

Islam in Azerbaijan (Historical Background)

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Abstract

This article provides a history of the development of Islam in the territory of current Azerbaijan through the end of the Soviet period.

Introduction

Azerbaijan is a secular Muslim nation on the western shores of the Caspian Sea in the South Caucasus which restored its independence with the demise of the Soviet Union. Almost instantly, this tiny country faced a significant revival of its various religious identities, which had been suppressed by the militant atheism of the Communist regime. Although dissemination of Islamic belief in the territories of current day Azerbaijan started in the middle of the 7th century A.D., formation of religious and ethnic identities here has always been a dynamic and complex process, which has gone through numerous changes over the course of a long, rich history, ultimately laying the foundations for the current situation.

In the 11th century, the formation of the Seljuk Empire forced a shift in the ethnic composition of the Azerbaijani populace, boosting the proportion of Turkic people and Sunni Islam. Five hundred years later, the Sunni Hanafi version of Islam, patronized by Seljuk Turks, suffered a severe setback with the rise of the militant Shia Safavid dynasty, which was supported by Qizilbash (Redhead) Turcoman tribes. Due to this conversion, forcibly imposed by Safavids, the religious loyalties of the locals were deeply divided. Only the Russian conquest of the 19th century and the formation of a local, secularly educated elite under imperial patronage gradually eased long-lasting tensions between the Sunnis and Shias of Azerbaijan. These fresh circumstances paved the way for the formation of a new secular nation. Thus, the fall of the tsarist regime was followed by a brief two-year period of independence for the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic. Although the First Republic was swallowed by the Soviet Union, nation-building in the Soviet Autonomy of Azerbaijan actually made the restoration of independent statehood after the collapse of the Communist regime a viable possibility.

Under the Caliphate

The fall of Azerbaijan's current territories under the control of the Islamic caliphate began in the middle of the 7th century, when the Arabs launched a major attack on the Iranian Sassanids. However the Arab defeat of the Sassanids and the local Christian Mikhranid dynasty did not bring an end to the war. During the following century, Azerbaijan became a major battlefield for fighting between

the Omayyad Caliphate and the Turkic Khazar State.

By the middle of the 8th century, the Abbasids had replaced the Omayyads in the Caliphate. This period was also marked by the establishment of Islamic rule in the current territories of Azerbaijan. The Islamization of the local Christian, Zoroastrian and pagan populations accelerated, although some of the local Christians, namely the autochthonous Caucasian Udi people, preserved both their Christian religion and unique language.

During the second decade of the 9th century, the region generated a major uprising against Arab rule. The so-called Khurramite movement, led by the charismatic leader Babak (Islamic name: Hassan), set out to reclaim its ancient Zoroastrian heritage and mixed it with some elements from Shia Islam. For 20 years, this rebellion routed numerous Arab armies. While Babak's uprising was ultimately defeated by the Arab armies, this revolt shook the foundations of the Caliphate and became one of the major causes of its eventual disintegration a few decades later.

The First Turmoil and Stability Brought by the Seljuks

Thus, with the fragmentation of the Caliphate over the next 200 years, Azerbaijan fell under the control of conflicting Muslim dynasties. These ruling dynasties, as well as the population in general, adhered to rival factions of Islamic belief, such as mainstream, Zaidiyah and Ismaili Shiism, Hanafi and Shafii Sunnism, or even belonged to the radical Kharijites.

Only in the 1040s, under the conquering Seljuk dynasty of Turkic Oghuz origin, a relative religious stability was established that endured for the next two hundred years. The founder of the Seljuk dynasty converted to Islam from either Judaism or Nestorian Christianity when the Oghuz tribes under his command settled in the Jand province near the Aral Sea in Central Asia. This dynasty championed the Hanafi version of Sunni Islam by making it the dominant official religion. Seljukid Toghrul grew into the de facto ruler of the Muslim world when he captured Baghdad in 1055 and obtained the official title of Sultan from the Abbasid Caliph. The creation of the great Seljuk Empire, along with religious stability, caused a significant shift in the ethnic composition of Azerbaijan, making the majority of its population Turkic speakers, although the Persian

language still dominated local literary life.

A Major Setback

For most of the 13th century, non-Muslim Mongol invaders dominated the political life of Azerbaijan, which was then included in the territories of the Ilkhanate state, ruled by the Mongol prince Hulagu. Although the Mongols adopted a somewhat tolerant religious policy in general, from the beginning, Hulagu's relationship to Islam was markedly hostile.

Beginning in the middle of the 13th century, neighboring Mongol rulers, in what is often called a political move, gradually adopted Islam, a religion followed by the bulk of their subjects. While for the majority of the century the Ilkhanid rulers remained non-Muslim, in 1295 Ilkhanid Ghazan khan also officially adopted Islam. Although Ghazan chose to follow Sunni Islam, in 1310 his brother Oljaitu embraced Shiism, making it the preferred religion for the rest of the rulers of Ilkhanids, as well as the succeeding Chobanid and Jalairid dynasties of the 14th century.

The Second Turmoil

During the last decades of the 14th century, Azerbaijan suffered the invasion of the Central Asian ruler Timur and his sons. Officially Timur was a follower of Hanafi Sunni Islam, but his mentor and closest adviser was a renowned Shia scholar Seyyid Barakah. Although Timur used religion as an excuse to launch military campaigns, it seems that religion was not the major defining factor either for his alliances or for his wars.

During the years of Timur's invasion, some regions of Azerbaijan became strongholds for the Hurufi movement, which was a radical deviation from the mainstream Shiism.

In the first half of the 15th century, Azerbaijan was ruled by the Sunni Shirvanshahs and the Turcoman Shia Black Sheep Tribal Confederation. The latter was eventually defeated and replaced by the rival Turcoman Sunni White Sheep Tribal Confederation.

Major changes came only in the early 16th century when Ismayil, a young head of the militant Shia Turcoman Qizilbash movement, established a new ruling dynasty of Safavids.

The Frontline between the Shias and Sunnis

An adherent of Twelver Shiism, Ismayil the First defeated the Sunni Shirvanshahs and the White Sheep dynasties, forcing the Sunni population to adopt Shiism. However, Ismayil's advance to the west was halted by the Ottoman Sultan Selim. For the following two centuries, Azerbaijan became the border between the Shia Safavids and the Sunni Ottomans. This circumstance also defined the religious loyalties of locals, causing a roughly equal

division of the Azerbaijani population to the north of Araxes river into Shias and Sunnis.

While Tahmasp, the son of Ismayil the First, managed to convince the Mughal ruler of India Humayun to adopt Twelver Shiism in an exchange for military aid, Humayun's successors reversed this decision. Tahmasp's own successor Ismail the Second also showed early signs of sympathy toward the Sunnis by abandoning the extremely hostile anti-Sunni attitudes of his father and grandfather. However, he was killed only two years into his reign and the anti-Sunni policies of the former Safavid rulers were restored.

The Reconciliation Attempt of Nader Shah

The Sunnis of Azerbaijan were followers of the Hanafi and Shafii schools. While the Turkic speaking Sunnis of Azerbaijan were mainly Hanafites, the majority of the mountain people who spoke the native Caucasian languages followed the Shafii branch of Sunni Islam. In turn, the majority of Azerbaijani Shias adhered to the mainstream Twelver branch of Shia Islam.

In the 17th century, a major ideological dispute within the Twelver branch of Shiism exacerbated the bitter rivalry between the "Akhbari" and "Usuli" factions. "Akhbaris," who only allowed the Quran and the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad and Shia Imams as a source of Sharia (Islamic Law), were crushed by the "Uslis," who unlike their rivals also accepted modern "Ijtihad," i.e. the legal reasoning of distinguished scholars, for deriving new religious laws.

The 18th century was marked by a major attempt to reconcile Sunni and Shia versions of Islam.

In 1736, Nader, the military commander from the Turcoman Afshar tribe, overthrew the rule of the Safavid dynasty by declaring himself a Shah. Nadir launched a series of religious reforms aimed at easing differences between Shias and Sunnis. He prohibited the cursing of the first Rashidi caliphs, which was a custom during Shia mass prayers. Furthermore, Nader publicly wore a hat called the "Kolahi-Naderi" which celebrated all four Rashidi Caliphs. He introduced the term "Jafari" to describe mainstream Shias by repeating Sunni methodology when the names of juridical schools bore the names of their founders. He negotiated the recognition of "Jafarism" among the Ottomans as an official fifth legal school along with the four other Sunni versions of Islam. Although he failed to achieve this goal, Shias were allowed to join Sunnis during the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Russian Conquest

The assassination of Nader in 1747 left his realm in a state of disarray. Semi-independent Khans ruled their constituencies until the early 19th century when the Rus-

sian Empire conquered the lands to the north of the Araxes River. The Russians had experience ruling over Muslim subjects, but this was the first time they had to deal with Shia Muslims. In the beginning, Imperial authorities invited a prominent Shia cleric from Iran to organize the religious life of Shias living in the newly acquired lands. However, this venture failed and a new plan, which sought to organize separate Sunni and Shia institutions, was introduced, although its full implementation was delayed due to an armed uprising against Russian rule in the North Caucasus.

In general, the Russian authorities considered Sunnis more hostile and this sentiment was reinforced by the aforementioned armed uprising in the Sunni-dominated North Caucasus. Russian conquest, however, coincided with a Sunni revival in Azerbaijan. The local spiritual leader of the Sunni Nagshbandi Sufi order, Sheykh Ismail Shrivani-Kurdamiri, became an inspirational figure, not only for Azerbaijanis, but also for those engaged in the revolt against the Empire in the North Caucasus.

This surge of Sunni Islam forced Russian authorities to implement unprecedented measures, forcing Sunnis to abandon their homeland and move to the Ottoman Empire. This move shifted the centuries-old balance of the number of Sunnis and Shias who resided in Azerbaijan in favor of the latter.

After the defeat of the armed revolt, in the 1870s the Imperial authorities established two separate Muslim Boards to supervise the religious life of the Sunnis and Shias of Azerbaijan with a Shekyhulislam as the head of local Shias and a Mufti as the leader of the Sunnis. Both of them were headquartered in Tiflis (the current capital of Georgia), which also was the place of residence of the Russian Caucasian Vice-Roy.

Secularization

The most important development after the Russian conquest was the birth of a new powerful elite in Azerbaijani Society: an intelligentsia with a secular education. Although the first representatives of this stratum, like Akhundov, Kazem Bek and Shahtakhtinski became famous because of their vocal anti-Islamic rhetoric, the majority of Azerbaijani reformers displayed a more conciliatory tone towards Islam, not blaming the religion itself, but instead Muslim clerics and despotic rulers for the decline and current state of affairs in the Islamic world.

This intelligentsia defeated the clerics in the struggle to lead society and carried out significant reforms by introducing native secular schooling, a Muslim press, native theatres, as well as an opera etc. to the local pop-

ulation. They even established the secular parliamentary democracy after the collapse of the monarchy in the Russian empire, declaring the independence of the Azerbaijani Republic in 1918.

The reconciliation of the Sunnis and Shias was one of the main issues in the agenda of intelligentsia and they united Sunni and Shia Muslim Boards into one body during the years of Republic.

Sovietization

In April of 1920, Azerbaijan was occupied by the Red Army. The first sign of Bolshevik anti-religious policy was a campaign against the most important annual Shia processions of Ashura, i.e. the commemoration of Imam Huseyn's death (Shia saint, grandson of Muhammad) on the battlefield. But the major attack, just as in the rest of the Soviet Union, began in the end of the 1920s and accelerated during the land collectivization. When the mosques were closed, visits and donations to the so-called pirs, i.e. graves of both Sunni and Shia saints, became the most visible sign of religious life. The lack of religious scholars and clergy also triggered the rise in the importance of Shia seyyids, so called descendants of Prophet Muhammad.

The Muslim Board of Transcaucasian Muslims, which was closed in the early 1920s, was reopened in 1944 due to foreign policy reasons rather than domestic demands. Although, in general, the modernization of public life deepened the secularization of Azerbaijani society in the post-war era, the moderation of the regime and a chain of nationalistically-minded, local Communist party leaders caused some activation in the religious realm of public life. The Soviets responded by appointing a strongman, a KGB general, as the head of the local Communist party in order to suppress these signs of national and religious awakening. However, the Islamic Revolution in Iran further influenced these, as yet, weak signs of Islamic revival.

Conclusion

Under Soviet rule, circumcision and Shia funeral ceremonies continued nationwide. Mosque attendance, especially during Ashura, had been increasing considerably since the late 1970s. Meanwhile, weddings and other kinds of mass celebrations during the Muxarram month of the Muslim calendar were never held, even in modernized urban areas such as Baku. While the Soviet atheistic education almost completely eliminated religious knowledge, it was not able to destroy the country's deeply embedded Muslim identity, which in turn, paved the way for the gradual revival of Islam after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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