibrahimoglu became imam of the historic Juma Mosque in Baku's old town in 1992. The Juma Mosque attracted sizeable numbers of devout Shia Muslims throughout the 1990s, and in 2000 the community's members established a religious freedom and human rights organization known as DEVAMM (Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion). Like many other independent Islamic organizations in Azerbaijan, the Juma Mosque community did not recognize the spiritual authority of the Caucasus Board of Muslims. Ibrahimoglu's political activism in the 2003 presidential election eventually landed him in prison for a short time. After his release in 2004, he was barred from preaching at Juma Mosque, though he still serves as head of both the Juma Mosque community and DEVAMM.

DEVAMM's Spartan office in Baku's hilly Yasamal district is flanked on either side by Iranian religious book stores. Inside, Ibrahimoglu underlined both his respect for Iskenderov and the frustration of many Islamic leaders regarding the SCWRO's inability to undertake meaningful reforms.

"I think that Iskenderov is a serious professional who can solve problems affecting religious groups," explained Ibrahimoglu. "Initially we thought that his appointment would lead to reform. We thought that the hijab issue would be solved, that imprisoned believers would be released, and that relations between believers and the government would improve. However, none of these questions have been solved. The situation has abated to a certain extent. That is, it isn't improving, but it also isn't worsening."

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"Without a solution to these two problems," continued Ibrahimoglu, "no improvement in relations is possible. The first major problem is the hijab ban. The second is the imprisonment of believers. As long as these issues remain, government initiatives will only be words. If the government provides the necessary political will, then Elshad will be able to solve these problems. If no such political will is forthcoming, then Elshad, regardless of his professionalism, won't be able to solve anything."

Independent Sunni leaders shared similar views. Haji Gamet Suleymanov serves as the unofficial head of Baku's Sunni Salafi community. Educated in Saudi Arabia and Sudan, he became the imam of Baku's Abu Bakr Mosque in 1998 and presided over a decade of unprecedented growth of the capital city's Salafi community. However, Abu Bakr was closed by the authorities in August 2008 following a grenade attack on the mosque, which was ostensibly carried out by a member of a more extreme, rival Salafi group. Since the attack, the authorities have not allowed Abu Bakr to re-open, and many parts of the mosque and its surrounding courtyard have fallen into disrepair. Nevertheless, Suleymanov and a few dozen members from his congregation can be found at the mosque on a daily basis, though large-scale prayers are still not permitted. Unlike Ibrahimoglu, Suleymanov has never harbored political claims and has always discouraged his congregation from becoming politically active.

Speaking of Iskenderov's appointment, Suleymanov said, "I believe whoever is appointed head of the SCWRO must be a professional. It's obvious that Iskenderov is familiar with the religious situation in the country; he is a professional in this respect. The thing is that before Iskenderov, the government appointed unprofessional people to these posts, people who generally did not understand religion. Orujov, for example, knew nothing about religion. Therefore, I believe that government officials must be professional. After Iskenderov's appointment, the religious situation here became a bit more stable."

Nevertheless, the Salafi community has experienced its own problems in recent years. Among the most salient issues, according to Suleymanov, is the lack of Sunni mosques in Baku and other cities. "Of course, there are very few mosques, especially in Baku and especially for

Sunnis. In Ganja there used to be a mosque, but later the authorities closed it and turned it into a library," stated Suleymanov. "So both Salafis and Hanafi Sunnis in Ganja are faced with a big problem, as there are almost no mosques and those that remain are Shia. There is one place for Sunnis in Ganja, though it can only accommodate twenty people."

Suleymanov indicated that talks are underway with the SCWRO concerning the re-opening of both Abu Bakr Mosque and the Salafi mosque in Ganja. However, at this point there are neither guarantees nor any proposed timetable regarding the re-opening of Salafi mosques.

Multiple interview requests were made to various SCWRO and CBM officials in order to incorporate government views into this analysis. However, no government officials were available for comment.

Improvement in Relations or Stillborn Reform?

The Azerbaijani government was prudent to recognize the need for change in its religious policy in 2012. Accordingly, the appointment of Elshad Iskenderov as SCWRO chairman was a positive step given Iskenderov's religious credentials and his good standing among Azerbaijan's various official and independent religious groups.

Nevertheless, the SCWRO's personnel change has accomplished comparatively little in terms of improving the government's relationship with Azerbaijan's independent religious organizations. Independent Islamic leaders have expressed increasing doubts about the SCWRO's role as a mediator given the persistence of issues such as the hijab ban, imprisoned believers, and mosque closures. According to a well-informed Baku journalist, some members of Azerbaijan's official Islamic clergy are likewise pessimistic about the SCWRO's ability to improve the government's relations with independent Islam, though they have largely remained silent on the issue and cooperate with the SCWRO in order to protect their own mosques and congregations.

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Apart from his initial meetings with Islamic groups, there has been no indication that Iskenderov is able to fundamentally influence the nature of government-religion relations in Azerbaijan. Indeed, in addition to his comments regarding tolerance and interfaith issues, many of Iskenderov's statements address issues of a decidedly more strategic and administrative nature. In late 2012, for example, he addressed the SCWRO's campaign to rein in the circulation of foreign religious literature, while also stating the importance of striking a "balance between freedom of worship and national security". Moreover, in February 2013, the SCWRO launched a new website which, among other features, aims to centralize the registration process for religious organizations via an online registration system

Religious tolerance, the distribution of Islamic literature, and administrative improvements are doubtless important topics under the SCWRO's jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the committee's inability to make progress on the most prominent religious issues following Iskenderov's appointment will continue to remain a sticking point for government-religion relations in Azerbaijan. Accordingly, if any real progress is to be made on creating a more positive working relationship between authorities and independent Islamic organizations, the upper echelons of Azerbaijan's government must show a tangible willingness to actually address Azerbaijan's most salient religious issues. ✪