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Framing Perceptions of Islam and the 'Islamic Revival' in the Post-Soviet Countries

This paper discusses the main directions and trends in framing the perceptions of Islam in the post-Soviet countries engaged in the process of so-called "Islamic Revival". It focuses on the Northern Caucasus region of Russia, Azerbaijan and the countries from Central Asia - a geographical area governed by the tension between the local Muslim traditions and the imported Islamism. It argues that Islamic revival in post-Soviet countries is associated either with the revival of local pre-modern traditions and thus with the localization of post-socialist Muslim space, or with the spreading of Islamism, which is absolutely alien for local Muslim traditions and it is introduced from abroad.

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Introduction

The Post-Communist transition has been accompanied not only by political, social, and economic changes, but also cultural ones. After collapse of 70 years of official atheism and the Communist value system, religion started to revive and play an important role in different spheres of social life, politics, and economics. A bright example of such revival is the mainly Muslim populated ex-Soviet republics. Building of new and modernization of old mosques, an increasing number of Islamic study centers, schools and universities, thousands of pilgrims going to Mecca for Hajj every year as well as falling profits of alcohol producing facilities can be more or less observed in all of these republics. Islam to some ex-

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tent could manage to fill the void left after the collapse of Communism.

The processes of religious revival have played a tremendous role in the lives of the people of the former Soviet Union. Islam does not separate secular life from the spiritual. This is the reason for its active involvement and influence on the course of political events in the Northern Caucasus. The concepts “Islamic” and “National” are closely intertwined in Muslim perception. During the years of Soviet atheism, people continued to follow Islamic customs and rites, understanding them as national and not religious.

This paper will focus on the Northern Caucasus region in Russia, Azerbaijan, and the countries of Central Asia, since to some extent they became the battlefield of the tensions between local Muslim traditions and imported Islamism. I will try to answer the following question: What are the main directions and trends in framing the perceptions of Islam in the post-Soviet countries.

It can be argued that Islamic revival in post-Soviet countries has been associated either with the revival of local pre-modern traditions and thus with the localization of post-socialist Muslim space, or with the spread of Islamism, which is absolutely alien to local Muslim traditions and introduced from abroad. This situation has resulted in certain tensions between these forms of Islam. In the northern Caucasus and Republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan these tensions have even turned into military conflicts. Very often such conflicts are considered to be between Islam and secu-

larism, whereas “the real dispute lies within Islam” (Cornell and Spector 2002: 195).

Islam in the Caucasus and Central Asia during the Soviet Era

During the Soviet rule and the time of militant atheism there were still official “independent” Muslim religious administrations: the Muslim Religious (Spiritual) Board for the European USSR and Siberia (centered in Ufa, Bashkir ASSR); the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Tashkent, Uzbekistan); the Muslim Religious Board for the North Caucasus (in Buinaksk; later in Makhachkala, Daghestan); and the Muslim Religious Board for Transcaucasia (Baku, Azerbaijan). The strongest position and hidden leadership were granted to the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan, situated in Tashkent and mainly headed by Uzbek nationals. Existence of the same institutional structures for the various local Islamic traditions can be evaluated as a process of homogenization. These Boards did not oppose the Soviet rule, and even tried to find similarities between Communist ideology and Qur’anic values, such as equality of nations and sexes, freedom of religion, security of honorable work, ownership of land by those who till it, and others that were put in practice after October Revolution (Saroyan 1997).

As our focus is the regions of the Northern Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia, it will be benefi-

cial to see what the position and specific features of Islam was in each of the above-mentioned regions.

Central Asia

First of all I must mention that, traditionally, Uzbeks and Tajiks have been more religious than Kazakhs, Turkmens and even some Kyrgyzs (Hiro 1994, Rashid 1994). The main reason is that the latter have had a nomadic life-style while the former were settled. During the Soviet era (up to Gorbachev's reforms) the main role in framing of the perception of Islam in this region was played by the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan, situated in Tashkent. This religious body had more rights and advantages than other boards. It issued the only official Muslim journal, "Muslims of the Soviet East," and was responsible for other literature and publications about Islam. In fact, there emerged and developed a Muslim administrative elite, which tried to promote its own authority and undermine any alternative authority.

Perestroika and changing sociopolitical and economic circumstances brought to life the reconstruction of Islam, not only in terms of theological debates between isolated Muslim elites but also reinterpretations of Muslim identity in Central Asia.

Fragmentation and regionalization replaced homogenization. Saroyan highlights fragmentation along ethnic and sectarian lines within the Muslim community in the USSR as one of the most important institutional

changes in Muslim religious organizations (Saroyan 1997). In 1990 an assembly of Muslim clerics in Alma-Ata declared the establishment of a Muslim Board for Kazakhstan. Central Asian boards based in Tashkent did not recognize the legitimacy of this new board.

The establishment of a new medresa also allowed for the development of differentiation and further divided Muslims by nationality in Central Asia. For example, the inauguration of new training centers for the clergy in the various republics meant that Turkmen Muslims studied in Turkmen medresa and Tajiks studied in Tajik medresa. Moreover, the Tajik medresa, along with religious subjects, also provided instruction in Tajik history and culture, which clearly meant stress on national issues. Thus, without the bonds of a common institutional experience and educational process, Muslim clerics increasingly had contact only with members of their own nationality and preached a more localized form of Islam.

The rapidly changing political environment also created conditions for new forms of Muslim religious association. In the past, the Muslim religious boards could rely in part on the coercive power of Moscow to prevent the emergence of independent Muslim religious centers. In the perestroika era, however, liberalization allowed for the emergence of several new Muslim religious movements. The Muslim Religious Boards not only confronted a new set of religious and political challenges, they also increasingly faced a challenge from below - from Muslim religious movements that operated independently from the boards (Saroyan 1997). The

first strong challengers in Central Asia were the Turkestan Islamic party centered in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley and the Islamic Renaissance Party in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Muslims in the Ferghana town of Namangan near the Kyrgyzstan border began their movement with the takeover of a mosque that had been used as a storage facility for wine. After making renovations to the building, the Namangan Muslims chose an imam and mosque council and opened the mosque for regular worship. In this way, the mosque became the first in the postwar Soviet Union to operate outside the jurisdiction of a Muslim Religious Board. In the ensuing months, local activists began the construction of a medresa alongside the mosque. Most significant about the Ferghana Valley movement and other independent religious movements that emerged in the late perestroika era was the nature of their challenge. Their target was not the secular Soviet state, but self-serving and corrupt Muslim boards.

The collapse of the USSR and the gain of independence intensified "Islamic revival"; especially in the southern part of Central Asia, namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Ferghana valley region of Kyrgyzstan. Islam has deeper roots there than in the western republics of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Radical Islamist movements opposed any official religious elite or authoritarian regimes in these countries. Authoritarian governments in turn tried to suppress the radical Islamist element.

Northern Caucasus

The multiethnic community of the Northern Caucasus has traditionally been poly-confessional. Here, along with the autochthonous pagan beliefs, in various historical periods Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have been widespread. Since the XVII-XIX centuries Sunni Islam has become the indisputably dominant religion in the region. In the first half of the XIX century Islam was a flag for a national movement for the independence of the mountain people of the Northern Caucasus, which strengthened the position Islam in the minds of those who previously were very often Islamicised only on the surface (excluding the inhabitants of Southern and Central Daghestan). Exceptions include the Ossetians, a people of Indo-European language who were and are predominantly of the Orthodox Church, and the Tats in the northern part of the Caucasus, who for a long time were referred to as "the mountain Jews," because Judaism was the dominant faith among them.

In Soviet times the Muslim Religious Board for the North Caucasus was the main official religious center of this linguistically and ethnically heterogeneous region. There have traditionally existed two versions of Sunni Islam (Khanafit and Shafit), a number of Sufi orders, and various small Shiite communities (mostly in Southern Daghestan). Historically the primary expression of religiosity in the region has been Sufism (Bobrovnikov 2001). Unlike orthodox ideology the "mosque tendency" is relatively weak in Sufism. Originating from

the Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya Sufi lineages, the widespread network of Sufi orders links the North Caucasus's disparate ethnic, linguistic, clan, and village communities. Sufism is especially important in the region since most mosques in the area were destroyed during the deportation of Chechens and Ingushes in World War II (Saroyan 1997). Thus, the North Caucasus religious board most clearly fits the description of official Muslim elite isolated from the people. It already had a challenger in framing a perception of Islam among population: the Sufi movements.

Thus the religious board's definition of Islamic identity and practice is orthodox and exclusionary. The North Caucasus board emphasizes mosque worship and the religious authority and primacy of the official cleric. Pilgrimages to local shrines (*mazar*), traditional meeting places of Sufis, are discouraged, and the believing population is encouraged to participate in religious rituals performed by official clerics in the state-registered mosques. The North Caucasus clergy has issued a fetwa prohibiting women from leading religious associations. This can be understood as a measure aimed against the numerous Sufi orders that are led by women and whose membership is entirely female (Ibid). It can be argued the North Caucasus administration adopted the dogmatic variant of Islamic identity articulated by the Tashkent Muslim establishment in response to the cultural particularities and Sufi opposition.

However, here the weakening of the Soviet Union has had results like in Central Asia: fragmentation of the official board. Changes in the North Caucasus were

even more striking and confusing. A conference of religious leaders from the region declared the dissolution of the North Caucasus board. In its place they proposed the formation of "religious centers" for each of the ethnic autonomous regions in the area. Like in the case of Central Asia, Makhachkala refused to recognize the decision to dissolve the North Caucasus board, but could not stop this process.

There was also a third power, which had been in a shadow for a long time - "Caucasus Wahhabis." Their roots go back to the 1970s, when proselytizing Muslim groups appeared in many Daghestan and Chechen villages of Terek-Sulak lowlands (Bobrovnikov 2001). They had secret meetings in houses of local radical Muslim scholars taking classes of Arabic and Qur'an. In fact, such unlicensed schools carried out missionary work among the village youth. The most famous teachers have been Bagaudinn Kebedov and Ahmad-qadi Akhtaey (who died in 1998).

According to Bobrovnikov, the movement of North Caucasus Wahhabis appeared as a reaction to anti-Islamic socialist reforms. They were more popular in the lowland regions of Daghestan and Chechnya, where collectivization and "cultural revolution" were successfully implemented from 1930-1970s.

Azerbaijan

According to Motika, 4% to 6% of the population of Azerbaijan may be called "active" believers, which

means that they obey the various Islamic behavior regulations; 87% to 92% consider themselves as Muslims but comply with only a (quite often small) part of the religious regulations. Only about 3% call themselves atheists (Motika 2001).

In contrast to the North Caucasus administration, the Transcaucasus Muslim elite have operated under different conditions. Aside from its jurisdiction over Muslims in Armenia (before they were massacred and deported) and Georgia (where in any case most Muslims are ethnic Azerbaijanis), the Baku religious board is staffed by Azerbaijanis and serves an Azerbaijani community. The administration can be characterized as an Azerbaijani national institution. In Azerbaijan the overlapping of religious and national customs and identities is more common and likely since “Muslim” is coterminous with “Azerbaijani.” (Hadjy-zadeh 1997, Safizadeh 1998, Shaffer 2000, Motika 2001). Another important factor is that the Baku administration is also heir to a religious administration established during the Tsarist period and thus may have some historical legitimacy for the population. Probably even more important, however, is that Azerbaijan’s Muslim community is predominantly Shiite. In contrast to Sunni Islam, formal religious hierarchy is not foreign to the historical development of Shiite Islam. Thus the operation of official institutions regulating religious life can be seen as part of Azerbaijan’s Shiite heritage (Saroyan 1997).

Since in this sense it enjoys a greater degree of legitimacy in popular eyes, it can more easily accommodate particular popular traditions by appropriating them as

its own legitimate religious traditions. For example, while visitations to saints’ tombs or other holy sites have been criticized as heretical by the Tashkent and North Caucasus establishments, the Baku Muslim elite has encouraged such visitations by organizing pilgrimages under its auspices to holy sites in Azerbaijan (Ibid.). Thus it can be argued that the intensity of Islamic reconstruction is much less pronounced in the Azerbaijani administration. The Baku elite’s appropriation of popular Azerbaijani traditions serves its quest to consolidate its socio-religious authority and legitimacy.

In fact, the Baku board is the only one that succeeded in surviving and developing after the Gorbachev reforms and the collapse of the USSR. It is also the situation where there was the least observed activity of transnational Islamic movements, and perception of Islam was mainly framed by “specific circumstances of the republic” (Motika 2001).

During the post-Soviet transition, however, the Muslim Religious Board for Transcaucasus was not the only actor in Islamic revival. I think one can highlight the following “competitors”:

- Popular and recognized Shiite religious leaders, opposing the official center, e.g. Haji Ilqar Ibrahimoglu - Imam of Djuma Mosque, Azerbaijani representative of the International Religious Liberty Association and human rights defender. He does not obey the board, criticizes it and the government. At the moment, Haji Ilqar is under 5 year suspended sentence of deprivation of liberty and his issue is under the rapt of many human

rights defenders, international organizations and some Western Governments.

- Self-declared mullahs and religious leaders opposing Shiism and thus the board. I can mention by name Hamet Suleymanov, who is considered to be Wahhabi. They have their own mosques where followers gather together.

- The Pro-Iranian Islam party, officially registered in 1992. In 1996 leaders of the party were arrested under the accusation of spying for Iran and sending young people to IRI for military training. The Party has up to 70,000 members, but is not supported by the board and intellectuals.

- The following can be defined as actors as well: muslim intellectuals who might be seen as reformists and modernizers of Islam. This would include persons like Haji Ilqar.

As we can see, Islam in the Soviet republics was under control of local official religious boards (to a lesser extent in Northern Caucasus), which in turn were controlled by the state. One of the most important features was the fact that Islam became a part of national identity, which resulted in strengthening traditional Islam in all of the republics. However, lack of religious knowledge among the population and a high level of ignorance as well as corruption among clergy created fertile ground for the emergence and strengthening of new religious movements and sects, and these not only of Islamist persuasion.

Radical Islamists: Who Are They?

The notion of “Islamic Fundamentalism” has become so strongly entrenched in the Western mind, thanks to the efforts of mass media, that it might seem difficult to imagine that fundamentalism can be something different. The concept itself appeared at the beginning of the 20th century in conjunction with the movement of conservative Protestants directed against rationalism and modernism. Similar movements do exist in Judaism and in some non-monotheistic religions, such as Hinduism, where there are calls for the resurrection of what had never historically existed - a pure, unalloyed Hinduism (Chanishev 1974). However, it should be mentioned that Islamic fundamentalism has made itself visible on the largest scale and seems to be the most highly organized form of fundamentalism. The reasons for this are hidden in the peculiarities of Islam, which is not only a religion, but also a “modus vivendi,” and this fact very easily transforms it into one of the factors in the political game playing out on many levels (Yarlykapov 1999).

I already mentioned that after the collapse of Soviet Union there was a heyday of radical Islamic movements. For a better understanding of this problem we should, first of all, define who are the Wahhabis, if there are any.

Radical Islamist movements demand a return to the original Islam of the days of the Prophet and His first successors. The basis for Islam should be only the Qu’ran and Sunnah of the Prophet; the majority of

what was achieved through Muslim thought involving other resources and implicit in the life of the Muslim community (including beliefs as well as everyday practices) is declared to be prohibited innovation and is rejected. It is worth mentioning that such movements are not a product of the XX century, as it might appear to an unsophisticated contemporary observer. This idea has a long history and even a particular symbol in Islam: those supporting “fundamentalist” ideas are named Salafits (as-salafiya). In Sunni Islam such ideas found expression in one of the four renderings of Khanbalist Mazkhab (which was originally formed as a religious-political movement in the IX century, and only later was transformed into a dogmatic legal school at the beginning of the XI century). Later, in the XVIII century, Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab elaborated his own teachings based on the Khanbalist ideology and tried to implement them.

The followers of the movement call themselves ‘Muslims’ or ‘brothers’ (ikhwan) and consider their congregations the only communities of the faithful (jamaat). They are also known as salafs or salafits, making reference to the first followers of Prophet Mohammed, whose way of life they claim to imitate. They prefer to call themselves “true Muslims” or “monotheists” who have returned to the purity of the original Islam. The movement was named ‘Wahhabi’ by its opponents.

The Wahhabis, accusing traditional Islam of departing from the original teachings in their innovations (bida) reject many customs and rites entrenched in the minds of people as Islamic. Thus it is forbidden to read

the Qur’an over a grave or in the house of the deceased, to read “Yasin” sura on funerals, to use beads, etc. Not acknowledging the special virtues of the Prophet, the Wahhabis are against the celebration of the Mawlid, the birthday of Muhammad. A special target for attacks is Sufism, cults of the saints, and Ziyarat (pilgrimage) to holy places, which is closely linked to Sufism and Shiism. These practices are sharply condemned as polytheism (shirk).

It should also be mentioned that even in spite of a quite radical agenda, different movements differ on their repertoire of contention, which ranges from peaceful religious propaganda to the above-mentioned acts of militant extremism and terrorism. A good example of such a difference is two movements in Central Asia: the “peaceful” Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

A very important fact is that the radical ideas have been disseminated mainly in those areas where the economic and social situation is unstable: Chechnya and the foothills of Daghestan, and poor and war-torn regions of the Central Asian republics (Yarlykapov 1999, Rashid 1994, Hiro 1994, Cornell and Spector 2002). The main target group is the youth. The young people have not yet become integrated into the life of the community. They have not yet fully perceived the traditional culture, or even protest against some of its components. In the course of teaching, great attention is given to learning the Arabic language, and to studying the Qur’an and Khadises in the original language. In this way they are being trained for forthcoming discussions.

It is no secret that Wahhabis receive significant financial support from abroad. People of Daghestan have even christened Wahhabism as “Dollar Islam” (Yarlykapov 1999).

The Struggle for Islam in the Post-Soviet Republics

Post-Communist transition in Muslim regions is noticeable for the activation of different religious groups and movements (which are not only Islamic). Thousands of missionaries and preachers from abroad with briefcases full of dollars together with local “fighters for faith” started to actively challenge existing perceptions and traditions of a religion as well as a common lifestyle.

The main target of their criticism was, first, local clergy, and then local governments. The clergy has been criticized and accused of ignorance, corruption, betrayal of religion for indulgences from the side of oppressive and corrupt governments, as well as cooperation with the atheist Soviet power and KGB. The latter was said about all the Muslim religious boards and their administrations. For example, a head of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Caucasus since 1980, Sheikh ul Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, is said to be a KGB colonel, though he rejects these accusations.

It would be wrong to say that only Wahhabi movements have been active. Local traditional Muslims as well as Sufi orders did their best to resist imported Is-

lam. The most obvious and tragic manifestation of such a clash has been military conflict in Northern Caucasus and Central Asia.

In Northern Caucasus Wahhabism started to spread in the 1970s, but its regional activization started in 1991 in Daghestan and Chechnya (Bobrovnikov 2001). By the mid-1990s Wahhabi congregations, though small in size, emerged in Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. First, they concentrated only on missionary work, by imparting Qur’anic education and literature based on Islamic practices such as Bagauddin Kebedov’s book *Namaz* (Prayer). The center of the movement was located in the Daghestani town of Kizliyyurt, famous for its largest Wahhabi madrasa al-Hikma. Connections were established with foreign missionary Islamic foundations, which began to sponsor their activities (Bobrovnikov 2001).

Radicalization started in the mid-1990s. From 1994-1998, a number of armed conflicts occurred between Wahhabi and traditionalists in the towns and villages of Daghestan and Chechnya. Since the mid-1990s, the Wahhabis have been subjected to systematic repression by the local official Muslim clergy. Gradually, outbreaks of fighting within village and town communities were reproduced at the level of the republic and subsequently expanded to the regional level. This was also the period when the first Russian-Chechen war started, and region became militarized as a result.

In December 1997, Bagauddin Kebedov had to leave Kizilyurt for Urus-Martan in Chechnya. This exile and some other factors resulted in a rapid politicization

and radicalization of the movement in terms of its form and programs. "Islamic Jamaat", established by Bagauddin Kebedov in 1998, announced a holy war (al-jihad al-asgar). This war was to be waged against the "unbelieving secular government" of Daghestan and for the establishment of an "Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus". With the support of Chechen field commanders, the Wahhabi leaders organized "Islamic peace-making troops". An interesting fact is that militant ideas and practices are shared by both Wahhabis and their religious and secular opponents.

In Central Asia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and to lesser extent Kyrgyzstan also turned into arenas of the clash between traditionalists and radicals for control of minds and power. It is worth mentioning that these countries have weaker economic performances than Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. We can observe some negative association between economic performance and spread of religious fundamentalism.

Shortly after independence, Tajikistan became involved in a civil war that pitted the former Communist elite against an opposition force containing strong Islamist groups. This conflict led political regimes in four other regional countries to outlaw many opposition parties and religious movements, halting the development of political opposition (Rashid 1994, Cornell and Spector 2002).

It should also be mentioned that different Islamist movements (e.g. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Ahle-Sunnah, and others) act not only within the territory of one state, but in the whole re-

gion. This is the most underdeveloped part of the region, and did not have strong Sufi tradition. The "hottest" place of spread of militant groups is the Ferghana Valley and the surrounding regions where three republics border with each other. The Wahhabi movement in the Ferghana Valley is the most determined and organized of all the radical movements (Rashid 1994). They condemn Sufi tradition, Shiites, secular governments, and official "Islam".

As I already mentioned, militant Islamist movements discredited themselves in the eyes of the public. They now have challengers in the form of organizations like Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT). This is a secretive transnational network of different movements working on the local level in the Middle East and Central Asia. Having the same goals as do militants, it has a completely different repertoire: it tries to achieve its objectives by propagating its tenets through leaflets and fliers rather than the use of force (Botobekov 2001, Babadzhanov 2001). The lack of secular opposition (where the most active opposition is in exile or in jail) contributed to the fast rise of HuT (Cornell and Spector 2002).

The Uzbek government of Karimov is considered to be the most anti-Islamic government in Central Asia. However, while suppressing radical movements, the Uzbek government has maintained very good relations with the global network of the most prominent Sufi order - Naqshbandiya (Cornell and Spector 2002).

Turkmenistan's Islamic revival was relatively weak. The Government was able to control a process of fram-

ing and foreign influence was minimal. Kazakhstan is the least Islamicized country in the region. Kazakhstanis have also undergone large-scale “Russification” and have the largest Russian population. They also experienced a revival of religion, but it was not as strong as in other countries and local clergy could satisfy it easily. As Rashid mentions in his book “many of the faithful who come to pray every Friday at local mosques belong to non Kazakh minorities, who see Islam as an effective means to distance themselves from both the Kazakhs and the Russians and as means to assert their ethnic identity with their national homeland” (Rashid 1994: 133). I would also like to mention that Kazakhs and Turkmen have traditionally been nomads, which might be negatively correlated with the role of religion in their lives.

Azerbaijan includes different elements of the “Islamic Revival” in other regions of the Post-Soviet space. Radical Wahhabi movements came later and could not achieve such progress as they had in Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus. Financed by Iran groups also try to challenge existing status quo. But unlike other republics nobody openly and extremely opposed the idea of a secular state. At the same time, Islamic movements were not as weak and unpopular as in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. In the first chapter I mentioned the main actors in the framing of the perception of Islam in Azerbaijan. But what are the main trends in this process?

The prestige and influence of Azerbaijan’s official religious “establishment,” the Spiritual Board of Mus-

lims of the Caucasus, which has been headed since the 1980’s by Sheikh ul Islam Allakhshukur Pashazade, is reportedly rapidly evaporating, while that of some other members of the unofficial Muslim clergy is on the rise. Those developments suggest that Islam is becoming a rallying point for the dispossessed, impoverished, and unemployed, and even simply for those Azerbaijanis who reject many aspects of Western culture. As co-chairman of the Social-Democratic party of Azerbaijan, Zardusht Alizade, argued in his interview with the Turan information agency: “The politicization of Islam has helped drive the secular opposition into a corner. A holy place is never empty, and the population has reached out for the mosques...The politicization of Islam was the reaction of the lower classes to the introduction of such attributes of Western mass culture as beauty contests, the cult of eroticism, the legalization of sexual minorities, and the provocative consumption of the upper classes. The ethical puritanism of the conservative sectors of the population manifested itself in the form of devotion to the Islamic behests of their forebears.” Unsolved problems in Karabakh, the approximately one million refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as thousands of veterans of war and families of martyrs, also create a fertile ground for such trends.

As Motika argues, the intellectuals might have a considerable influence in framing the future outlook of Islam in Azerbaijan since most of Azerbaijanis consider Islam a part of their identity (despite of lack of knowledge of their own religion). All actors (except some

radical Wahhabis and small extremist Shiite groups) try to minimize the differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam and find ways to unite the different sects and movements within Islam (Motika 2001).

The state has established a certain committee headed by one of the so-called Islamic intellectuals and modernists, Rafiq Aliyev. That committee is currently completing the process, which it began last fall, of re-registering all religious communities in Azerbaijan. All missionaries and preachers from abroad will be registered and tested by experts of the committee. It also is going to check the financial base of all existing religious organizations.

Azerbaijan's opposition parties are well aware that the burgeoning popularity of Islam could both destabilize the domestic political situation and undercut the degree of support they currently enjoy. Some parties, e.g. the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, have amended their programs to give greater emphasis to the role of Islam in Azerbaijani society.

I would also like to mention the regional diversity of Islamic ideas in Azerbaijan. Baku and the surrounding regions are more pro-Shiite, though Wahhabis are getting more support in Baku and Sumgait. Wahhabis are strong in the northern parts of Azerbaijan, where different Sunni Daghestani minorities reside compactly. Regions bordering Iran are influenced by ideas and support of the Iranian Shiite model of Islam.

Conclusion

After examination of the processes that have taken place in the regions of our interest, some conclusions can be drawn. The first conclusion is that it is still too early to make any clear-cut conclusions, as the process of "Islamic Revival" and the Post-Communist transition itself are still ongoing.

However it is obvious that the main conflict is within Islam. Different movements and groups struggle to influence the framing of the perception of Islam. In some countries this conflict turned into open military clashes. However, there is a trend toward demilitarization and change in the (sometimes contentious) strategies of these movements towards more peaceful methods.

The long tradition of secularism as well as other Soviet legacies also played a role in framing the perceptions of Islam. On the one hand, it framed a kind of "national" Islam in these countries; on the other hand, it creates the fertile ground for framers to influence unemployed and poor youth. In this respect, corrupt and discredited local clergy from the Soviet period also contribute to the disillusionment of the public and the turn towards puritan Islamists.

For most of the Muslims of the post-Soviet nations, Islam serves as a component of their ethnic and regional identity, but is not their primary collective identity (Hadjy-zadeh 1997, Safizadeh 1998, Shaffer 2000, Suleymanov 2001). Solidarity on an Islamic basis with Muslims abroad is minimal, although it has begun to

emerge among movements, especially in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Most members of the region hold in high regard their local cultures, and they are not particularly susceptible to intensified identification with the broader Muslim world.

Islamist movements are supported from abroad. Rich Muslim countries try to create and support through different charity and religious organizations a kind of “advocacy network” in order to develop their type of Islam and to have strong influence in the Post-Soviet countries. It is clear that radical ideas are spread more successfully in the regions that are worst in their economic performance.

One could roughly say that the above-mentioned processes in the post-Soviet countries are just another illustration of the centuries-old conflict between Wahhabism, Sufism, and traditional Islam; and one will be right, in a way. However, this view of the problem is too simplified. In fact the processes going on are more sophisticated and not just religion is involved. Economic and political interests, socio-cultural and political factors, geopolitics, and others influences contribute to the complication of this issue.

In writing this paper I could not conduct a precise examination of all the possible and relevant factors. Deeper study of such issues as interconnection between poverty, unemployment and radicalism, whether Islamism is more developed in urban or in rural areas, among which strata of society, connection between secular authoritarianism and Islamism, regionalism (trib-

alism) and Islamism, and many others, would be very useful and helpful for better understanding the process of “Islamic Revival” in the post-Soviet countries.

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