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Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan: Repression and  
Mobilization in a Post-Soviet Context





# Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan

Repression and Mobilization in a Post-Soviet Context

Sofie Bedford

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## Abbreviations

ADP	Azerbaijan Democratic Party
ADPF	Azerbaijan People's Front
AMOCO	American Oil Company
BP	British Petroleum
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DEVAMM	Center for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IHRCS	Institute of Human Rights and Civil Stand
IMF	International Monetary Fond
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IPA	Islamic Party of Azerbaijan
IRLA	International Religious Liberty Association
IRP	Islamic Renaissance Party
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PSA	Product Sharing Agreement
SCWRA	State Committee for Work with Religious Associations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UTO	United Tajik Opposition

# Glossary

Avliyo	Saint, friend of Allah
Fatwa	Legal decision/opinion rendered by a mufti
Gurban Bayram	The holiday of sacrifice
Hadith	Tradition, written account of what the Prophet Mohammed said or did
Hajj	The pilgrimage to Mecca or Medina; one of the five main pillars of Islam
Hajji, Kerbalay, Meshedi	(Shi'a) Muslim who has performed hajj to Mecca, Meshed or Kerbala
Hijab	Veil, head covering
Imam	Prayer leader
Jihad	Effort, fight, most often used in the meaning of 'crusade', 'holy war'
Kufr	Godlessness
Madrasa	Islamic educational institution, secondary school
Mazar (Central Asia), or Pir, Imamzade (Azerbaijan)	Place of burial, graveyard, shrine
Milli Majlis	Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan
Mufti	Religious authority; in Azerbaijan deputy of the Caucasus Muslim Board
Muftiat	Council of muftis; in former Soviet Union used about the 'Muslim Boards'
Muharram	The first month of the Islamic year
Mullah	Islamic cleric or mosque leaders
Musavat	Political party in Azerbaijan
Namaz, Salat (Arabic)	The basic Islamic prayer, recited five times daily, one of the five pillars of Islam.
Nazir Qutusu	Donation boxes outside mosques in Azerbaijan
Qazi	Islamic judge
Ramadan	Islamic month of fasting, one of the five pillars of Islam
Salafi	Proponent of 'pure' 'ancestral' Islam

Sayyid	Descendant of Prophet Mohammed or other Imams' families, saint, or great religious scholar
Shakhsey-vakhsey (Azerbaijan)	Large processions on the 10th day of Muharram to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein
Shari'a	Islamic jurisprudence
Sheikh	Religious leader
Sheikh-ül-Islam	Honorary Muslim title; in Azerbaijan head of the Caucasus Muslims Board
Shirk	Idolatry, polytheism
Sufism	The mystical way of Islam
Sunna	'Custom'; the way prophet Mohammed acted
Sura	Verse in the Qur'an
Tagut	Idols, pagan non Islamic law
Ulama	The Islamic learned
Umma	The community of Muslims
Umra	Visiting of the holy places in Mecca, the 'lesser' or 'small' pilgrimage
Waqf	Property of the religious community
Ziyorat	Visit or pilgrimage to a shrine
Zoroastrianism	Ancient, pre-Islamic religion of Persia

Note on transliteration: Many of these religious terms are originally Arabic. In my text I have used transliterations available in the reference literature, or my own for less common expressions. This resulted in a number of concepts being presented in their Russian or local versions rather than in classic Arabic. Hence, I rely on Roy, who concludes that: "as long as concepts and proper names are recognized it is sufficient" (Roy 2000, p. xvii).

# 1. Introduction

## Islamic mobilization at the “bridgehead of secularism”

A majority of the population in Azerbaijan identifies itself as Muslim, but given its geographical location the area has throughout history found itself under the influence of the cultures of the large empires that surrounded it. The outcome is a complex Azerbaijani identity with Iranian, Turkish and Russian influences. The Azerbaijanis are, similarly to the Iranians, mostly Shi'ite, although they are ethnically and linguistically Turkic. Under the Tsarist power the traditional Islamic leadership was abolished and later on the Soviet leaders tried to further diminish the devoutness of Muslims in the area through an anti-religious and atheist policy. These measures seem to have had a major impact on Azerbaijan, which has been portrayed as “by far the most secularized of the republics of the former Soviet Union” (Dragadze 1994), “the most secularized and relatively modernized of the Islamic republics” (Tohedi 2000) and even the “bridgehead of secularism” (Shaffer 2004). Thus still important to most Azerbaijanis, Islam came to be seen as a form of national culture and tradition rather than a religious directive. Also, despite the flourishing political activity in the country during Perestroika and its aftermath the topic of religion was largely missing on the political arena. In the light of this it was interesting that in the mid-to late 1990s the Azerbaijani authorities seemed to have identified a new type of opposition to the state, in the shape of religious movements.

Azerbaijan, just as the other Soviet Muslim republics after independence, saw a sudden explosion of interest in religion and in re-establishing religious practices. Initially this “religious boom” was noticeable at all levels of society, leading to the abolishment of restrictions on religious studies, worship and organizations. At the same time being Muslim appeared as an important part of the new republic's public identity. A change in this respect could be noted as the authorities, prompted by a perceived threat from the rapid spread of “imported” radical Islamic ideas, increased state supervision of the organization and activities of religious communities and initiated a harsher policy towards religious practitioners. Some Muslim communities questioning this line of action became major targets of the policy of state intervention, judged as they were as a threat to stability and peace in the country. To

control and counteract the activities of these groups however proved more difficult than the government first predicted. In some cases the disagreement resulted in a prolonged conflict between representatives of the state and the mosques whose activities were deemed controversial. This thesis will analyze the mobilization of the most well known of these Muslim communities, namely the Shi'ite Juma mosque community and the Sunni Abu Bakr mosque community in Baku.

Moreover, these two are intriguing not only because of their conflict with the state, but they are in other ways unique to the Azerbaijani context. Whereas other mosques have few or no visitors these two show an increasing popularity especially among the young and educated. In their rhetoric their leaders also actively promote their mosques as something new, an alternative to "other" traditional mosques that they describe as "dirty, corrupt and uneducated"<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, the two have been shown to be compelling cases for comparison, as despite their many similarities there are certain aspects of their mobilization that make them seem light-years apart. That both, one Sunni and one Shi'ite mosque community, have become the state's symbols of oppositional Islam is equally fascinating as it shows the religious complexity of Azerbaijan, a country which in theory is Shi'a dominated.

Finally, in neither of these cases had the mobilization processes, during the time period studied, resorted to the use of violent methods. This, I believe, make it possible for this thesis to make a contribution to the often one-sided debate on Islamic movements that have flourished since the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. By focusing on the mobilization of these mosque communities, I would like to underline the fact that, first of all, only a few Islamic movements have chosen to express themselves through acts of terror, and that, secondly, the importance of taking a multi-faceted approach to understanding Islamic activism should not be underestimated.

## Aim(s) and research questions

Given the novelty of the phenomenon of Islamic activism in the Azerbaijani context, the main aim of this thesis is to shed light on how the mobilization of Islamic movements has taken place in Azerbaijan since the country's independence from the Soviet Union. To do this I will focus on the similarities and differences of the mobilization processes of the two Islamic groups that received the most attention in this respect, the communities of the Abu Bakr and the Juma mosques, both located in Baku. The basic empirical question is thus: *What conditions shaped the mobilization of Islamic movements which have taken place in Azerbaijan after the country's independence?*

---

<sup>1</sup> This observation is from my interviews in these communities and will be discussed in more detail throughout this thesis.



What is more, the rise of Islamic movements in post-Soviet Azerbaijan is fascinating not only because it is empirically “surprising” but also because it raises some broader questions about the process through which a group mobilizes, especially in a transitional context such as the former Soviet sphere. Thus, I have chosen to analyze the Juma and Abu Bakr cases through the lens of social movement theory. In difference to many other cases of social movement mobilization studied their mobilization processes have taken place in a political environment that, despite certain progress, still cannot be said to possess fully developed democratic societal norms and values. By studying mobilization in this type of situation, a widening of the scope of this theory is made possible. Hence, another aim of this thesis is to elaborate on the conditions surrounding movement mobilization in non-democratic contexts, such as post-Soviet Azerbaijan. This aim will be approached through the theoretical problem which this thesis addresses: *Under what conditions may movement mobilization in non-democratic contexts occur?*

As mentioned above, yet another ambition in this thesis is to make a contribution to the wider debate on Islamic movements. Through using concepts from social movement theory in the analysis it will be possible to enhance the understanding of what Islamic activism is, who is involved and their reasons for being involved, hence contributing to a more nuanced view of this phenomenon. To be able to elaborate a bit further on this important theme, Chapter 12 of this thesis provides a comparative perspective where the case studies from Azerbaijan are related to mobilization processes in three other post-Soviet contexts (North Caucasus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan).

Last but not least, it seems to me that Azerbaijan is generally speaking an understudied country. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, its geo-political importance and its potential oil and gas resources have attracted certain interest, but a large part of the world is still unaware of the political, economic and social situation in this area. Against this background my study can contribute to an enhanced understanding and awareness about developments in post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

As hinted in the above aims, the theoretical point of departure for this thesis is that the entry of the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities onto the public arena in Azerbaijan can be seen as a process of social movement mobilization. Below I will discuss this further as well as elaborate on how my study contributes to the theoretical field of social movement theory.

## Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities as social movements

.../Ordinary people often erupt into the streets and try and exert power by contentious means against national states or opponents. .../they often succeed, but even when they failed, their actions set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes. Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces in confrontations with elites, authorities and opponents.<sup>2</sup>

Even though diverse the quintessence of the scholarship under the general umbrella of social movement theory can be illustrated by the above quote by Tarrow. This line of theoretical and empirical research seeking answers to questions about why and how collective action emerge was already current in the 1940s, but then received an upswing during the political turbulence of the 1960s and the rapid mobilization of groups in the following decades. What is considered a social movement in this context differs, and over the years groups as diverse as the U. S. civil rights movement and the German Nazi Party of the 1930s have been analyzed through the lens of social movement theory.<sup>3</sup> Theoretical definitions are equally multifarious and seem to be author dependent, but all seem to have certain aspects in common.

### Defining social movements theoretically

Some definitions of a social movement are rather abstract like Tarrow's, describing them as "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities".<sup>4</sup> Others are more concrete, as Zirakzadeh's, defining a social movement as a group of people who endeavor to build a radically new social order, involving political activity by non-elite people from a broad range of social backgrounds employing a mix of socially disruptive tactics and legal tactics.<sup>5</sup> What they seem to have in common is the members' joint ambition to change certain aspects of societal order and their interaction, in order to achieve this goal, with some sort of opponent or authority that they feel is unjust.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tarrow, Sidney (1994) *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Zirakzadeh, Cyrus Ernesto (2006) *Social Movements in Politics: A Comparative Study*. Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>4</sup> Tarrow (1994) p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Zirakzadeh (2006) p.5.

<sup>6</sup> Tarrow, Sidney (1988) Old Movements and New Cycles of Protest. In Klandermans, Bert, Kriesi, Hanspeter and Tarrow, Sidney (eds.) *From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research Across Cultures*. Greenwich: JAI Press inc.

This, plus certain other interesting features, can be found in the definition provided by Della Porta and Diani stating that social movements are a distinct social process consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents, are linked by dense informal networks and, finally are characterized by a distinctive collective identity.<sup>7</sup>

For the purpose of the study at hand, I find their definition most useful as it is inclusive and allows for the study of a variety of groups, using different methods to achieve shifting goals. At the same time it does point to certain features of the movement as important. Some might argue, however, that it is still too broad to be an efficient analytical category, as it could make it difficult to find a group that is not a social movement according to this definition. On the one hand I acknowledge this might be problematic, but on the other hand this rather wide definition makes it possible to observe interesting variations in the mobilization processes of different groups. To continue this thread, albeit social movement research frequently uses the concept “mobilization”, a closer look reveals that few authors actually find it necessary to specify the theoretical definition of this word, whereas this is common in other research traditions, such as for example the studies of ethnic conflicts. Most probably the reasons for this is that such a definition of mobilization as Harff and Gurr’s “organizing for political action”<sup>8</sup> or Esman’s “the process by which an ethnic community becomes politicized on behalf of its collective interests and aspirations”<sup>9</sup> overlap with general theoretical conceptions of what constitutes a social movement, as discussed above. Thus, a social movement can be said to be “mobilized” (or in the process of mobilizing) by default. As will become clear further on, the definition of a social movement provided by Della Porta and Diani, including political, organizational, cognitive and “interactional” aspects, can also be seen as outlining the main components of the mobilization process of movements. Hence, these will also provide the basis for the framework of analysis to be outlined in the next chapter.

## Islamic activism: Islamic mobilization from a social movement perspective

Researchers have previously shown that religious institutions, religious believers and religious beliefs in different ways have been important in the

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<sup>7</sup> Della Porta, Donatella and Mario Diani (2006) *Social Movements an Introduction*. Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Harff, Barbara and Gurr, Ted R. (2004) *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*. Second edition. Boulder: Westview Press, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Esman, Milton J. (1994) *Ethnic Politics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 28.

mobilization of social movements.<sup>10</sup> Studies that feature the mobilization of religious movements in particular have, too, demonstrated their comparability with other social movements. One obvious example is Gerlach and Hines' 1970s analysis of the Pentecostal Christians that is now well known in the social movement genre for its early findings on the importance of recruitment and leadership for social movement mobilization.<sup>11</sup>

As for the mobilization of Islamic movements, this has traditionally been studied in the field of Islamic studies where it has been explained as a reaction to some specific grievance (poverty, colonialism, Western influence<sup>12</sup>, etc).<sup>13</sup> However, some later scholarship has integrated the study of Islamic mobilization into the social movement field as well. Wiktorowicz was the editor of the 2004 book *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* where authors like Hafez, Rosefsky Wickham, Singerman, Yavuz and Clark utilized the main concepts from social movement theory in the study of what in the book was referred to as "Islamic activism".<sup>14</sup> Although this was not the first interaction between social movement theory and Islamic studies it was one of the most comprehensive attempts made to combine the two.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For an overview of this see for example McVeigh, Rory and Sikkink, David (2001) God, Politics, and Protest: Religious Beliefs and the Legitimation of Contentious Tactics. *Social Forces* 79 (4): 1425–58 or Wald, Kenneth, Adam L. Silvermann and Kevin Fridy (2004) Making Sense of Religion in Political Life. *Annual Review of Political Science* 8: 121–143.

<sup>11</sup> Gerlach, Luther P. and Hine, Virginia H. (1970) *People, Power and Change. Movements of Social Transformation*. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

<sup>12</sup> I use the terms "the West" or "Western" in this dissertation with hesitance. On the one hand I am well aware of the definition of such concepts being highly debatable. On the other hand I feel that the common usage of these terms about the States in North America and Western Europe that have come to "represent" stable Political systems based on democratic values is widely accepted both in the "West" and in Azerbaijan as my respondents often talked about the "West" in this sense.

<sup>13</sup> For overviews of these approaches see among others: Almond, Gabriel A., Appleby, Scott R & Sivan, Emanuel (2003) *Strong Religion. The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press; Kepel, Gilles (1993) *The Revenge of God. The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Fox, Jonathan (2002) *Ethnoreligious Conflict in the Twentieth Century. A General Theory*. Oxford: Lexington Books.

<sup>14</sup> Wiktorowicz, Quentin (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Earlier examples includes for example: Snow, David A., and Marshall, Susan (1984) Cultural Imperialism, Social Movements, and the Islamic Revival. In Kriesberg, Louis (ed.) *Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change*. Volume 7. Greenwich Conn: JAI Press; Burke III, Edmund and Lapidus, Ira M. (eds.) (1988) *Islam, Politics and Social Movements*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press; Wolff, Kristin E. (1998) New Orientalism: Political Islam and Social Movement Theory. In Moussalli, Ahmad S. (ed.) *Islamic fundamentalism. Myths and realities*. Reading: Ithaca Press; Fantasia, Rick and Hirsch, Eric L. (1995) Culture in Rebellion: The Appropriation and Transformation of the Veil in the Algerian Revolution. In Johnston, Hank and Klandermans, Bert (eds.) *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

In the introduction Wiktorowicz defines Islamic activism as “the mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes”. This definition is purposely broad and includes a number of collective activities in the name of “Islam”, such as “propagation movements, terrorist groups, collective action rooted in Islamic symbols and identities, explicitly political movements that seek to establish an Islamic state and inwards-looking groups that promote Islamic spirituality through collective efforts”.<sup>16</sup>

The reason for using such an inclusive definition was not to create any artificial divisions or singling out one type of movement behavior as “more Islamic” than another. While a too broad definition would be unhelpful in a study aiming to establish the causal effects that contributed to a specific outcome, this inclusive definition works well granted the aims of this study. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the inclusive definition opens the opportunity to see interesting variations between the different types of groups in the study. An important part of the study in hand is, as stated above, to present a more nuanced picture of Islamic movements and activism than is often the case. In this respect I also find the concept of Islamic activism a useful way to circumvent other names for this phenomenon, such as political Islam, Islamicism and Islamic fundamentalism, since the way the latter terms have been used in the media, by politicians, and also by researchers provided them with unavoidable negative connotations.<sup>17</sup> To “de-orientalize” Islamic movements by recognizing that they share the main features of many social movements around the world is also one of the purposes of Wiktorowicz’s book mentioned above.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of Islamic activism in a post-Soviet context should be especially empirically compelling to the study of Islamic activism. For over 70 years the people of Azerbaijan were subject to the atheistic Soviet system’s attempts to suppress religion and religious expression. Having been part and parcel of the USSR and at present an independent state developing within this very special legacy has had certain consequences for the religious situation after independence. The reform processes that Islam in many other countries had gone through had sidestepped Azerbaijan and although still referred to as a Muslim country Azerbaijan could at independence almost be described as religiously illiterate. Even though much happened in this respect in the decades since independence, the legacy of living in Soviet Union still lives on. To analyze the impact of this legacy on the circumstances for

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<sup>16</sup> Wiktorowicz (2004) p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> See ex Fox (2002); Juergensmeyer, Mark (1993) *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*. Berkeley: University of California Press or Jonasson, Ann-Kristin (2004) *At the Command of God? On the Political Linkage of Islamist Parties*. Gothenburg: Kompaniet Aidla Trading AB for a discussion about this.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, Glen E. (2004) Hamas as Social Movement. In Wiktorowicz, Quentin (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

mobilization of Islamic movements will be an important part of this dissertation.

### Defining social movements normatively

Zirakzadeh has described two waves in social movement research. During the first one in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, social movements were mostly viewed negatively by researchers that described their activities as “crowd movements” that were “inimical to civility, democracy, and liberty”. This negative attitude was, Zirakzadeh writes, based on the experiences of “National Socialism in Germany, Fascism in Italy, and McCarthyism in the United States”. During the second wave, appearing in the mid 1960s, an alternative way of viewing social movement was gaining strength as many researchers themselves had been participants of or sympathized with movements for social justice and peace.<sup>19</sup>

To a large extent it seems this second wave still dominates social movement research. An assumption that all social movements aim at further democratization of society runs like a common thread through many recent studies.<sup>20</sup> In the same way, according to this line of thinking the ultimate success for a social movement is when movement activities advance from “protest to proposal”, something that might, or in fact is assumed to, lead to their absorption in the system they were once opposed to.<sup>21</sup> In this respect equating Islamic movements to other social movements around the world is not completely uncontroversial as many Islamic activist groups have a reputation for challenging Western-style democratic rule. On another level there is also a debate among researchers and others as to whether there is actually a profound conflict between Islam and democracy.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as pointed out by Roy, Islamic activism could, in some cases even unwillingly, in fact have contributed to democratization in many countries in the Middle East. “Islamism was a ‘failure’ only if one took the Islamists at their own words”, he argues.<sup>23</sup> In his view Islamists, despite their failure to gain the political power, actually contributed to democratization by changing and reviving the political landscape.<sup>24</sup>

My aim here, however, is not to take sides in the discussion about Islam and democracy. Instead I want to emphasize the theoretical relevance of studying all types of movements, in all kinds of contexts. As concluded

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<sup>19</sup> Zirakzadeh (2006) p. 6, for a similar analysis see also Wald et al (2004).

<sup>20</sup> Della Porta, Donatella and Mario Diani (1999) *Social Movements an Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

<sup>21</sup> Foweraker, Joe (1995) *Theorizing Social Movements*. London: Pluto Press.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion on this debate, see for example Kepel (1993) or Jonasson (2004).

<sup>23</sup> Roy, Olivier (2004) *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Roy (2004).

above, all social movements are driven by their wish to achieve some sort of societal change. Whether this change is of a democratic or non-democratic character is not relevant for the study of their mobilization. Rather, studying different types of movements (including Islamic) will provide a more thorough understanding of the diversity and complexity of mobilization. It also provides us, in the words of Dentice and Williams, with a diversity of ideas about what social change is. Being the editors of a book that includes case studies of the Ku Klux Klan, the White Supremacist movement and other so-called hate groups they show the research potential of studying anti-democratic and anti-humanitarian as well as democratic social movements.<sup>25</sup>

Somewhat provokingly Wiktorowicz writes that “given the variety of collective actors that operate in the name of Islam one might even make a strong case that Islamic activism is one of the most common examples [of a social movement] in the world”. It is thus, he concludes, an important phenomenon to study.<sup>26</sup> On a similar note, the increase in social movement activities in non-democratic or democratizing countries during the last decade calls for an increase in social movement studies focusing on these types of – according to some – unlikely contexts given the built-in “democracy bias” of social movement studies.

## The “core democracy bias” of social movement theory

Many social movement researchers in the “second wave” discussed above tend to study movements with which they sympathize. This often means that the focus of the study will be Western Europe or North America, as this is where a majority of social movement researchers originate from. Hence, most works by renowned social movement researchers such as for example Tarrow, Kriesi, Della Porta, Diani and McAdam have focused on movement mobilization in Germany, Italy, France or the United States. As a result only a minority of empirical research in this field of study has been conducted in contexts that do not possess fully developed plurality of parties, unions and alliance structures ensuring citizens access to the political system. This, Kurzman says, has contributed to giving certain features of social movement theory a “core democracy bias”.<sup>27</sup> The increase in social movement activities in non-democratic or democratizing countries during the last decade has moreover led to concerns about the viability of generalizations from findings

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<sup>25</sup> Dentice, Dianne and Williams, James L. (2008) *Social Movements: Contemporary Perspectives*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

<sup>26</sup> Wiktorowicz (2004) pp. 4–5.

<sup>27</sup> Kurzman, Charles (2004) Conclusion: Social Movement Theory and Islamic Studies. In Wiktorowicz (Ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

and conclusions in this genre.<sup>28</sup> This makes the study of Islamic activism even more relevant. The political context of Middle Eastern states, where Islamic activism is most often studied, is often quite different from that of “the West”, since the former is characterized, as it were, by the domination of one person or one particular party, more often than not relying on political exclusion and repression to maintain in power.<sup>29</sup> Given these differences, an important part of the study of Islamic activism turns out to be how to operationalize the main concepts and mechanisms of social movement theory in order to apply them in a different, more closed political context than it is usually the case. In this respect I also believe that the case of Azerbaijan has a lot to offer the study of social movements. Similar to the Middle Eastern countries, most post-Soviet states, including Azerbaijan, still some twenty years after independence suffer from serious transitional problems in the political and juridical spheres. Most have maintained the Soviet tradition of a strong leader supported by an elite leadership that controls most of the country’s power and resources. To study Islamic activism in these types of contexts gives interesting insights on the specificity of movement mobilization in authoritarian/transitional states.

## Outline of the thesis

To conclude, the remaining contents of this thesis are structured in the following way. Chapters 2–4 provide the theoretical and methodological background for the study. Chapter 5 discusses the religious situation in the Soviet Union as well as the role the Soviet legacy plays in the mobilization process. Chapter 6 presents the religious situation in post-Soviet Azerbaijan and introduces the two mosque communities in focus, Juma and Abu Bakr. In Chapters 7–9 the analysis of the mobilization of these mosque communities is conducted, focusing on their organizational, cognitive and political aspects. In Chapter 10 this analysis continues, but here it is the interaction between the state and the two different movements, and its impact on the mobilization process, that is in focus. Chapter 11 explores possible extrinsic aspects of the mobilization process in Azerbaijan while Chapter 12 goes beyond Azerbaijan, comparing the findings from mobilization in that context to mobilization of Islamic activism in other post-Soviet settings (North Caucasus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Finally, in Chapter 13 I summarize and discuss the general conclusions arrived at in the dissertation.

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<sup>28</sup> Foweraker (1995).

<sup>29</sup> Singerman, Diane (2004) *The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements*. In Wiktorowicz, Quentin (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.



## 2. Social Movement Mobilization: Organization, Cognition and Context

The previous chapter stated that the analysis of the mobilization of the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities in this thesis would be conducted on the premise that they are to be seen as social movements. To follow up on that, the purpose of this chapter is to review certain parts of social movement theory in order to construct an analytical framework to be used for this purpose. With this framework in mind, mobilization will be looked at from two different angles. The first centers on the movements and discusses different aspects of their mobilization processes (organizational, cognitive, political, extrinsic) while the second (presented in the next chapter) focuses on mobilization as a reciprocal relationship, thus examining the interaction between the respective group and the state.

However, as discussed in the introduction, one of the weaknesses of social movement research has been the overrepresentation of studies conducted in a Western context, where a well functioning democratic political system is the norm rather than the exception. Hence, not all aspects of the theoretical concepts extracted from this line of research will be directly applicable to a so-called transitional context. As a result, one of the challenges in this chapter is to ensure that the concepts, and their operationalization in the analytical framework, are adapted to fit the specificities of the Azerbaijani context. This will mean, for example, an emphasis on a repressive rather than a facilitative political environment in the mobilization process as well as the incorporation of certain extrinsic and historical aspects of mobilization.

### The political process approach

Even though it is difficult to speak of one comprehensive social movement theory, most researchers involved in the study of social movements focus on groups as the proper unit of analysis. They recognize that individuals make strategic choices but argue that such choices are not made independent of the changing contexts, relations, and networks in which people actually live. A change in the political context is however not guaranteed to lead to a certain political outcome, but the outcome is dependent on how groups utilize changes and on their organizational capacity, which leads Robinson to de-

scribe social movement theory as a “middle way between structural change and agency”.<sup>30</sup>

Della Porta and Diani identify four dominant perspectives through time in the analysis of social movements: *collective behavior*, *resource mobilization*, *political process* and *new social movements*. Briefly, collective behavior focused on the individual and social psychological reasons for contention while resource mobilization, assuming that individuals are “rational actors”, emphasized the organization and the effectiveness with which movements use the resources to obtain their goals. The new social movement approach focuses on the movements that emerged in the 1960s and 70s, which are considered representative of a new type of contention set on ideological changes in society rather than political power. As noted by Della Porta and Diani, these directions are rather fluctuant as in many cases concepts and ideas overlap and change over time.<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that textbooks still refer to them as separate categories a rather strong consensus seems to have developed among scholars around certain broad categories that encompass many aspects of collective behavior, resource mobilization and new social movement theory.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the best-known example of how these concepts can be synthesized is the so-called *political process approach*, also mentioned by Della Porta and Diani above. This approach studies mobilization as a combination of a movement’s *organizational strength*, providing the means for taking action, their *shared cognitions*, which presents the ideological motivation that inspires people to collective action, group identity and group action and, finally, *political opportunities*, highlighting the political context within which groups can engage in contentious politics.<sup>33</sup>

The political process approach was introduced by McAdam as a result of his tracing of the development of the American civil rights movement.<sup>34</sup> In 1982, when it was first published his model was a novelty because it went against the classical theories of collective behavior, such as the theories of mass society or relative deprivation, and concentrated both on what goes on within movements and on the relationship between movements and institutions in the surrounding society. Its main characteristic is the understanding

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<sup>30</sup> Robinson (2004).

<sup>31</sup> Della Porta and Diani (1999). See a similar categorization in Eyerman, Ron & Jamison, Andrew (1991) *Social Movements. A Cognitive Approach*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>32</sup> Whittier, Nancy (2002) Meaning and Structure in Social Movements. In Meyer, David S.(ed.) *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*, Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated. One example is the book McAdam, Doug, McCarthy, John D. and Zald, Mayer N. (eds.) (1996b) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Davenport, Christian (2005) Repression and Mobilization: Insights from Political Science and Sociology. In Davenport, Christian, Johnston, Hank and Carol Mueller (eds.) *Repression and Mobilization*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>34</sup> McAdam, Doug, (1999) *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*. Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago.

that collective identity and strategic intent of social movements remain undefined until analyzed in interaction with the political environment.<sup>35</sup> Many social movement researchers have since then followed in McAdam's footprints, arguing that although movements usually conceive of themselves as being outside of, and opposed to, institutions, acting collectively inserts them into a complex policy network and thus within reach of the state. That is, movements develop in response to an ongoing process of interaction between movement groups and the larger socio-political environment they seek to change.<sup>36</sup>

As could be seen above, McAdam's three categories correspond well to the definition of a social movement provided in the previous chapter. It includes organizational, cognitive and political aspects and thus, I believe, provides a good starting point for designing a more satisfactory framework for analysis. However, for these categories to constitute a more useful analytical tool the different features they entail need to be identified.

## Organizational aspects of mobilization

Of the three aspects of social movement mobilization under scrutiny, the first is what McAdam has referred to as "the level of organization within the aggravated population" or "degree of organizational readiness" within the community in question.<sup>37</sup> This concept focuses on the means available for a group to turn their efforts into an organized campaign of social protest and the effects of organization on the movements' capacity for contention.<sup>38</sup> From my reading of McAdam and others I find that this concept alludes to certain factors which strike me as crucial to social movement mobilization: *members, networks, social relationships* and *leaders*. With the specific empirical focus of this study in mind I am also adding a fifth category, *free spaces*, related to a certain locality facilitating a group's mobilization.

## Members, networks and social relationships

According to McAdam "if there is anything approximating a consistent finding in the empirical literature, it is that movement participants are recruited along established lines of interaction".<sup>39</sup> This is supported by much other

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<sup>35</sup> McAdam (1999).

<sup>36</sup> See for example Tarrow (1994); Kriesi, Hanspeter, Koopmans Ruud, Duyvendak, Jan Willem and Guigni, Marco G. (1995) *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Hafez, Mohammed M. (2003) *Why Muslims Rebel. Repression and Resistance in the Muslim World*. Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers; McAdam et al (1996a).

<sup>37</sup> McAdam (1999) p. 40.

<sup>38</sup> Tarrow (1994); Mc Adam (1999).

<sup>39</sup> McAdam (1999) p. 44.

research showing that most local dissent is generated from the most basic structures of everyday life. These structures may be characterized as formal (for example political parties, churches, unions, professional associations, protest committees, movement schools), informal (friendship networks, neighborhoods, work networks, activist networks, affinity groups) or illegal (underground extremist, or non-extremist groups). It is through these structures that movements recruit like-minded individuals, socialize new participants and mobilize contention.<sup>40</sup> If no such network exists the protest produced by the group is unlikely to be anything more than short-term sporadic outbursts of contention. Furthermore, preexisting social relationships that link leaders and followers, center and periphery and different parts of a movement also guarantees that the movement will keep working even when formal organizational structures are absent.<sup>41</sup> In this context it is however important to note that it might be misleading to think about a movement in terms of formal and informal. As described by Gerlach and Hine:

A movement is neither an amorphous collectivity nor a highly centralized authority. It cannot be considered an imperfect bureaucracy, one which succeeds in spite of its lack of unity. Movement organization is of a different order entirely. It is a decentralized, segmented, and reticulate structure.<sup>42</sup>

Especially informal networks, such as kinship and friendship groups, have been shown to be central to understanding movement recruitment as well as movement mobilization.<sup>43</sup> Family units, friendship networks, voluntary associations, work units are all examples of such social networks that might not be directly tapped for movement mobilization, but nevertheless constitute the primary source of recruitment. As pointed out by Gerlach and Hine “it is clear that the original decision to join [a movement] required some contact with the movement”.<sup>44</sup> If large number of family and friends are already members, this encourages the new recruits’ participation by helping them overcome the costs they might associate with joining a social movement.<sup>45</sup>

Studies on Islamic activism show similar findings. As Singerman points out, since their collective action is often not public in a conventional sense, Islamists tend to a large extent to utilize informal networks to mobilize supporters and build movements.<sup>46</sup> In general, organized religion is often well

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<sup>40</sup> Robinson (2004); McCarthy, John (1996) Constraints and Opportunities in Adopting, Adapting and Inventing. In McAdam, Doug, McCarthy, John D. and Zald, Mayer N. (eds.) (1996) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Clark, Janine A. (2004) *Islamist Women in Yemen. Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

<sup>42</sup> Gerlach and Hine (1970) p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> McCarthy (1996); McAdam (1999).

<sup>44</sup> Gerlach and Hine (1970) p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Clark (2004).

<sup>46</sup> Singerman (2004).

prepared to provide new members to movements through already established social networks and subgroups. Pre-existing communication and recruitment channels also facilitate the process of religious movement emergence.<sup>47</sup>

## Leaders

McAdam holds that “to assert the importance of leaders or organizers in the generation of social insurgency requires not so much a particular theoretical orientation as common sense”.<sup>48</sup> Leaders are the face of movements to the outside world and have a main responsibility for directing it, expressing its values, defining collective interests, setting strategies, management relations with outsiders, and resolving internal conflicts. Therefore a leader is expected to be someone with a strong connection to and a great investment in the movement.<sup>49</sup> One should nevertheless keep in mind that in most cases social movement leadership is charismatic rather than bureaucratic in nature. As observed by Gerlach and Hine few leaders have lists of, or even know about, all the individuals, groups or fractions that consider themselves parts of the movement. Furthermore, even though the leaders may be able to express general beliefs that all participants subscribe to, they cannot make decisions that are binding for their community as a whole, and neither can they, although they often do, speak for the whole movement.<sup>50</sup>

Harff and Gurr link a group’s leadership style to group cohesion. Strong leaders are assumed to be able to generate a cohesive climate where the members willingly put their personal preferences aside as secondary to the group’s preferences.<sup>51</sup> An advantage of religious organizations in this respect is that they are likely to have clear pre-established structures of leadership. In many cases religious leaders are specialists in their field, formally or informally educated. Additionally they have vast experience of interpersonal relations and group dynamics that will significantly benefit them in their mobilization work. They are also likely to be well respected and have great influence inside the religious community as well as established connections to other religious leaders and the broader community.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Smith, Christian (1996) Correcting a Curious Neglect or Bringing Religion Back. In Smith, Christian (ed.) *Disruptive Religion. The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>48</sup> McAdam (1999) p.47.

<sup>49</sup> Esman (1994).

<sup>50</sup> Gerlach and Hine (1970).

<sup>51</sup> Harff and Gurr (2004).

<sup>52</sup> Smith (1996).

## Free spaces

In contrast to the West, where contentious groups have the legal rights and possibilities to act openly, the constraints of repression in authoritarian regimes mean that open, free and structured organization is often impossible. This increases the need to find so-called “free spaces”, which in this respect means places to meet shielded from state scrutiny. Here dominant ideologies can be questioned and mobilization initiated.<sup>53</sup> Authoritarian regimes often knowingly or unknowingly provide this kind of spaces through leaving loopholes of administrative freedom where, in the word of Johnston, “contentious words are uttered along with non-contentious ones”.<sup>54</sup> These spaces have often displayed other functions prior to taking on an oppositional character.<sup>55</sup> In several communist states, the remains of the established Church, a traditional cultural space, often became the free space where indigenous opposition could grow.<sup>56</sup> The reason that this could happen seems to be that many authoritarian regimes, despite their brutality towards opposition, have been reluctant to ban and completely suppress religious institutions, which make them the only remaining “open space” in civil society.<sup>57</sup>

## Cognitive aspects of mobilization

The second aspect of mobilization identified by the political process approach is the “level of insurgent consciousness” or the “collective assessment of the prospects for successful insurgency”.<sup>58</sup> Here the relationship between collective involvement and personal engagement is the key to trying to understand how a group is formed.<sup>59</sup> In this regard movements are viewed as processes of identity formation and as social actors struggling to define history: both the subjective motives for action and the ideology of the group are significant. In the literature it is often indicated that social movements start out of what is culturally given, finding its position in the political landscape by utilizing pre-existent rhetoric and symbols.<sup>60</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>53</sup> Fantasia and Hirsh (1995).

<sup>54</sup> Johnston, Hank (2005) *Talking the Walk: Speech Acts and Resistance*. In Davenport, Christan, Johnston, Hank and Mueller, Carol (eds.) *Repression and Mobilization*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 110f.

<sup>55</sup> Fantasia and Hirsh (1995).

<sup>56</sup> Johnston (2005).

<sup>57</sup> Smith (1996).

<sup>58</sup> McAdam (1999) p. 40.

<sup>59</sup> Melucci, Alberto (1995) *The Process of Collective Identity*. In Johnston, Hank and Klandermans, Bert (eds.) *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>60</sup> Johnston, Hank and Klandermans, Bert (1995) *The Cultural Analysis of Social Movements*. In Johnston, Hank and Klandermans, Bert (eds.) *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

however, social movement theory seems to carry a fairly instrumental view of culture, assuming that social movements are not only shaped by culture, but also contribute to shape and reshape the culture themselves. Culture is according to this point of view seen as a set of instruments. Social actors, relying on these cultural instruments, make sense of their own life experiences by adopting symbols, values, meanings, icons, and beliefs and molding them to fit the movement's objectives.<sup>61</sup> Two major parts of this process can be identified: the formation of a *collective identity* for the movement's participants and the employment of certain *frames* in order to facilitate this formation.

### Collective identity

As collective action seldom occurs without the actors recognizing themselves and being recognized by others as a group, the consolidation of a collective identity is a most central task of a movement. In this process the "us" involved in collective action is elaborated and given meaning when actors engaging in conflict are starting to see themselves as people linked by interests, values and common histories.<sup>62</sup> As important as the "us" in the construction of a collective identity is, the identity of the social movement is shaped by the notion of the (antagonistic) "Other". The identity serves a dual purpose: to reassure, inspire and sustain the participation of activists, members and sympathizers of the movement as well as to project to and legitimize for outsiders, including the authorities, a desired image of the movement and its demands.<sup>63</sup> This makes the interaction with and the recognition of a group's identity by other social and political actors crucial to the social process in which identity is shaped.<sup>64</sup>

To "take on" a collective identity of a social movement is to express an individual association with a certain group that shares the same set of attitudes, commitments, and rules of behavior.<sup>65</sup> Gamson points out that collective identity is not necessarily something "mysterious and intangible, but can be empirically observable as a t-shirt or a haircut".<sup>66</sup> In the same line of thinking Della Porta and Diani identify certain models of behavior through which activists can clarify what sets them apart from "ordinary people" or their opponents. They mention for example the wearing of certain styles of

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<sup>61</sup> Della Porta & Diani (1999).

<sup>62</sup> Smith (1996).

<sup>63</sup> Esman (1994).

<sup>64</sup> Melucci (1995).

<sup>65</sup> Friedman, Debra and McAdam, Dough (1992) Collective Identity and activism: networks, choices and the life of a Social Movement. In Morris, Alan D. and McClurg Mueller, Carol (eds.) *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

<sup>66</sup> Gamson, William A. (1992) The Social Psychology of Collective Action. In Morris, Alan D. and McClurg Mueller, Carol (eds.) *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 59.

clothing, or identifiers – associated in various ways with their work – that make them instantly recognizable (such as the Greenpeace rainbow or the smiling sun of the anti-nuclear protesters). Another way of pursuing a collective identity is by the promotion of characters that have played an important role in the action of a movement or in the development of its ideology, artifacts (including books or visual documents to help reconstruct the history of the movement) and events and places of particular symbolic significance. Finally, Della Porta and Diani also bring up the role of movement rituals as symbolic expressions to pass on experiences and relationships.<sup>67</sup>

## Frames

In social movement studies frames (also sometimes referred to in the literature as cognitive frames, ideological frames, ideological packages or cultural discourses) are described as “interpretive schemata” that simplifies and condenses the “world out there, by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of action within one’s present or past environment”.<sup>68</sup> In the words of Della Porta and Diani, frames “allow a phenomenon whose origins previously was attributed to natural factors to be transformed into a social or political problem”.<sup>69</sup> The process of “framing”, in this respect, is the process through which meaning is produced, articulated, and disseminated by movement actors in order to mobilize participants and support. Hence, frames in this context are to be seen as the outspoken worldview of a movement, the one that is being communicated to the observer rather than something that is just in the minds of community members.

According to framing theorists Snow and Benford, frames serve three core tasks for social movements.<sup>70</sup> First, frames are used to diagnose a situation as problematic, as well as to establish who is to blame for it. For any form of mobilization to take place people need to feel an urge to change some aspects of their situation and nurse a hope that activism will help resolve their problem, a process McAdam refers to as cognitive liberation.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Della Porta & Diani (1999) p. 97f.

<sup>68</sup> Snow, David A. and Benford, Robert D. (1992) Master Frames and Cycles of Protest. In Morris, Alan D. and McClurg Mueller, Carol (eds.) *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 137.

<sup>69</sup> Della Porta & Diani (1999) p. 69.

<sup>70</sup> See also Esman (1994) for similar thoughts although expressed in different terms. The term “Frames” or “framing” is used in different research traditions, for example media studies, by different authors, sometimes, but not always with overlapping definitions and interpretations. In this thesis I understand the concept of “framing” as commonly used in Social Movement literature.

<sup>71</sup> McAdam, Doug, McCarthy, John D. and Zald, Mayer N. (1996a) Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes—towards a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements. In McAdam, Doug, McCarthy, John D. and Zald, Mayer N.



Lacking this insight, or the conviction that this is actually attainable, it is very improbable that a movement will develop. Not only does framing help to identify commonly experienced grievances, it also defines the “us and them” for a movement and its participants.

Second, frames offer solutions to the diagnosed problem as well as specific tactics and strategies for dealing with injustice, based on ideas about protest and organization appropriate to a particular cultural context, as well as on what has worked in the past. In this respect larger movements may provide “master frames” which later may serve as guidelines for the tactics chosen by other movements. The internal and external contest over tactics and goals results in changes in the dominant frames and contributes to progression in power and influence.<sup>72</sup>

Third, frames provide the rationale to motivate support and collective action. After the initial mobilization the movement faces an even more challenging situation. Even though potential participants might share the common understandings about a particular problem, they need to be convinced to actually engage in activism. In this process movement entrepreneurs try to frame their interpretations of ideology and of symbols, in a way that resonate with the frame of the participants, drawing on cultural understandings of injustice, infringements et cetera. Their success with this mission is not only dependent on cultural attractiveness, since other factors like, for example, the group’s reputation, might influence the willingness of potential participants to engage in activism.<sup>73</sup> It is therefore important that frames link the individual sphere with that of collective experience.<sup>74</sup>

## The role of religion in the process of identity formation

Much previous research sees religious ideas and religious institutions more as potential resources in the struggle between regimes and opposition movements rather than as the core motivation of action.<sup>75</sup> Smith, for example, points to some of the many ways in which religion is an asset when it comes to mobilizing a group. Of great importance for the task of creating a collective identity is that religion possesses a preexisting collective identity

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(eds.) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; McAdam (1999).

<sup>72</sup> Johnston, Hank (1995) A Methodology for Frame Analysis: From Discourse to Cognitive Schemata. In Johnston, Hank and Klandermans, Bert (eds.) *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>73</sup> Zald, Mayer N. (1996) Culture, Ideology, and Strategic Framing. In McAdam, Doug, McCarthy, John D. and Zald, Mayer N. (eds.) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Snow and Benford (1992).

<sup>74</sup> Della Porta and Diani (1999).

<sup>75</sup> Rosefsky Wickham, Carrie (2004) Interest, Ideas and Islamist Outreach in Egypt. In Wiktorowicz, Quentin (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

“ready for use” by a movement. In religion icons, rituals, songs and testimonies, a ready-made identity can be found which defines, motivates and upholds collective action.<sup>76</sup> Another asset in this regard is that religious language is easily accessible for any religious group, their social status notwithstanding. As Williams notes: “because religious language is both legitimate and democratically available, almost any group, especially those mobilized at the grassroots, can use religious symbols, metaphors, and authority to legitimate its public claims”.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, one characteristic of a social movement is its opposition to some authority that members feel is unjust.<sup>78</sup> In this context religion, of great importance to people that find themselves in an “unjust” situation and are looking for a way to change it, has a built-in system of moral values telling us what should be, how to live, how the world should function.<sup>79</sup> It can also, according to Tarrow, make members of a religious movement more conflict-prone than members of other social movements. “Since they feel that their cause is not only advantageous but just, their sense of injustice can be far greater than that of antagonists in a purely economic relationship”, he writes.<sup>80</sup> On a similar note, religion can legitimate protest by associating it with the will of God; through this a secular cause becomes something ultimate or sacred.<sup>81</sup> Even more so, such a cause is likely to remain important for a longer period of time in comparison to other secular causes more likely to be shaped by what is discussed in public at that particular point of time.

Finally, religious motivation can be said to eliminate the so-called free-rider problem, the question about how and why individuals are motivated to sacrifice their own personal well-being for the collective good, as religion in itself is an important source of self-discipline and self-sacrificing.<sup>82</sup>

## Political aspects of mobilization

Besides the organizational and cognitive aspects the mobilization of a social movement is conditioned by political aspects influencing the availability, within a national context, of the movements’ capability, tactics, actions and

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<sup>76</sup> Smith (1996).

<sup>77</sup> Williams, Rhys H. (2002) From the ‘Beloved Community’ to ‘Family Values’: Religious Language, Symbolic Repertoires, and Democratic Culture. In Meyer, David S.(ed.) *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, p. 269.

<sup>78</sup> Tarrow (1988).

<sup>79</sup> Smith (1996).

<sup>80</sup> Tarrow (1988) p. 283.

<sup>81</sup> Smith (1996); Williams (2002).

<sup>82</sup> Smith (1996).

choices.<sup>83</sup> To researchers of this perspective the concept of *political opportunity structure* (POS) has become central. As with most general concepts, however, what the “political opportunity structure” actually consists of has proven hard to pin down.<sup>84</sup> Sidney Tarrow describes political opportunities as “consistent, but not necessarily formal or permanent dimensions of political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people’s expectations for success or failure”.<sup>85</sup> Other scholars have defined the term differently, applied it to a variety of empirical phenomena, and used it to address an equally wide range of questions in the study of social movements. Many researchers have also expressed concerns with regard to the inclusiveness of the concept of political opportunity structure since it makes it less useful for analysis and generalization.<sup>86</sup> Guided by Esman, I will therefore try and discuss two particular dimensions of the concept of opportunity structure that I see as most relevant for this study. The first addresses the more formal aspects of the political context and involves institution and legislation that enable or prevent movement mobilization, while the second will focus on the more informal identifying attitudes of and practices pursued by the political establishment in regards to opposition.<sup>87</sup>

### An inopportune political context

The overemphasis on Western contexts, discussed in Chapter 1, is noticeable in lists of common conceptions of the political opportunity structure compiled by, for example, McAdam (1996) and Kriesi (1994). These most often include: the degree of openness or closure of formal political access, the degree of stability or instability of political alignments, and the availability and strategic posture of potential alliance partners and political conflict within and among elites.<sup>88</sup> Characteristic of these conceptions however is

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<sup>83</sup> Foweraker (1995); McAdam (1999); Tarrow (1994); Kriesi et al (1995); Hafez (2003); McAdam et al (1996a).

<sup>84</sup> Tilly, Charles (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. New York: Random House.

<sup>85</sup> Tarrow (1994) p. 76. The concept is believed to have originated from a “polity model” for the analysis of collective action presented by Tilly in his book *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Tilly’s model links collective action to the State through emphasizing the opportunities and threats facing challengers as a result of the facilitative or repressive actions taken by the authorities.

<sup>86</sup> Gamson, William A. and Mayer, David, S. (1996) Framing Political Opportunity. In McAdam, Doug, McCarthy, John D. and Zald, Mayer N. (eds.) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>87</sup> Esman (1994).

<sup>88</sup> McAdam, Doug (1996) Conceptual Origins, Problems, Future Directions. In McAdam, Doug, McCarthy, John D. and Zald, Mayer N. (eds.) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Kriesi, Hanspeter (1994) Political Opportunity Structure. In Jenkins, J. Craig and Klandermans, Bert (eds.) *The Politics of Social Protest: Comparative Perspectives on States and Social Movements*. London: UCL Press.

that, even though their definition in theory covers a political context ranging from facilitative to repressive towards opponents, the main emphasis has come to be on highlighting the various opportunities opening up to social movements through, for example, influential allies or changing political alignments. In contrast, studies of social movements in “partial democracies” feature an *inopportune* political environment which, from the outset, hardly offers any openings for social movement mobilization.<sup>89</sup> Hence, when studying these types of context too much theoretical focus on political opportunities in the traditional sense of the concept, as understood by social movement theory, seems counterproductive. As suggested by Rosefsky Wickham, rather than solemnly relating mobilization to improving political opportunities, in terms of changing political alignments, alliance partners or political conflict within and among elites, authoritarian empirical contexts call for a greater focus on how institutions and legislation shape and restrict movement mobilization.<sup>90</sup>

In the case of Azerbaijan the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 did promote a series of overwhelming changes in the political opportunity structure. Many of these could be considered positive. After 70 years of authoritarian, centralized one-party rule the Azerbaijanis now had the opportunity, or rather were expected to, develop a multi-party system based on citizens’ participation in free elections. Today, however, some twenty years after their independence the political system in Azerbaijan, as well as in most post-Soviet states, can be considered a sort of gray zone. The countries have left their totalitarian past behind, but despite their constitutional adherence to freedom and liberties these political systems can in most cases be considered closed rather than open. Many have also maintained the Soviet tradition of a strong leader who normally controls most of the country’s power and resources. Some authors have referred to this type of regime as hybrid<sup>91</sup>, while others talk about democracy’s “doubles”, regimes that claim to be democratic and may look like democracies, but which rule like autocracies.<sup>92</sup> In the specific Azerbaijani context, Guliyev prefers the term “sultanistic semiauthoritarian” to describe the post-Soviet political system.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> See for example Foweraker (1995); chapter 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 in Bayes, Jane H and Nayereh Tohidi (ed.) (2001) *Globalization, Gender and Religion. The Politics of Women’s Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*. New York: Palgrave or Singerman (2004).

<sup>90</sup> Rosefsky-Wickham, Carrie (2002) *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political Change in Egypt* New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>91</sup> Diamond, Larry (2002) Elections without democracy. Thinking about Hybrid Regimes, *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2): 51–61.

<sup>92</sup> Krastev, Ivan (2006) New Threats to Freedom. Democracy’s “Doubles”. *Journal of Democracy* 17 (2): 52–62.

<sup>93</sup> Guliyev, Farid (2005) Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Transition to Sultanistic Semiauthoritarianism? An Attempt at Conceptualization,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 13 (3): 393–435.

Alongside the formal political context, however, researchers in this field acknowledge the importance of a more informal political structure that shapes the state's informal procedures and prevailing strategies with regards to challengers. I too find this to be an important aspect of the understanding of this concept.

### Prevailing paradigms and path dependency

As noted above authors in this genre recognize that the so-called political opportunity structure has both formal and informal elements, even though the name they give this phenomenon differs. Gamson and Meyer for example have referred to it as the cultural and institutional dimension of political opportunity structure,<sup>94</sup> while Della Porta and Diani talk about how “national strategies set the informal and formal rules of the game for the conflict between new social movements and their adversaries”.<sup>95</sup> Esman has discussed “prevailing strategies encompassing more general attitudes of and strategies pursued by the political establishment in regard to opposition”.<sup>96</sup> Another common notion in this context is the idea of a “Zeitgeist” — “the mutable and flexible spirit of the times” — influencing state politics.<sup>97</sup> I have chosen to refer to these informal structures influencing the procedures used by governments to deal with challengers as *prevailing paradigms*. They are prevailing since they are believed to live on — to some extent — beyond the conflict that started them in the first place and a paradigm because they represent a certain worldview that affects the type of political action taken. As exemplified by Della Porta and Rucht, whether a protest action is understood as “your right as a citizen” or a “disturbance of the public order” can have a crucial effect on how different actors are approached and apprehended.<sup>98</sup>

Kriesi notes that another result of a prevailing paradigm is that a short-lived democracy might, in times of trouble, fall back to its non-democratic past.<sup>99</sup> This discussion is of specific interest to my case studies inasmuch as the Soviet past is likely to still bear influence on informal procedures and policy thinking in Azerbaijan. In common with many of the other newly independent states, Azerbaijan is to a large extent still ruled by leaders with extensive Soviet experience. Many high-ranking officials did previously possess leadership positions in the national branch of the Communist party. As a result a “Soviet paradigm” can still be noticed influencing their assess-

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<sup>94</sup> Gamson and Meyer (1996) p. 279.

<sup>95</sup> Della Porta and Diani (2006) pp. 206–207.

<sup>96</sup> Esman (1994) p. 32.

<sup>97</sup> Della Porta and Diani (2006) pp. 206–207.

<sup>98</sup> Della Porta, Donatella and Rucht, Dieter (1992) *Left-Libertarian Movements in Context: A Comparison of Italy and West Germany, 1965–1990*. In Jenkins J. Craig and Klandermans, Bert (eds.) *The Politics of Social Protest: Comparative Perspectives on States and Social Movements*. London: UCL Press.

<sup>99</sup> Kriesi (1994).

ment of political opposition as something controversial. Also, their view of Islam is colored by their Soviet experience, separating "good Islam", that is controlled by the government and lacking political ambitions, from all other "bad" forms of Islam. This attitude is not without significance for the mobilization of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan.

This paradigm is not only noticeable in informal structures, but the Soviet past is also very much present in the independent state's institutional framework. That "the past matters" is the crux of the idea of *path dependency*, a concept originating from institutionalism and often used in studies of democratic transitions.<sup>100</sup> According to this line of thought, if a country's institutional structure at a critical juncture in its history enters a certain developmental path, it will be very difficult to redirect it from this path in a foreseeable future. In this way institutional legacies of the past are believed to impose a serious constraint on current institutional innovation strategies.<sup>101</sup> This does not mean however that the institutional development will be completely static, but changes from the chosen route are conventionally viewed as pre-determined options endorsed within an obtaining institutional framework. Path-dependency is therefore often referred to as not as a return to the past but rather a return of the past.<sup>102</sup> In Azerbaijan this return of the past is noticeable in the creation of institutions and formulation of laws, insofar as the need is felt by the powers that be, the aim of which is to control religion and religious organizations in a way reminiscent of what was experienced in this regard during Soviet times.

After this discussion of the national context it is high time to also acknowledge the possible importance of the international context in which the movements operate. Even though this factor is neither a part of the political process model nor commonly found in social movement literature in general I believe the character of the movements in question (say, as possible representatives of a global Islamic movement) justifies this. Additionally, considering that much previous research on post-Soviet Azerbaijan focuses on the country's strategic geographical location — in the middle of the influential regional great powers Turkey, Russia and Iran — it can be expected that external influence has played a certain role in shaping the mobilization processes in the Azerbaijani context.

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<sup>100</sup> See for example Linz, Juan J. and Alfred, Stepan (1996) *Problem of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press; Nielsen, Klaus, Jessup, Bob and Jerzy Hausner (1995) Institutional Change in Post-Socialism. In Hausner, Jerzy, Jessop, Bob and Klaus Nielsen (eds.) *Strategic Choice and Path-dependency in Post-Socialism Institutional Dynamics in the Transformation Process*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar.

<sup>101</sup> Thelen, Kathleen (1999) Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics. *Annual Review of Political Science* 2: 369–404.

<sup>102</sup> Nielsen, Jessup, and Hausner (1995).

## Extrinsic aspects of mobilization

Internal conflict frequently involves neighboring states in one way or another. In some cases the collective action in one state can have certain implications for regional stability; in others it is neighboring states, or other outside actors, which engage in activities that affect the mobilization process of a country. Three, quite different kinds of extrinsic influence will be identified below: direct involvement, international constraints and diffusion of ideas and activists.

### Direct involvement

Even though a conflict might be internal in nature, external support either from foreign governments or social movements in other countries may boost the local movement in a given country.<sup>103</sup> Not all external support is meant to escalate a conflict however. Intervention is according to Brown something that can be very complex and involve a wide range of activities and actions. He categorizes the actions that neighboring states take with respect to internal conflicts into five main blocks, defined mainly in terms of motivation: humanitarian interventions, defensive interventions (to keep wars from spreading or bring them to an end), protective interventions (to protect or assist ethnic brethren involved in conflict elsewhere), opportunistic interventions (to exploit internal turmoil elsewhere to advance one's political, economic and military interests) and opportunistic invasions (to take advantage of momentary weakness to launch an invasion on a rival).<sup>104</sup>

### International constraints

Not only movements but also their opponents can be the object of certain external influence. This can in turn have negative or positive effects for the movement. In what Goertz calls 'the barrier model', trans-governmental pressure is applied on national authorities by some extrinsic force (a superpower, colonial power or regionally dominant power) with various implications for the social movements. This outside force might persuade the national government to block apparent mobilization, stop the implementation of reforms, or do both. According to the model, social movements in the various countries affected by this trans-governmental power relation track

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<sup>103</sup> Della Porta, Donatella and Kriesi Hanspeter (1999) Social Movements in a Globalizing World: An Introduction. In Della Porta, Donatella, Kriesi, Hanspeter and Dieter Rucht (eds.) *Social Movements in a Globalizing World*. Basingstoke: MacMillan.

<sup>104</sup> Brown, Michael E. (1996) The Causes and Regional Dimensions of Internal Conflict. In Brown, Michael E (ed.) *The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. See also Harff and Gurr (2004).

this development and act accordingly.<sup>105</sup> It might also be that a movement, experiencing that all other channels of participation are blocked, see the international arena as the only means available to attract attention to their issues. This phenomenon, when “domestic NGOs bypass their state and directly search international allies to try to pressure on their states from the outside”, is referred to by Keck and Sikkink as a “boomerang pattern”.<sup>106</sup> Harff and Gurr suggest the opposite scenario: a country’s international connections lead to accommodation of oppositional groups. According to their predictions “the extent of a state’s economic interaction via trade and investment with foreign partners suggests some degree of openness and flexibility in dealing with international demands, which may include easing internal tension by accommodating challengers”.<sup>107</sup>

### Diffusion of ideas and activists

The conventional way in which social movement theorists tackle the issue of extrinsic influence is through the effects of globalization on collective action. A general assumption found in this line of research seems to be that, owing to globalization, movements from different parts of the world have been able to bring their forces together. Generally speaking, factors like lower costs for international flights and new electronic communication technologies have contributed to an increased information flow between and more frequent personal contacts among activists. Global forums like United Nations’ conferences and the growing transnational NGO networking have at the same time helped to strengthen the organizational dynamics of international mobilization.<sup>108</sup>

Also, protest leaders do not have to “reinvent the wheel”, but can instead often find inspiration elsewhere in the ideas and tactics practiced by other activists. As expressed by Della Porta and Kriesi: “ideas and people travel easily in the ‘global village’.”<sup>109</sup> According to them this is particularly true in times of international crisis. They point to the fact that international similarities in protest expression tend to increase when mobilization emerges in reaction to an international triggering event like Chernobyl, the Vietnam War or the Gulf war.<sup>110</sup> However, as pointed out by Risse-Kappen, the degree of influence emanating from certain ideas or protests varies from coun-

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<sup>105</sup> Della Porta and Kriesi (1999).

<sup>106</sup> Keck, Margaret E. and Sikkink, Kathryn (1998) *Activists beyond Borders. Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 12.

<sup>107</sup> Harff and Gurr (2004) p. 105.

<sup>108</sup> Keck and Sikkink (1998); Bayes, Jane H. and Tohidi, Nayereh (2001) Introduction. In Bayes, Jane H. and Tohidi, Nayereh (eds.) *Globalization, Gender and Religion. The Politics of Women’s Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*. New York: Palgrave.

<sup>109</sup> Della Porta and Kriesi (1999) p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> Della Porta and Kriesi (1999).



try to country depending on variations in the domestic structures of national contexts.<sup>111</sup>

Apart from the geo-strategic location of Azerbaijan mentioned above, the case in question provides other transnational associations. The most obvious is Islamic activism qua possible expression of support for Muslim causes globally. Militant religious movements have been receiving increasing global attention as a result of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. A widespread explanation for this among historians of the Middle East and researchers of Islam is that these attacks can be gauged as an all-Islamist backlash sparked by Western-led globalization processes.<sup>112</sup> Whether one agrees or not with this analysis evidence from conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan among other places seem to confirm that transnational Islamic activists are active outside the Middle East.<sup>113</sup> A general understanding in terrorism research is that globalization has made it easier not only for ideas and activists to travel, but for organized crime and corruption to spread as well, and in connection to underdevelopment, demographic pressures, and resource scarcity this has contributed to further instability in the developing world.<sup>114</sup>

On this note I conclude this first part of the theoretical review. In the checklist below follows the four aspects of mobilization discussed above, as well as my conceptualization of them. The main application of these concepts will be in Chapters 7–9 and 11 where they serve to guide the analysis, but they will occasionally appear in earlier discussions, as in those undertaken in Chapters 5 and 6.

Organizational aspects	Members, networks, social relationships, leaders, free spaces
Cognitive aspects	Collective identity, cognitive frames
Political aspects	Institutionalized political system, prevailing paradigm, path dependency
Extrinsic aspects	Direct involvement, international constraints, diffusion of ideas and activists

Figure 1 Checklist: social movement mobilization

<sup>111</sup> Risse-Kappen, Thomas (1994) Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War. *International Organizations* 48 (2): 185–214.

<sup>112</sup> Lewis, Bernard (1990) The Roots of Muslim Rage, *The Atlantic Monthly* September; Huntington, Samuel (1993) The Clash of Civilizations, *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3).

<sup>113</sup> Simon, Steven (2003) The New Terrorism, *The Brookings Review* 21 (1).

<sup>114</sup> Troy S. Thomas, Stephen D. Kiser, William D. Casebeer (2005) *Warlords Rising: Confronting Violent Non-State actors*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

From the discussion so far in this chapter, it follows that even though a social movement's mobilization to a large extent might be an internal process it is also likely to be influenced by the national (and international) context in which it takes place. Even though part of this influence might be perceived as rather static, taking the shape of government regulations and institutions, social movements cannot be expected to respond mechanically to existing conditions. Their different reactions might in turn be met by divergent responses. Consequently mobilization should also be understood as a reciprocal relationship between the movement and their opponents. In the next chapter I will further elaborate upon this interaction and its implications for the movement process.

### 3. Mobilization as a Reciprocal Relationship

In the previous chapter social movement mobilization was introduced as a multifaceted puzzle consisting of organizational, cognitive, political and extrinsic pieces. The understanding of mobilization does not however end there. As discussed earlier, the dynamics of a movement is shaped by opportunities and constraints in the political and institutional environment in which they exist. At the same time their actions contribute to shaping this national context. This interaction could be seen as a crucial aspect of the movements' mobilization process. The ambition of this chapter is to incorporate this reciprocal interaction into my theoretical framework. As in previous chapter this will be done by reviewing existing literature in the field, extracting important theoretical conceptions and adapting these to the case studies in hand.

#### The interaction context

The call for change in society represented by a social movement is likely to provoke some kind of reaction and response from the political establishment (and perhaps also from other groups in society). While earlier studies of political opportunities and movement mobilization appear to have been lacking when it comes to linking the context to the actual mobilization processes, more recent research often includes some framework to analyze the interaction between state and movement. In McAdam's political process model the aspects of mobilization discussed in the previous chapter are joined by another, "level of social control", highlighting "the reciprocal relationship that exists between the movement and its external environment".<sup>115</sup> On a similar note, Kriesi et al. present a model of social movement mobilization that includes an "interaction context" to capture this dynamic. They argue:

Once the mobilization process has been set in motion, the strategies adopted by the social movements will have a feedback effect on the strategies adopted by the authorities. An interactive system will be established with a dynamic of its own.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> McAdam (1999) p. 53–54.

This interaction context shares many similarities with the scheme used to explain the course or operation of social movements, as presented by Della Porta and Rucht. They choose to highlight the role of an interactive process between movements and an alliance system (major political actors and interest groups such as the unions) and a conflict system (opponents attempting to manipulate conditions to the detriment of social movements) in shaping movement behavior.<sup>117</sup>

Looking into the above mentioned frameworks it seems that two main factors are seen as influencing state-movement interaction: *the degree of threat* a movement is believed to pose to the state and the *state's strategies* towards this threat (movement).

## Movement types, strategies and tactics

Previous research indicates that it is the alleged level of threat a movement poses to official interests that decides how elite groups choose to respond to the movement's mobilization. How threatening a movement appears is to a large extent determined by its "type", i.e. what issues are focused upon as well as where and how they choose to pursue their goals.

Not only the tactics used, but also the character of the issues raised by a movement and who they are approaching with their activities is of importance for how the movement is perceived by the state. There are several types of movements and these differ in the way each reacts to the concrete opportunities found in a given political context. Dieter Rucht identifies two ideal types of movement strategies: power-oriented and identity-oriented. Power-oriented movements are characterized by instrumental reasoning where political influence and political confrontation are the most influential factors. Their actions include political participation, bargaining, pressure and confrontation. The identity-oriented strategy follows, according to Rucht, a much more expressive logic in which collective action and the identities it produces become ends in themselves. Their actions are more untraditional and aim at challenging the established culture through change in individual behavior and the development of a subculture or new lifestyles.<sup>118</sup>

However, Rucht's categorization does not stand unchallenged. Dahlerup, for example, believes it is wrong to define power strictly in terms of power

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<sup>116</sup> Kriesi et al (1995) p. xv.

<sup>117</sup> Della Porta and Rucht (1992). See also Boudreau, Vincent (2002) *State Repression and Democracy Protest in three Southeast Asian Countries*. In Meyer, David S., Belinda Robnett, Nancy Whittier (eds.) *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated for a discussion on the role of interaction in Mobilization.

<sup>118</sup> Rucht, Dieter (1990) *The Strategies and Action Repertoires of New Movements in Dalton, Russell J. and Manfred Kuechler (eds.) Challenging the Political Order. New Social and Political Movements in Western Democracies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

in the parliamentary arena. In her case-study, the Danish feminist group Rødstrømperne (the Red Stockings), it becomes clear that even though the group chose to stay out of party politics their activities still aimed at influencing the power relations in society, through changing what they viewed as dominating patriarchal power structures and patriarchal relations. Dahlerup has instead developed an alternative distinction between policy-oriented and social-cultural movements where the former direct their activities towards bringing about change in laws and legislative decisions, targeting, that is, formal political institutions, while the latter has its sights set on changing people's way of thinking and acting.<sup>119</sup>

This categorization of movements has also been used in the study of Islamic activism. Making a distinction similar to Dahlerup's, Yavuz's research on Turkey, for example, shows a difference between state-oriented Islamic movements that seek to take over what they see as an ill-functioning secular state and replacing it with an all-embracing religious ideology and society-oriented Islamic movements that instead aim for a bottom-up change in society.<sup>120</sup>

Similarly to McAdam, Kriesi et al link the character and agenda of a specific movement to the response it is likely to face from the authorities. Identity-oriented movements with an external confrontational attitude (counter-cultural movements) are in their mind most likely to be met with repression rather than facilitation. Furthermore, the issues promoted by counter-cultural movements are often considered to have no positive "value" for the authorities and therefore, says Kriesi et al., can repression against these groups be expected to be strong, even independent of their strategies. Identity-oriented movements that are internal in character and action (sub-cultural movements) are to the contrary categorized by a withdrawal from (external) political activity, particularly when the political context is a closed one. Therefore they normally represent no "threat" to the authorities and are therefore either ignored or appeased. The state's response to policy-oriented movements, aiming to change the existing political situation (referred to by Kriesi et al. as instrumental), varies depending on the more or less challenging political status of the issues raised by them.<sup>121</sup>

Another key issue which helps to determine the degree of threat to the authorities from a social movement is the movement's choice of state sanc-

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<sup>119</sup> Dahlerup, Drude (1998) *Rødstrømperne: den danske Rødstrømpebevægelses udvikling, nytænkning og gennemslag 1970–1985*. Bd 1. Copenhagen: Gyldendal and Dahlerup, Drude (2000) Continuity and waves in the Feminist Movement – a Challenge to Social Movement Theory. In Saarinen Aino, Christensen, Hilda Rømer and Beatrice Halsaa (eds.) *Women's Movement and Internationalisation: the Third Wave?* University of Oulo.

<sup>120</sup> Yavuz, M. Hakan (2004) Opportunity Spaces, Identity and Islamic Meaning in Turkey. In Wiktorowicz, Quentin (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

<sup>121</sup> Kriesi et al (1995).

tioned or non-sanctioned tactics. Non-sanctioned tactics, that is activities that take place outside the boundaries for political expression sanctioned by the state, are in this respect much more likely to be treated as a threat than the sanctioned ones that take place inside these parameters.<sup>122</sup> According to McAdam:

Even if used to pursue ‘radical goals’ /.../ [sanctioned tactics] implicitly convey an acceptance of the established “proper channels” of conflict resolution. Such tactics are, thus, viewed as non-threatening by elite groups both because they leave unchallenged the structural underpinnings of the political system and because it is within these ‘proper’ channels that the power disparity between members and challengers is greatest.<sup>123</sup>

Non-sanctioned tactics, on the other hand, are seen as ignoring established institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution and hence, McAdam writes, “deprive elite groups of their reverse to institutional power” and are as a result likely to appear threatening to the interests of the authorities.<sup>124</sup>

Trying to sum up the above discussion is difficult, as the degree of threat felt by the state from a particular social movement and the reaction chosen by the state seems to depend, in each particular case, on what combination of issues, strategies and tactics movement mobilization relies on. Some things can nevertheless be highlighted from the above discussions. The previous research reviewed above, by for example Rucht, Dahlerup, Kriesi, McAdam and Davenport, seem to indicate that movements using non-sanctioned tactics, movements with a high-profile political agenda and movements that have an external orientation are likely to be considered threatening by the state, hence it is likely to try and prevent their further mobilization. Movements using sanctioned tactics, pursuing non-political agendas and internally oriented are, to the contrary, expected to be considered less threatening and are as a result more likely to be “tolerated” by the state.

Even though one of the underlying assumptions of this thesis is that the national political context in transitional (non-democratic) countries such as Azerbaijan is more likely to be repressive than accommodating towards social movements, it should be noted that besides “tolerating” or “repressing” a social movement a state can also be facilitative towards a movement. However, in a non/partially-democratic context this is often done in order to strengthen the state’s own agenda making the concept of co-optation more appropriate. Boudreau gives an example of this from the Philippines, where he writes “Marcos never eliminated either protest or anti-regime organiza-

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<sup>122</sup> McAdam (1999); Davenport, Christian (ed.) (2000) *Paths to State Repression. Human rights Violations and Contentious Politics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>123</sup> McAdam (1999) p. 57.

<sup>124</sup> McAdam (1999) p. 57.

tion but sought to divide moderates from communist insurgents by co-opting the former and squashing the latter”.<sup>125</sup>

Based on the above discussions I have tried to compile two models to be applied in Chapter 10’s analysis of state–movement interaction and its dynamics in Azerbaijan. My empirical study will show to what extent the internal logic of these models are relevant also for the cases of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan.

MOVEMENT TYPE	STRATEGY	TACTICS	STATE ACTION
<i>Policy-oriented:</i> wants to see changes in laws and decisions pertaining to political institutions	<i>Non-sanctioned tactics:</i> approaching the state outside the sanctioned arena	<i>External:</i> displays a confrontational attitude towards the state	<i>Intolerance:</i> views the movement as a threat
	<i>Sanctioned tactics:</i> using “established channels” for interaction with the state	<i>Internal:</i> prefers withdrawal from (external) political activity	<i>Tolerance:</i> does not view the movement as a major threat and ignores it  <i>Co-option:</i> facilitates a movement’s mobilization in order to gain its support
<i>Social-cultural:</i> wants change in people’s way of thinking and acting	<i>Non-sanctioned tactics</i>	<i>External</i>	<i>Intolerance</i>
	<i>Sanctioned tactics</i>	<i>Internal</i>	<i>Tolerance</i>  <i>Co-option</i>

Figure 2 The interaction context: movement character and state approach

It must also be kept in mind that the above outlined models are ideal-types. They are compiled by a combination of theoretical findings in previous literature trying to figure out what movements would appear most threatening to a state and the type of action the state is likely to pursue. Hence, they do

<sup>125</sup> Boudreau (2002) p. 31.

not necessarily correspond to any actual social movement. Some combination of the above models might even appear counterintuitive, given that for example studies of social-cultural movements often show that the tactics they use are most often non-sanctioned. Also, it is doubtful that the strategy of a policy-oriented movement will ever be internal as their very purpose is to challenge the political status quo. This can, naturally, take place in a more or less confrontational way.

Additionally, as pointed out by Dahlerup, there is always the possibility that a movement's general orientation includes for example both policy and social-cultural features. Similarly the movement "type" is not constant and very well might change over time. Moreover, an overall movement as well as other movements, often includes many groups of various kinds.<sup>126</sup> There might also be a difference between the less visible everyday activities of a movement and the more spectacular activities that studies of social movements are most often concerned with.<sup>127</sup> Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge that other accidental factors might influence how the state chooses to react in a specific situation as well.<sup>128</sup>

## Repression and mobilization

In most cases the social movement mobilization that is highlighted by mass media and thus made visible to the more general public is the one whose activities are characterized by a high degree of publicity and which in many cases uses violence or the threat of it to achieve its goals. Still, violence has become a rarer form of protest in contemporary democracies, although it is clear that it continues to be a common feature of social movement mobilization in many non-democratic regimes.<sup>129</sup> This is noticeable in many case studies of Islamic activism. According to Hafez, for example, "Islamist rebellions are often defensive reactions to overly repressive regimes that misapply their repression in ways that radicalize, rather than deter movement activists and supporters".<sup>130</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1's introduction, the mobilization of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan seems rather "soft" in comparison, for at the time of writing it had not turned violent, despite the repressive political context in which it took place. If looking to other countries in the post-Soviet region (such as Russia/North Caucasus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) violence has been a major feature in the groups' activities, giving the mobilization a rather "hard" character. To understand this diversity it needs to be acknowledged that repression can take many shapes and can also

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<sup>126</sup> Dahlerup (1998).

<sup>127</sup> Rucht (1990).

<sup>128</sup> Kriesi et al (1995).

<sup>129</sup> See for example: Tarrow (1994); Melucci (1995).

<sup>130</sup> Hafez (2003) p. 71.



influence mobilization in various ways. The closing theme of my analytical framework will therefore identify various aspects of repression and how these contribute to giving the groups' mobilization a "soft" or "hard" character.<sup>131</sup>

## Hard and soft repression

Most researchers seem to agree that repression does influence the mobilization process. However, there is very little theoretical agreement on how repression correlates with group mobilization. Whereas some observers maintain that repression increases the cost of collective action and thereby discourages it, others state that repression motivates further mobilization through providing additional grievances. As a result as pointed out by Hafez and Wiktorowicz, there are enough empirical studies that provide evidence for both these and other perspectives.<sup>132</sup> This, first of all, indicates that there are many aspects of repression that need to be taken into account and, secondly, it suggests a more diverse analysis of repression is needed in order to establish its interaction with mobilization. In their words:

These studies suggest that there are many dimensions to repression, each generating variables that could explain different outcomes. Therefore, rather than hypothesize the effect of repression per se, it is more useful to clarify some of the dimensions of repression and how they encourage or deter violent movement strategies.<sup>133</sup>

A natural starting point for searching out useful dimensions of repression as an analytical category is a discussion about what repression is. To a certain extent it seems that much of previous research use Tilly's 1978 definition of repression. According to this repression is defined as "any action by another group which raises the contender's cost of collective action".<sup>134</sup> However, most definitions tend to then get slightly more specific (also Tilly's own later versions) identifying the state as the oppressor.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, repres-

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<sup>131</sup> I have borrowed the conceptions of hard and soft Mobilizations from Davenport that uses these to present a figure of revisited and modified linkages between Repression and Mobilization in his introduction to the 2005 book *Repression and Mobilization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. xxvii.

<sup>132</sup> Hafez, Mohammed M. and Wiktorowicz, Quentin (2004) Violence as Contention in the Egyptian Islamic Movement. In Wiktorowicz, Quentin (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. For more discussions on the diversity of observations in this regard see for example, Tarrow (1994); Davenport (2005); Earl, Jennifer (2006) Introduction: Repression and the Social Control of Protest. *Mobilization: An International Journal* 11 (2): 129–143.

<sup>133</sup> Hafez and Wiktorowicz (2004) p. 67.

<sup>134</sup> Tilly (1978) p. 55.

<sup>135</sup> See for example Tilly, Charles (2005) Repression, Mobilization, and Explanation. In Davenport, Christan, Johnston, Hank and Carol Mueller (eds.) *Repression and Mobilization*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press. p. 218; Davenport (1995) p. 683.

sion is traditionally understood as physical hindering of a movement by a state – exemplified, for example, by McPhail and McCarthy describing repression as a scale where “the use of deadly direct force” marks the most severe end, followed by “less-than-deadly direct force”, and finally the “use of restraint in the form of cordons and barricades, then apprehension of challengers before or during protest events, followed by arrest, arraignment, and incarceration”.<sup>136</sup>

At the same time there is a growing call in social movement research for a broader understanding of repression, incorporating non-physical methods as well as other actors besides the state. In a special issue of the journal *Mobilization*, focusing on repression, Linden and Klandermans, for example, write that “to be sure, much repression is state repression, /.../but not all repression is state repression. Repression is a far more complex process in which not only the state, but also mass media, counter-movements, civil society, and individual citizens are involved”.<sup>137</sup> In the introduction to the same issue Earl even argues that “the concept of repression is a theoretical blinder”. In order to capture the heterogeneity of this phenomenon she instead suggests a “change to the language researchers use in thinking and writing about such dynamics by focusing on ‘the social control of protest,’ or more succinctly, ‘protest control,’ instead of ‘repression.’”<sup>138</sup>

Much of this debate can be attributed to Ferree that has been developing the concept “soft repression” to analyze methods used to silence or eradicate the ideas behind social movement opposition. According to Ferree soft repression is used to prevent, block and silence social movement mobilization at the micro, meso and macro level. This repression is, at the micro level, directed at individuals and groups by rival groups during face to face interaction. As an example she points to the use of expressions like “queers” and “fags” being used for ridicule already on an elementary school level. At the meso level, being connected to a certain group is considered discrediting because that is how the group as a whole is viewed. At the macro level, certain groups in society face soft repression by dint of being blocked from public access. This is most often done by prohibiting the use of mass media qua channel for voicing dissent.<sup>139</sup> Even though the examples differ the un-

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<sup>136</sup> McPhail, Clark and John D. McCarthy (2005) Protest Mobilization, Protest Repression, and their Interaction. In Davenport, Christan, Johnston, Hank and Carol Mueller (eds.) *Repression and Mobilization*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press. For further discussion on how repression has become to be understood as violent and state-caused see Earl (2006).

<sup>137</sup> Linden, Annette and Klandermans, Bert (2006) Stigmatization and Repression of Extreme-right Activism in the Netherlands. *Mobilization: An International Journal* 11 (2): 213–228, p. 213.

<sup>138</sup> Earl (2006) p. 129f.

<sup>139</sup> Ferree, Myra Marx (2005) Soft Repression: Ridicule, Stigma, and Silencing in Gender-based Movements. In Davenport, Christan, Johnston, Hank and Carol Mueller (eds.) *Repression and Mobilization*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

derstanding of soft repression can be said to resemble Galtung's and Wiberg's work on direct and structural violence in society.<sup>140</sup>

In Ferree's work she finds that soft repression is specifically directed against movements' collective identities and ideas that support "cognitive liberation" or "oppositional consciousnesses".<sup>141</sup> She is also arguing that "new social movements", like, in her case, the women's movement, which promote change by targeting civil society rather than the state, are also more likely to be met by soft repression, but by the former rather than by the latter. In principle, however, she writes that any agent can use both soft and hard repression.<sup>142</sup>

According to Davenport soft repression is more likely to be frequently used within democratic regimes that, according to him, "attempt to constrain the presence of overt state activity while facilitating non-state behavior."<sup>143</sup> Still, work by Rosefsky Wickham shows this is not always the case. Her account of strategies of authoritarian regimes include both "hard" and "soft" repression, such as disabling of potential agents of mobilization (banning, harassment, arrest, imprisonment, exile, torture, execution of group members considered dangerous), disabling potential sites of mobilization (denying a movement access to public spaces, censoring its publications, and/or prohibiting it from raising funds and providing services) as well as co-opting targets of mobilization (using state-controlled media, schools, and religious institutions, the state tries to cultivate support for official policy while simultaneously discrediting the opposition groups).<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> See for example: Galtung, Johan (1985) Twenty-Five Years of Peace Research: Ten Challenges and Some Responses. *Journal of Peace Research* 22 (2): 141-158; Wiberg, Håkan (1981) What Have We Learnt About Peace? *Journal of Peace Research* 18 (2): 111-148.

<sup>141</sup> Ferree (2005) p. 141.

<sup>142</sup> Ferree (2005) pp. 142ff. As much as I agree with the concerns raised by Earl, Linden and Klandermans and others about the need to widen the theoretical understanding of who the actors of repression are this thesis nevertheless chooses to focus on the state as the main oppressor in so far as the interaction between state and movement in this context appears to be critical for the movements mobilization. I can also relate to the need of using another concept instead of repression expressed by Earl, but in this context I believe it to be sufficient to make sure that both "soft" and "hard" aspects of repression are taken into account.

<sup>143</sup> Davenport (2005) p. xxiii.

<sup>144</sup> Rosefsky Wickham (2002) p. 10.

Furthermore, in their analysis of the Dutch extreme right, Linden and Klandermans conclude that soft and hard repression reinforce one another. According to them:

Soft repression — in the form of ridicule, stigmatization, or silence — prepares the ground for hard repression. In a situation where large proportions of the population despise the activists of a movement, the state can afford to harshly repress that movement.<sup>145</sup>

### Hard and soft mobilization

It seems that the categorization of repression as hard and soft can also be useful when examining the relationship between the style of repression and the type of group mobilization. Della Porta's study of left-wing movements in Germany and Italy for example indicates that "softer repression" seems to result in "softer mobilization". Her research shows that these groups' resorting to violent behavior was a result of the interaction between protesters' tactics and policing. She points to two types of police strategies. "Tolerant, selective, 'soft' style policing" that as far as possible avoided "coercive means" resulted in lower levels of radicalization than the police's "frequent use of coercive means or even illegal methods".<sup>146</sup> At the same time she notes that radicalization is something that develops gradually and unconsciously through repeated clashes with police and political adversaries. The resort to political violence, according to her, is a result of the negative escalating interaction between those involved.<sup>147</sup>

Yet other studies show that repression is believed to provoke violence but only as long as it is not excessive. Moderate repression used by political authorities is according to this line of reasoning expected to increase the likelihood of the challengers to respond with open rebellion. Extremely harsh repression is to the contrary expected to discourage opposition either because groups cannot organize open resistance or because they fear the consequences of doing so.<sup>148</sup> At the same time as the state's use of force might appear "successful" in the sense that it managed to discourage mass protest, it is also possible that state authorities are facing a hidden challenge by underground movements pursuing terrorism or guerilla warfare.<sup>149</sup> The hard repression, often seen as illegitimate, could also serve to encourage more militant parts of the movement to take action.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Linden and Klandermans (2006) p. 226.

<sup>146</sup> Della Porta and Diani (2006) p. 198.

<sup>147</sup> Della Porta and Diani (2006).

<sup>148</sup> Harff & Gurr (2004) p. 105.

<sup>149</sup> Harff & Gurr (2004) or Mueller, Edward N. (1985) Income Inequality, Regime Repressiveness, and Political Violence *American Sociological Review* 50 (1): 47–61.

<sup>150</sup> Della Porta (1995); Della Porta and Diani (2006); Tarrow (1994).

Moreover, in Della Porta's model she differentiates between repression that seeks to control all demonstrators and that which focuses just on those "possibly guilty of an offence". In this case her research shows that selective repression (that is also often "hard") is less likely to provoke a radicalization than one which includes all protesters.<sup>151</sup> Also Hafez and Wiktorowicz have focused on timing and targeting of repression. In their categorization pre-emptive repression takes place before the movement has had the chance to mobilize and organize supporters around a common goal while reactive repression occurs after activists have been able to gather their forces. Of these two, pre-emptive repression is believed to deter violent movement strategies as it stops it before it has taken its final shape. Reactive repression on the other hand will face strong resistance, often violent, as the wider support is already gained and, furthermore, activists want to make sure that they do not lose resources that have already been mobilized. Selective repression targets only leaders and core activists. This is also believed to deter violent contention as it indicates that only "trouble makers" will be punished, which makes others, less involved, stay away. Indiscriminate repression targets general sympathizers and ordinary citizens suspected of involvement as well, something that is likely to increase moral outrage and provoke a violent response. According to Hafez and Wiktorowicz reactive and indiscriminate types of repression are the kind most likely to trigger "hard" mobilization, which is a violent movement response.<sup>152</sup>

Even though the "soft" repression of a movement does not result in a radicalization of its methods, the interaction between the state and a movement will most probably still influence the mobilization process in some ways, not always visible to those outside the movement. One such influence seems to be that soft mobilization, by reinforcing collective identity, is likely to strengthen the cognitive aspects of a group's mobilization process. Repression influences mobilization because it forces group members to rethink the frame that influenced them or — might bring them — to take action in the first place. As noted by Paltemaa and Vuori in their study of protest movements in China:

/.../once soft repression begins it becomes the natural focus of refutation and thereby protest legitimization. It forces the activists to talk about their own protest/movement and its goals among themselves and to their audiences in terms that will, it is hoped, render the repression ineffective as well as mobilizing popular support and giving the protest a sense of common cause.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Della Porta and Diani (2006).

<sup>152</sup> Hafez and Wiktorowicz (2004).

<sup>153</sup> Paltemaa, Lauri and Vuori, Juha (2006) How Cheap is Identity Talk? — A Framework of Identity Frames and Security Discourse for the Analysis of Repression and Legitimization of Social Movements in mainland China. *Issues & Studies*© 42 (3): 42–86, p.53.

Repression of a group might also convince them that they are “doing the right thing”, hence strengthening their collective identity.<sup>154</sup> This effect is of course not limited to soft repression, but could also be a result of hard repression or a combination of the two.

Repression, both soft and hard, is used to limit a group’s access to the public arena. As mentioned above this could generate underground “hard” mobilization in terms of terrorism or guerilla warfare, but as noted by Johnston also “soft” mobilization can take place in spaces that are hidden from the eye of the public. This mobilization can sometimes be very limited in scale and might not even be noticeable to those who do not know what they are looking for. In his research on what he refers to as oppositional speech acts, Johnston focuses on “talk as political resistance”. According to him:

The typical topics of oppositional speech acts include criticisms and complaints about the ruling party, leaders, and state; ideological debate about society and the economy; discussion of emigration; discussion of world events and open societies; ethnic-national issues; the secret police and repression; nonofficial, non-propagandized information about contemporary society or historical events. Also, in the absence of open media, oppositional speech situations provide communicative channels whereby information not available in the official media is disseminated.<sup>155</sup>

It is in an authoritarian regime, where political opportunities are severely restricted and any critique or comment about the political status quo could result in interrogation, harassment, arrest or imprisonment, that speech acts become an important analytical category. When the options are limited and the risks high it is the talking about opposition that becomes the actual contentious action. As pointed out by Johnston, “a speech act is what one does when speaking rather than what one says”.<sup>156</sup> If the political situation improves, and the political opportunities increase, the opposition will be able to do more than talking about protesting. To again paraphrase Johnston, there will be “less talk and more walk”.<sup>157</sup>

To conclude, based on the works of Della Porta, Wiktorowicz, Hafez and others from the theoretical discussion above, the figure below outlines two “ideal types” of the interaction between state repression and mobilization character. In this model repression is featured by its general character (soft or hard), timing (pre-emptive or reactive) and its targeting (selective or indiscriminate) and mobilization by its character (soft or hard) and degree of transparency (overt or covert). The concepts from this model be present in

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<sup>154</sup> Davenport (2005).

<sup>155</sup> Johnston (2005) p. 114f and Johnston, Hank (2006) “Lets get Small”: The Dynamics of (Small) Contention in Repressive States. *Mobilization: An International Journal* 11(2), p. 199.

<sup>156</sup> Johnston (2005) pp. 108f.

<sup>157</sup> Johnston (2005) p. 131.

the discussion in Chapter 9 as well as in Chapter 12, which contains a regional outlook and compares movement mobilization in the Azerbaijani national context with that in three other areas of the post-Soviet region.

It is again important to note that, for the sake of simplicity, this framework of analysis relying on the concept of repression is based on ideal-type models. As noted by, for instance, Linden and Klandermans above, repression is not necessarily limited to one type of behavior, but is rather a set of restrictive measures imposed by the authorities. These could feature both hard and soft features.<sup>158</sup> Additionally, repression can neither be expected to appear similarly in all situations nor is the level of repression likely to stay constant. Authoritarian regimes differ from time to time as well as from context to context in their propensity and capacity to restrict oppositional activity, hence repression varies and so does the movement's reaction to it.<sup>159</sup>

REPRESSION	TIMING OF REPRESSION	TARGETING OF REPRESSION	MOBILIZATION
<i>Soft</i> : non-violent, often highly informal ways, to silence the ideas behind the opposition	<i>Pre-emptive</i> : takes place before the movement mobilizes around a common goal	<i>Selective</i> : targets only leaders and core activists	<i>Soft</i> : looks to achieve goals without the use of force  <i>Covert</i> : taking place in private, "free" spaces  <i>Overt</i> : activities carried out in the public arena
<i>Hard</i> : direct use of force against challengers	<i>Reactive</i> : occurs after the activists have been able to gather their forces	<i>Indiscriminate</i> : targets general sympathizers and ordinary citizens suspected of involvement	<i>Hard</i> : employs the use of force or the threat of force to achieve its goals
			<i>Overt</i>
			<i>Soft</i>
			<i>Covert</i>

Figure 3 Repression and mobilization character

<sup>158</sup> Linden and Klandermans (2006).

<sup>159</sup> Rosefsky Wickham (2002).

## Change and continuity

A final comment on the theoretical framework considers how time will be dealt with in the analysis. Even though not per se included in the framework, notions of change and continuity are certainly of great importance for my research. In the words of McAdam “/.../social insurgency is shaped by broad social processes that usually operate over a longer period of time”.<sup>160</sup> In my case I do not expect these processes to be turbulent or dramatic. As the notion of “interaction contexts” shows, one of the main underlying ideas of this thesis is rather that social movements develop as a result of an ongoing process of interaction between movement and the larger sociopolitical environment they seek to change. Their development is in turn expected to generate certain dynamics that over time might modify the existing social structures and create new political opportunities and/or constraints. This means of course that none of the aspects of social movement mobilization outlined in this and the previous chapter can be seen as constant. Since the vast majority of my fieldwork was conducted in 2004 and 2005 this period will be the main focus even though to some extent the study starts at the demise of the Soviet Union, or even before. As for the contents and the scope of this above mentioned fieldwork I will return to this shortly in the next chapter, which focuses on the methods and methodology of my research.

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<sup>160</sup> McAdam (1999) p. 41.



## 4. The Research Process

This chapter will discuss the research process of this thesis work. This will be done in three steps. First I will outline the logic behind the selection of cases as well as the context of the study. Second a discussion on the kind of knowledge my research generates will follow. Finally this chapter describes how my work was carried out in practice and touches upon certain problems and insights in this respect.

### Research design

#### Azerbaijan as a “critical case context”

As already mentioned in the introduction, to study the mobilization of Islamic groups in the Azerbaijani context has both empirical and theoretical benefits. First, Azerbaijan described as “the most secular Muslim post-Soviet country”, was a country where nobody expected to see the rise of an Islamic movement.<sup>161</sup> Hence empirically it is particularly interesting to see how this has come about and what this can teach us about mobilization in the Azerbaijani context as well as, more generally, mobilization in a post-Soviet context. Second, theoretically, the Azerbaijani context is interesting because it is lacking in the democratic aspect. As social movement theory is most often applied to the study of movement mobilization in democratic political contexts, the focus on Azerbaijan contributes to a deeper understanding of the circumstances that facilitate mobilization in non-democratic ones.

This reasoning could to some extent be related to what the research literature calls the study of “critical”, “deviant” or “outlier” cases. According to this way of thinking, these are cases that challenge existing theory and can

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<sup>161</sup> Tohidi, Nayerheh (2000) Gender and National Identity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: A Regional Perspective. In Acar, Feride and Günes-Ayata, Ayşe (eds.) *Gender and Identity Construction. Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Turkey*. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill. p. 249; Dragadze, Tamara (1994) Islam in Azerbaijan: The Position of Women. In El-Solh, Camilla Fawzi and Mabro, Judy, *Muslim Women's Choices. Religious Belief and Social Reality*. Providence, Oxford: Berg. p. 152, 161.

provide an outcome unlike what is expected from traditional theory.<sup>162</sup> In this process new theoretical aspects can be discovered and existing conceptual frameworks reformulated by the new or redefined hypotheses.<sup>163</sup> However, as noted above, in my study it is the Azerbaijani context rather than the actual cases of Islamic activism that could be considered “critical” to the extent that it is empirically unexpected and theoretically understudied.

### The selection of cases

Because of the lack of available sources (see below), I first arrived to Azerbaijan not particularly sure where to put the emphasis of my study. In one of my initial interviews, however, a representative of the State Committee of Azerbaijan Republic for the Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) identified two main currents of religious activity as potential threats to the state. He referred to these as “Wahhabis”, and “radical Shi’ites”.<sup>164</sup> My further research indicated that in practice these two categories correlated mainly to two Islamic communities in the capital Baku, the Shi’ite Juma and the Sunni Abu Bakr mosque communities. I will introduce these more closely in Chapter 5, but for now I will comment a bit on what makes them interesting and relevant cases for this study.

The mobilization of these two particular communities is interesting in several aspects. Initially it was the attention it was receiving in media, research and conversations (both in negative and positive terms), both nationally and internationally that indicated to me that this was something rather unique in the Azerbaijani context. As it turned out, the mobilization of these mosques has shown to provide compelling material for comparison as they represent two very different types of movements, not only because one is Shi’a and one Sunni, but also since one is more liberal in its religious outlook while the other manifests more conservative religious views. Furthermore, the communities’ rising popularity, especially among the younger population, distinguishes them from other Muslim communities in the country. Additionally, as these communities through their rhetoric chose to distance themselves from other “traditional”, state-sponsored mosques, they can also be seen as standing for something new in society. Their communities seem to me to represent “more” than just a mosque, thus I feel that studying

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<sup>162</sup> Lijphart, Arend (1971) Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method. *The American Political Science Review* 65 (3): 682-93.

<sup>163</sup> Lijphart (1971).

<sup>164</sup> Representative of State Committee of Azerbaijan Republic for the Work with Religious Associations, Baku, April 22 2004. He also mentioned a third group – “secret radicals”. These were described as pro-Turkish groups that do not plan a future war, but in principle are not against engaging in politics. He concluded however that they now have a too weak base to allow this and this is why they are spreading secretly. The activities of these Turkish movements will not be a main focus of this study, but they will be discussed in Chapter 11 that discusses extrinsic aspects of the mobilization process.

their mobilization through the lens of social movement theory is warranted. As for further theoretical justification, if returning to the definition of a social movement provided by Della Porta and Diani as well as Tarrow (see Chapter 2), in the mobilization of these mosque communities I see 1) *a distinct social process* through which (mainly) young people actively choose to break with the Soviet approach to religion and engage themselves in the *collective activity* of these mosque communities. Further this collective activity is characterized by its 2) *conflictual relations* with those who oppose the religious independence of these communities. The members of the respective mosque communities are certainly linked by 3) *dense informal networks* and share a 4) *distinctive collective identity*. In the more analytical parts of this work I will get back to all these aspects as elements of the mobilization process.

## The case study method and “structured focused comparison”

“The type of study most frequently made in the field [of political science] is the intensive study of individual cases”, Eckstein points out.<sup>165</sup> Despite their frequent use case studies are interestingly enough often seen as a “weak method” in the political science field. Case study’s antagonists find it impossible to generalize findings from such a small number of cases (in many instances just one case); hence this method is considered non-theoretical.<sup>166</sup> This criticism is, of course, in a way justified. At the same time, expecting case studies to be comparable to statistical analysis of a large number of cases (so-called “large N studies”) is applying the wrong “lens” to them, granted that most case-oriented research has empirical, theoretical and methodological ambitions that differ widely from theirs. Uhlin has successfully captured this dichotomy when he describes the epistemological differences between “a positivist ideal aiming at explanations, and a hermeneutic ideal aiming at understanding”. While the former is interested in the question why and tries to find general patterns and universal knowledge, the latter focuses on the question how and seeks to make sense of the particular.<sup>167</sup> This evidently means that the case study primarily becomes a tool to advance knowledge of specific cases which, however, does not mean that case studies are

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<sup>165</sup> Eckstein, Harry (1975) Case Study and Theory in Political Science in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (eds.) *Handbook of Political Science*. Volume 7. Reading: Addison-Wesley, pp. 79f.

<sup>166</sup> See King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane and Verba, Sidney (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, for an outline of this criticism.

<sup>167</sup> Uhlin, Anders (1995) *Democracy and Diffusion: Transnational Lesson-drawing among Indonesian Pro-Democracy Actors*. Lund: Lund University Press, pp. 3f.

atheoretical.<sup>168</sup> Quite the opposite, researchers like Eckstein, George and Bennett, Lijphart, Ragin and van Evera have argued that case studies can indeed make an important theoretical contribution in political science.<sup>169</sup> highlight a number of areas such as conceptual clarification, theory generation and studying causal complexity, where the case study method in their view has proven highly useful.<sup>170</sup> In the same spirit Tilly writes that instead of broad analogies the strength of studies of particular empirical cases is that they concentrate on mechanisms and processes to explain a certain phenomenon.<sup>171</sup> In this respect case studies can be said to generate certain “contextual generalizations or hypotheses”, which, in the words of Uhlin, “may serve as a point of departure for further research on a different empirical context”.<sup>172</sup>

I would say that my study falls under the hermeneutic research ideal discussed above, as my general aim and research methods do not allow for the generation of general patterns or universal knowledge. For example, in this study the consolidation of collective identities is seen as an important aspect of the mobilization of Islamic movements. This is clearly a multi-dimensional, contextual phenomenon that is ongoing and difficult, if not impossible, to recreate. To quote Petersson, when studying identity questions we as researchers “can only do our best to illuminate certain parts of this process”.<sup>173</sup> Nonetheless in the spirit of George and Bennett and others I argue that even though my findings will be generated from the specific Azerbaijani context some of them might be relevant for the same category of cases, especially those that share some of the empirical characteristics of Azerbaijan, such as the post-Soviet or only partially democratized contexts. In order for a case study to have this theoretical ambition George and Bennett consider that it needs to be focused on a “case of something”, that is a phenomenon that allows for theoretical study. Then, theory should be used for deciding what aspects of a case should be emphasized. Its analysis also

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<sup>168</sup> Gerring, John (2007) *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press; Collier, David (1993) *The Comparative Method*. In Finifer A.W. (ed.) *Political Science the State of the discipline*. Washington DC: APSA.

<sup>169</sup> See for example: Eckstein (1975); George Alexander L. and Andrew Bennett (2005) *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge & London: MIT Press; Lijphart (1971); Ragin, Charles C. (1994) *Introduction to Qualitative Comparative Analysis*. In Janoski, T. and Hicks, A. (eds.) *The Comparative Political Economy of the Welfare State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Van Evera, Stephan (1997) *What are Case Studies and How Should They be Performed?* In Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University press.

<sup>170</sup> George and Bennett (2005).

<sup>171</sup> Tilly, Charles (2004) Foreword. In Wiktorowicz, Quentin (ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

<sup>172</sup> Uhlin (1995) p. 5.

<sup>173</sup> See Petersson, Bo (2003) *Intervjubarade studier av kollektiva identiteter* in Petersson, Bo and Robertson, Alexa (eds.) *Identitetsstudier i praktiken*. Malmö: Liber Ekonomi, p. 38 for a discussion about this problem.

needs to be guided by general questions that reflect the research objective and the selective theoretical focus of the study. George and Bennett refer to this as the method of “structured focused comparison”.<sup>174</sup> This captures much of the way I have related to theory in this thesis. Even though my main ambition is to highlight mobilization of Islamic movements in the specific Azerbaijani context, the aims and questions of the study are formulated as a result of theoretical considerations. Also the analysis is theory-dependent as it is guided by an analytical framework which focuses on certain aspects of the mobilization process extracted from social movement theory. To again paraphrase Uhlin, I am using theory as “an instrument for highlighting certain aspects rather than determining relations between ‘factors’”.<sup>175</sup> Even though this makes my study “consume” existing, as opposed to developing, new theories I do not expect the contents and functions of all theoretical concepts derived from social movement theory to stay the same when applied to the Azerbaijani post-Soviet context. As these theoretical viewpoints, to a large extent, as discussed before, have been mainly developed in a Western context, certain concepts are redefined and given new meaning. In this respect the present work can help to widen this theoretical perspective.

## Research methods

For the purpose of this study I conducted fieldtrips to Azerbaijan in April–May 2004, May 2005 and September 2005. The trips were between two months and two weeks long and during my journeys I spent most of the time in the capital city Baku, but I also took smaller trips to visit, for example, mosques and shrines on the Absheron Peninsula and in the Shemakha region. My initial work included establishing contacts, interviewing local scholars with special insight in the field and the region, meeting with NGO representatives, journalists, students and others to build impressions of the situation as well as to gather written material. During this time I also established useful contacts and was able to pit academic accounts against the view from the field. Later on I conducted interviews with government officials, religious authorities, Imams and groups of male and female visitors to the mosques in question as well as other religious figures in order to get a more detailed insight into the religious situation. These interviews are the main source of information used in this thesis. At the same time I would like to point out that I only see these interviews as one part, however paramount, of my fieldwork. Besides having the possibility of conducting interviews, fieldwork also provides the very valuable opportunity to observe the situation yourself and get a feeling for what is going on *in situ*. In anthropological

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<sup>174</sup> George and Bennett (2005).

<sup>175</sup> Uhlin (1995) p. 4.

research, where this is more systematically applied, it is known as participant-observation. Even though I did not deliberately pursue this method I did from time to time end up in comparable situations. To quote Hammersley and Atkinson: “there is a sense in which all social research is participant observation: it involves participating in the social world, in whatever role and reflecting on the products of that participation.”<sup>176</sup> This could for example be when I was “hanging around” outside the Abu Bakr mosques in Baku just to confirm the large number of visitors I had been told frequented it, especially during Friday prayer.

Initially my study was conceived as a comparative study of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, highlighting differences between these two cases. Therefore my fieldwork also included two trips to Uzbekistan. As in Azerbaijan, I met with local scholars, representatives of international organizations, journalists, students and others. I also interviewed government officials and spokespersons for the religious authority. However, while in Azerbaijan I had plenty of possibilities to visit mosques and talk to Imams and believers this proved much more difficult in Uzbekistan. Because of the government’s furious hunt of “radical Islamists”, mosque attendance and Islamic belief have become very sensitive topics about which many people do not want to speak openly. As a result the material I managed to access in Uzbekistan was simply not comparable. Consequently I decided to focus my analysis solely on Azerbaijan, yet to use my tentative findings on Uzbekistan in the sections where insights emerging from my study of Azerbaijan are related to a wider post-Soviet context.

## Finding the sources

As mentioned in the introduction, Azerbaijan is, in my mind, an understudied country. Many anthologies about the post-Soviet region have a chapter on the political situation in Azerbaijan. Still, in general relatively few academic studies published in English have Azerbaijan as their sole focus. Books by Swietochowski (1995, 2004) and Altstadt (1992) being some of the exceptions.<sup>177</sup> Consequently sources concentrating more specifically on issues surrounding Islam in Azerbaijan are even harder to come by. One of the few books (or possibly the only) book published in English on this topic was written by Yunusov (2005).<sup>178</sup> Unfortunately the poor translation from the Russian original makes a difficult read.

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<sup>176</sup> Hammersley, Martin & Paul Atkinson (2007) *Ethnography*. Third edition. London: Routledge, p. 15.

<sup>177</sup> Swietochowski, Tadeus (1995) *Russia and Azerbaijan. A Borderland in Transition*. New York: Columbia University Press; Swietochowski, Tadeus (2004) *Russian Azerbaijan 1905–1920. The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community*. First paperback edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>178</sup> Yunusov, Arif (2004) *Islam v Azerbaydzyane*. Baku: Zaman.

Some articles on Islam in Azerbaijan were available in Russian in the late 1990s and early 2000s, by, for example, Polonski (1999) and Abbasov (2001).<sup>179</sup> In English, articles by Motika (2001)<sup>180</sup>, Anar and Yusuf Valiyev (2003)<sup>181</sup> and Balci (2004) seem to have been the first to address this topic.<sup>182</sup> Later articles by Anar Valiyev on topics connected to Islamic radicalism in Azerbaijan have been published quite extensively, especially in the journal *Terrorism Monitor*.<sup>183</sup> Among later published material, reports by International Crisis Group (2008)<sup>184</sup>, OSCE (2006)<sup>185</sup> and the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program<sup>186</sup> are worth mentioning.

The lack of pre-existing literature made gathering information “on location” essential. However, out of respect for the believers it is difficult to just walk in to a mosque and start asking questions. Also, because of their episodically tense relationship to the state, many visitors to the Abu Bakr and Juma mosques felt forced, or simply preferred, to keep a rather low profile, which in some cases made gaining access to them rather complicated. These factors made the initial selection of sources not so much based on choice but rather on luck, something Norman Blaikie has referred to as *snowball sampling*. The name refers to the “analogy /.../ of a snowball growing in size as it is rolled in snow”. This is a method used when sources are hard to identify. Through the initial finding of contact persons, these can hopefully provide information that leads you to an expanded number of people.<sup>187</sup> In my case such first contacts came mainly from local journalists or researchers that had personal and professional contacts they were willing to share. In both cases I began by talking to the Imam of the mosque that in most cases organized further meetings.

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<sup>179</sup> Abbasov, Ali (2001) Islam v Sovremennom Azerbaydzhanе: Obraziy i Realii. In D.E. Furman (ed.) *Azerbydzhan i Rossiya: Obshchestvo i Gosudarstvo*, Moscow: Letnii sad; Polonski, Andrei (1999) Islam v Kontekste Oshestvennoy Zhizni Sovremennovo Azerbaydzhana. *Istoriya* 28.

<sup>180</sup> Motika, Raol, (2001a) Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan. *Archive de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 115: 111–124.

<sup>181</sup> Valiyev Anar & Valiyev, Yusif (2003) Islam in Azerbaijan. *Caspian Brief* 30: 1-11 This is one of the earliest articles in English, but some of its content can be found in the earlier articles by Polonski and Abbasov (in Russian), even though these are not referred to as sources.

<sup>182</sup> Balci, Bayram (2004) Between Sunnism and Shiism: Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan. *Central Asian Survey* 23(2): 205–217.

<sup>183</sup> See for example Valiyev, Anar (2005a) Azerbaijan: Islam in a Post-Soviet Context, *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9 (4): 1-13, Valiyev, Anar (2005b) The Rise of Salafi Islam in Azerbaijan, *Terrorism Monitor* 3 (13), Valiyev, Anar (2006) Al-Qaeda in Azerbaijan: Myths and Realities, *Terrorism Monitor* 4 (10).

<sup>184</sup> International Crisis Group (2008) Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State, *Europe Report* 191.

<sup>185</sup> Kotecha, Hema (2006) *Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging trends and tensions*. Baku: OSCE.

<sup>186</sup> Cornell, Svante E. (2006) *The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan*. Washington and Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program.

<sup>187</sup> Blaikie, Norman (2000) *Designing Social Research: The Logic of Anticipation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

The “snowball method” has obvious limitations in getting a group of interviewees that can be said to be a “representative sample” of the movement studied. Nevertheless, even though my access to the sources was rather random I did, after having established initial contacts, partly manage to steer certain aspects of who I got to meet. As a result my interviewees include almost as many men as women and also a variety of cohorts which seemed to correspond to the generational spread in the mosque communities.<sup>188</sup>

As for the representativity of those interviewed I can of course not say that my interviewees represent the whole communities, as these are only a small number of the total number of visitors. My findings are in that way conditioned by and limited to this particular study. At the same time, during my interviews I was struck by the similarity, in both mosques, in the replies regarding why and how the visitors had become affiliated to the mosques in question. This to me indicated that these views appeared to be fairly common among community members. In the case of the Imams the representativity is not as problematic as these can be said to “represent themselves” as the head of the community and their views can be regarded as the “official views” of the mosques. As it will be clear, however, these official views do not always correspond with those of other visitors.

Establishing contact with the Imams was more easily said than done. Most noticeably in the case of the controversial Imam of the Juma mosque, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, making the first contact turned out to be difficult. After his recent release from prison he kept an extremely low profile and had changed his mobile, as he believed that the government put a bug in his phone. None of the numbers I got for him worked, but eventually I managed to contact him through his brother whose number I got from a local researcher. Even later on contacting Ibrahimoglu was surrounded by secrecy and caution. He never answered his phone directly but always seemed to call back from another phone to confirm my identity.

## Interviews

During my fieldwork I conducted three types of interviews. Initially I interviewed/talked to local researchers and others thoroughly familiar with the field. Later on representatives for the “state side” were interviewed. This included three interviews with representatives of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations and two interviews with members of the Caucasus Board of Muslims (all these are recorded and transcribed). Finally, there were the interviews that focused on the religious communities and parties in Azerbaijan. Interviews in this category were by and large conducted with the Imams and visitors of the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque com-

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<sup>188</sup> That is the majority between ages 20–35, some younger some older.



munities.<sup>189</sup> I made 20 individual interviews and conducted three group interviews with visitors to the Juma and Abu Bakr mosques. I also participated in one group discussion conducted by local researchers with members of the Juma community. Of these interviews only the ones with the Imams are recorded. The reason for this is pragmatic. As the official spokespersons for two communities that at times attract a fair amount of attention, the Imams were quite used to being interviewed and consequently did not mind me recording their answers. However, I noticed early on that bringing out the digital recorder during interviews with other community members seemed to make them less inclined to talk to me and I soon decided not even to ask about recording but just take notes. Part of the problem appeared to be that the tape recorder created a sense of formality that made the respondents feel uneasy. They recommended that I instead conduct an interview with the leaders or others that “represented” the group and that could provide me with all the “correct answers”. In other words they did not feel that they were worthy representatives of the movement. If we instead only had “a conversation” they were happy to give me their view on things. Another reason for not using the recorder was that the situation surrounding many of the interviews was, too, characterized by a general informality as a group of us were sitting together. I was talking to one person at a time while others were talking to each other and also possibly commenting on the ongoing discussion. In that kind of situation I avoided using a tape recorder, for this would have disturbed the flow of the conversation. Instead I took notes in my “field study notebook” and afterwards I rewrote and printed my notes from all my interviews.

As for the location of these meetings I did my first interview with the Imam of the Juma mosque in an office in the actual mosque before the community’s eviction. For obvious reasons the rest of the Juma interviews took place in their temporary, quite crowded, office premises. The lion’s share of the interviews with Abu Bakr members took place either in the actual mosque (on the Women’s side), in office spaces in the mosque or in the courtyard outside the mosque.

Most interviews were conducted in Russian which is still a dominant language in much of Azerbaijan. I found that even though a small number of people I met did not speak Russian they generally still understood the language. This was helpful when conducting interviews in a larger group as they all understood the questions, although some had to have their responses translated. I believe that, in some cases at least, the fact that Russian was neither my language nor the respondent’s had a positive effect on the interview, inasmuch as it neutralized the impact of me being a foreigner from the West and thus made the interview more a conversation between equals. On

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<sup>189</sup> But, I did also talk to other religious figures inside and outside Baku as well as representatives of the Islamic party in Azerbaijan (IPA). For more on IPA see Chapter 6.

this note it should be said that one of the things that is believed to have contributed to these mosques' popularity among the young is precisely the fact that they tend to use both Russian and Azerbaijani in their activities in difference to "other" mosques' strict use of Azerbaijani.<sup>190</sup> As Russian is the first – and sometimes only – language of much of the urban "intelligentsia", bilingualism has made these mosques much more attractive in their eyes.

There has really been only one instance when my lacking Azerbaijani skills felt like a major restraint on my research. This is when I tried to follow the discussion on Abu Bakr mosque's online forum. Their webpage provides a great deal of interesting information, including an online forum where the Imam answers questions and community members can discuss with each other. Some of this information is in Russian but, unfortunately for my work, Azerbaijani is becoming more widely used on the webpage and in the forum (which seems to correspond to a general trend in Azerbaijani society). Initially the main page was available in Azerbaijani, Russian and English, while recently (2008) it is only in Azerbaijani. I have been using the discussions conducted online between community members in my work, but for practical reasons only the ones I can understand (in Russian).

A number of quotes from my interviews and the Abu Bakr mosque's online forum are used in this book. The quotes are used in the text to illustrate empirical observations and provide the basis for some of my interpretations. The quotes are also meant to "give life" to my analysis by dint of making the actual voices of key actors heard. I have chosen to translate all quotes into English. For the sake of clarity this has also sometimes meant editing them. Nonetheless I have tried to ensure that the quotes are "oral text" (rather than literal) to avoid losing the narrative nuances.<sup>191</sup> Particular words in certain contexts I found hard to translate, hence these appear in Russian in the text as well, which gives a chance to Russian-speaking readers to make up their own minds. On this note I have also, to facilitate the reading of the text, chosen to translate quotations from Russian and Swedish sources into English.

## Generation of data

The interviews varied in length and depth (from somewhere around 20 minutes up to two hours) depending on the respondent and the situation. My

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<sup>190</sup> This seems to be more true for Juma than for Abu Bakr. Even though the "official language" of Abu Bakr Mosque is Azerbaijani I got the understanding that because so many Russian speakers frequent there, Russian is commonly used as well which still creates a different atmosphere from the State Controlled Mosques.

<sup>191</sup> In this regard I have been inspired by the work of my fellow BEEGS colleagues: Linderlöf, Karin S. (2006) *Om vi nu ska bli som Europa. Könsskapande och normalitet bland unga kvinnor i transitionernas Polen*. Göteborg och Stockholm: Makadam and Søvik, Margrethe B. (2007) *Support, Resistance and Pragmatism. An Examination of Motivation in Language Policy in Kharkiv, Ukraine*. Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis.

interviews were semi-structured, that is, I did not have a written list of exactly worded interview questions but rather a list of theory-generated topics I could adjust to the situation at hand.<sup>192</sup> By conducting the interviews in this way I had a structure, yet I remained open to input from the respondent, which sometimes resulted in stumbling upon other interesting topics that I had not previously thought of asking about. In order to facilitate a more openhearted discussion, it was my intention that the informant see me more as a conversation partner than as a formal interviewer.<sup>193</sup>

To think of the interview as a conversation rather than an exercise in gathering information, also enhances the fact that I, as field researcher, am in fact part of the data-collection process. To paraphrase Dahl, the concept “data generation” rather than “data collection” more appropriately illustrates this phenomenon.<sup>194</sup> First, the responses I get from my respondents can to a large extent be seen as a response to the interviewer and the specific situation of the interview. Second, the responses the interviewees provide are interpreted and recalled by me, depending on how I understand them. The notion that social researchers are an inseparable part of the world they study seems to make absolute value-free research in this case impossible. The question arising from this conclusion is whether it is possible or even necessary to eliminate the effects of the researchers on the data. Petersson blames the discussion on a misunderstanding that he sees as “the result of a positivist reflex, even among those who do not share the positivist research ideals”.<sup>195</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson instead recommend that we exploit our impact, since as they write: “how people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they react to other situations”.<sup>196</sup>

Given the above discussion I felt that my respondents in most cases gave me their views on the topics we discussed as they experienced them. Interesting to note in this regard is that the Abu Bakr Imam’s opinions in some instances did not correspond to what the visitors told me. To me this indicated that the leaders of the mosque had a specific image of the mosque that they would like to present to the world, but that this view fails to reflect the diversity of opinions among the believers. I find this diversity interesting and use it as representative of the mosque.

On a different note, I did often feel during my fieldwork that I was perceived as a representative of “the Western world”, whatever that entailed. To give but one example, this resulted in me being utilized as a sort of spokes-

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<sup>192</sup> See for example Petersson (2003) p. 45 on the necessity, or as he puts it — the researcher’s obligation — to have some sort of theoretical structure guiding the interviews.

<sup>193</sup> See discussion on informal interviews in Agar, Michael (1980) *The Professional Stranger*. New York: Academic Press.

<sup>194</sup> Dahl, Mathilda (2007) *States under Scrutiny. International Organizations, Transformation and the Construction of Progress*. Stockholm : Stockholms universitet, p. 41.

<sup>195</sup> Petersson (2003) p. 42.

<sup>196</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) p. 16.

person for both “sides” (the state and the oppositional mosques), trusting me to tell the world the “true” story, which of course provided me with some extremely contradictory pictures of the religious situation in the country.

### Protecting the individuals

Even though Azerbaijan in many ways is a much more liberal country than other post-Soviet republics many activists still face repression because of their religious affiliations and social activity. There is also a risk that someone else in the community might not agree with a particular member’s opinion or view on, for example, their movement or society in general, thus targeting them dissimilarly. In my text I have therefore chosen not to name or in any other way identify my sources, whether these be from inside the Azerbaijani mosques or elsewhere, except by gender and in some cases not even that. If the respondents did not volunteered their names I refrained from asking. My transcripts divulge gender, age and occupation. I did however decide to call the mosques in question by their real name as they already are so well known that any attempt to somehow hide their identity struck me as silly. Likewise with the Imams in question and their opinions; the topics discussed in my thesis have been quoted numerous times in mass media and other contexts, making it, in my mind, unnecessary to provide them with pseudonyms. A similar standpoint has been taken for my interviewees with those who can be said to be “main representatives” of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations and the Caucasus Board of Muslims as well.

### Other sources

Beside my interviews a number of sources have been used in different phases of the thesis project. For mapping groups active in the region and their activities, as well as getting acquainted with the country and the domestic developments a wide range of sources have been useful. Newspapers, journals, research literature, informative research institutes’ webpages (such as the International Crisis Group, the Institute for War and Peace reporting, Eurasianet), reports by international organizations, official government institutions or research institutes, etc. have at some point or other served as sources. In Azerbaijan I have had contacts with researchers at a number of universities and have, too, had access to a network of various organizations that could assist with contacts and collection of materials.

The empirical analysis is based on the material I collected on location, but to a certain extent I have also used other sources that have been able to provide input on the groups in question, such as their own internet-pages, magazines or interviews made with their leaders or members in other printed or online

sources. One such other source deserves special attention. Much of the argumentation in Chapter 8 is based on the analysis of “virtual” discussions found at the online forum of the Abu Bakr mosque community’s internet webpage.

The possibility to access this type of discussion has certainly opened up a new level of information gathering. At the same time, as pointed out by Leth and Thurén in their book on “source analysis for the Internet”, the easiness with which anyone can post any type of information online calls for “the recognition of uncertainty” as well as “a sharp and detailed criticism” when analyzing information found on the Internet. Accordingly, they offer four basics for source analysis: time, dependence, authenticity and bias.<sup>197</sup>

The first online forum, where the Imam was answering the community members’ questions on the Abu Bakr webpage, was held on in August 2003 and has been occurring monthly since then. This would indicate that the page is being continuously updated (old forums remain accessible). Given that posters with the webpage address are posted at the mosque entrance and that the Imam referred me to the webpage (boasting 1288 registered users) for more information, I believe speaks for the page’s authenticity. A closer look at the users’ profiles indicates that some are most likely “fake” user names, generated by spammers, but looking through the forum lists demonstrates that quite a lot of other users frequently partake in discussions. As not many provide any information about themselves on their profile, it is difficult to say who they are. But, judging from the type of questions asked in the question-and-answer sessions, those who write appear to be believers looking for guidance (sometimes very concrete) in religious and worldly matters.

Another look at the listed users and their status shows that ten users have been banned from the forum. This of course raises questions about what type of censorship the homepage administrators conduct, and who these individuals are. I would assume that the administrators are computer-savvy people close to the Imam, but at the same time it is impossible for me to answer these types of questions with any degree of certainty. Nevertheless, the fact that the “banned” users’ profiles, as well as their discussion input, are still showing on the website is likely to indicate certain openness on the side of the administrators. Additionally, the discrepancy between “official” opinions expressed by the Imam and those of some of the visitors at the online discussions establishes the existence of a wide range of opinions among the many visitors. I have also to a certain extent been able to use the input of secondary sources such as media reports, other research literature and information from other researchers, as reference – and to “triangulate” particularly interesting information obtained through interviews or the online forum.

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<sup>197</sup> Leth, Göran and Torsten Thurén (2000) *Källkritik för Internet*. Stockholm: Styrelsen för psykologiskt försvar, pp. 142f.

The part of the dissertation that discusses Islam during the Soviet Union is for practical reasons based on secondary sources, as time constraints made it unrealistic to either gain access to or conduct extensive research in Soviet archives. Many authors listed as secondary sources in that chapter have however had the possibility to conduct this type of archival research, like Ro'i (2000), Yunusov (2004), Goyushkov and Askerov (2004). I am deeply indebted to their work.

Over and above certain data generated by me on location in Uzbekistan, secondary sources have also provided the information for the comparative outlook characterizing in Chapter 11. The use of secondary sources in this context is problematic, but unavoidable. Access to independent research from this area is limited, to a large extent because the governments, at least in Russia and Uzbekistan, are doing their best to control the information flow on the topic of Islamic activism. The topic is particularly sensitive as many authorities in both Russia and Central Asia have a tendency to blame all problems in society on some sort of ghost-like "Wahhabis".<sup>198</sup> This attitude (and the measures taken in relation to it) makes it hard, not to say impossible, to obtain objective information about any group targeted by the regime in its struggle against extremists. Most representatives of these groups are, in common with many others without connection to these groups, dead or in prison. The problem is not limited to the individual researcher's inability to conduct interviews with members of these groups who for obvious reasons prefer to stay out of the limelight. The odds against collecting or obtaining objective information are high enough to have had a negative impact on the entire field of research, making it prone to speculations that in due course get taken for the "truth". These problems notwithstanding and having had to rely mainly on secondary sources for my comparative analysis, I have, as expected, exercised the utmost caution.

On this note I conclude the introductory part of this dissertation. It is high time to start the analysis of the mobilization processes of Islamic activism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The analysis will start with a discussion of Soviet policy on religion in general and on Islam in particular, which I will argue, in many ways laid the foundation for post-Soviet developments in Azerbaijan.

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<sup>198</sup> For a discussion on Post-Soviet Central Asian governments' various imperatives to constrain Religion see Anderson, John (2002) Social, Political, and Institutional Constraints on Religious Pluralism in Central Asia. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17 (2): 181–196.

## 5. Soviet Islam: Bourgeoisie Nationalism or Local Traditions?

Even though it is the post-Soviet situation that is at the heart of this study, I believe that one of the main keys to grasping the development of Islamic activism in independent Azerbaijan is to be found in the past, more specifically, in lingering attitudes and institutions. Therefore the focus of this chapter is on the injurious relationship between religion and the state in the Soviet Union, a situation which, as I argue throughout this thesis, casts a shadow over the post-Soviet political context in Azerbaijan.

In the theoretical chapter I discussed the notion of a “prevailing paradigm” as informal pre-existing power structures that influence the procedures used by the government to deal with social movements. Prevailing paradigms can be seen as an expression of the general attitude among decision makers towards social movements. These attitudes often have a historical background, that is to say, they are the result of a lengthy process. I also discussed the concept “path-dependency” and how institutional legacies of the past may prove resistant to change. Both these concepts are useful for analyzing the legacy of the Soviet Union in regards to the attitude towards Islam in the former Soviet countries. Hence, before going into the specifics of the post-Soviet Azerbaijani context, I will in this chapter review the religious situation for practitioners of Islam under Soviet rule as well as briefly discuss the results of this for the post-Soviet development of Islam in general.

### Islam in the Soviet Union

The communist regime’s negative attitude towards religion is well known. Even somebody who is not an expert on this particular region is probably acquainted with Marx’s legendary expression about religion being the “opium of the people”. This to a certain extent characterizes the official Soviet attitude towards religion; it was considered an “unscientific distraction” for the people, preventing them from focusing on what was really important,

that is, the work to build communism.<sup>199</sup> Religion was an annoyance to the Soviet officials for two major reasons. First, religious tradition was seen as representing something “backwards”, a reminder of the rural pre-modern state that the Muslim republics were supposed to have left behind as they became a part of the Soviet Union.<sup>200</sup> In a book published by the “Institute for Scientific Atheism under the Central Committee of the Soviet Union Communist Party’s Academy of Science” the reader learns that the republics needed to be “liberated from Islam’s religious ideology and the backward traditions connected to it.”<sup>201</sup> This, the book states, was to be a “natural result of the radical socio-economic and cultural reorganization that strengthened the Soviet socialist way of life in the republics of the Soviet East.”<sup>202</sup>

Second and perhaps even more importantly, religious confessions were potential competitors to official Soviet ideology, counteracting the communists’ attempts to “forging a Soviet state, building a Soviet society and molding a Soviet man”.<sup>203</sup> It was however, according to the official view, not religion in itself that was the main danger to the system. In the book just mentioned above, which I find to be a good illustration of the Soviet approach to religion, it was for example assured that the Communist Party “respected religious convictions and the feelings of those that practice Islam, as well as other religions”.<sup>204</sup> Furthermore, at least in theory, the citizens of the Soviet Union were also granted “freedom of conscience” by the constitution. Instead it appears to have been the mobilizing power of religion that the Soviet leaders feared. “Under the Islamic banner a war for freedom can be unwrapped. /.../ But it [history] also tells us that also those that stand behind contra revolutionary mutiny might operate through the use of Islamic slogans”, to again quote the above mentioned book.<sup>205</sup> On this note the threat from religion in general, and Islam in particular, to Soviet machinations was often linked to that of “bourgeois nationalism”.<sup>206</sup> In order to prevent danger-

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<sup>199</sup> Broxup, Marie (1989) Political Trends in Soviet Islam after the Afghanistan War. In Allworth, Edward (ed.) *Muslim Communities Reemerge. Historical Perspectives on Nationality, Politics, and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 304f.

<sup>200</sup> Omel’chenko, Elena and Sabirova, Gusel (2003a) Islam and the Search for Identity in Pilkington, Hilary and Yemelianova, Galina (eds.) *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia. Public and Private Faces*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.

<sup>201</sup> Filimonov, E.G (1983) *Islam v SSSR. Osobennosti Protsessa Sekuliarizatsii v Respublikakh Sovetskogo Vostoka*. Moscow: Mysl, p. 3.

<sup>202</sup> Filimonov (1983) p. 6.

<sup>203</sup> Rorlich, Azade-Ayse (1991) Islam and Atheism: Dynamic Tension in Central Asia. In Fierman, William (ed.) *Soviet Central Asia. The Failed Transformation*. Boulder: Westview Press, p. 186.

<sup>204</sup> Filimonov (1983) p. 172.

<sup>205</sup> Filimonov (1983) p. 6.

<sup>206</sup> Filimonov (1983); Bräker, Hans (1989) Soviet Policy toward Islam. In Allworth, Edward (ed.) *Muslim Communities Reemerge. Historical Perspectives on Nationality, Politics, and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press; Rorlich (1991).



ous supra-nationalist ideas, such as pan-Turkism, pan-Persianism and pan-Islamism, from spreading and potentially contributing to shattering the Union, official rhetoric asserted it was necessary to “resolve the religious question”.<sup>207</sup> In order to reduce and gradually eliminate the religious consciousness of the Soviet people major efforts were put into atheist education through the creation of “Departments of Atheism” under the universities’ philosophy faculties. Lecture series and “Days of Atheism” were also organized by other forums such as “People’s universities” and so-called “Houses of Atheism”.<sup>208</sup> Moreover, antireligious propaganda frequently appeared in newspapers and magazines, at theatres, exhibitions and museums as well as on television and radio.<sup>209</sup>

Even though the situation described above paints a picture of an uncompromising Soviet attitude towards religious belief, as a matter of fact the relationship between Soviet leaders and religion over the years turned out to be rather dynamic. As will be discussed further below, the atheist campaign went through different phases, ranging from attempts at totally eradicating Islam to more amicable periods when the authorities made an effort to establish better relations with Muslims. Increased openness towards religious practitioners was meant to co-opt Islam for purposes consonant with Soviet policy.

### The honeymoon phase

Initially the attitude of Soviet authorities towards Islam and the Muslim clergy was actually more liberal than that towards the Russian Orthodox Church, which at the time was seen as the major threat against the revolution. As a result the Muslim areas were treated “relatively softly” as far as the implementation of religious policies went.<sup>210</sup> The Bolsheviks were nourishing somewhat romantic hopes of spreading the fight against imperialism to the Near East, Iran, Arab countries and Turkey through, what was called the Muslim East.<sup>211</sup> Muslim clergy was also considered an important partner in the struggle against Western powers. Additionally Islam and Muslims in general were seen as an important ally in the war against the internal enemy, “the Whites”.<sup>212</sup>

This initial honeymoon phase however started to come to an end with Lenin’s launching of a massive campaign for atheist education and propa-

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<sup>207</sup> Filimonov (1983) p. 6; Roy, Olivier (2000) *The New Central Asia. The Creation of Nations*. New York: New York University Press. The Soviet nationalities policy will also be discussed more later on in this chapter.

<sup>208</sup> Rorlich (1991).

<sup>209</sup> Broxup (1989).

<sup>210</sup> Bräker (1989).

<sup>211</sup> The “Muslim East” in this Context refers to the Soviet controlled areas with a majority Muslim population in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Russia.

<sup>212</sup> Yunusov (2004).

ganda under supervision of the so-called League of Godless Militants. The campaign also involved many ministries as well as other government organs and influential groups in society. In this regard Islam was seen as a particular nuisance, being a religion brought to the region by foreign invaders – who, by the way, were also believed to be strongly anti-Russian. Furthermore, it was considered the most conservative of religions and humiliating to women.<sup>213</sup> Special publications aimed at Muslim regions were highly intolerant of both Islam and local religious leadership, the former exposed as old-fashioned, anti-social, anti-feminist, intolerant and xenophobic while the latter was taken to task for its avowed backwardness. Islamic rites such as circumcision and fasting during Ramadan (the Muslim fast) were criticized as primitive, barbarian and unhealthy.<sup>214</sup> The “League” was established in Azerbaijan in 1925, but was not very successful. With the beginning of Stalin’s rule the atheist campaign took on a virulent character and the attitude towards Islam became much more uncompromising. One result of this heightened repression during the 1930s was that League membership increased in Azerbaijan as well as in other republics.<sup>215</sup> Yet, for believers in USSR, more noticeable consequences of Stalin’s coming to power would ensue.

### The Stalin years

During Stalin’s time the fight against religion entered a more concrete phase the objectives of which were the complete extirpation of Islam’s outward manifestations as well as the obliteration of all traces of religious consciousness. His constitutional reforms and new legislation had far reaching consequences for all religious conduct in the Soviet Union. An amendment to the constitution in 1929 gave the state the right to control and regulate all religious activity. The 1929 “Law on Religious Associations”, for example, made it obligatory for all religious organizations to register with the authorities, prohibited all ecclesiastical activities over and beyond plain religious observation (including for example charity or other economic activity) as well as forbade anyone under 18 to be a religious practitioner. In 1935 students were officially forbidden to visit mosques. The Ministry of Internal Affairs was given the mandate to see to it that this law was adhered to. In 1932 systematic arrests so-called nationalist Muslim elements began, accused of working against previous campaigns and hindering Soviet influence

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<sup>213</sup> Broxup (1989).

<sup>214</sup> Haghayeghi, Mehrdad (1996) *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*. New York: St Martin’s Press.

<sup>215</sup> Goyushkov, Altay and Elchin Askerov (2004) *Obzor Situatsii Islamskogo Obrazovaniya v Azerbaydzhanе za Sovetskii Period i posle Obreteniya Nezavisimosti (1920–2003)*. An article written within the Framework of “Islamic Education in the USSR and the CIS” project funded by VW foundation (Germany) [unpublished]; Balci (2004).

from spreading throughout Muslim regions.<sup>216</sup> Clerical leaders were not at first accused of conducting religious ceremonies or spreading illegal religious propaganda, but of political, pan-Islamic activities. Anyone who had any connection to religion risked being targeted. Apart from the clergy, their relatives, those carrying out *namaz* (the daily prayers) or observing Ramadan as well as those with the honorific Hajji, Kerbalay or Meshedi, indicating a pilgrimage, likewise suffered badly from the crackdown.<sup>217</sup>

During this more hostile phase of repression the nationalization of *waqfs* (religious property) was one more striking effect; mosques, prayer houses and religious schools were confiscated, demolished or closed in large scale. Houses of worship were also transformed into clubs, warehouses, factories or other buildings with secular functions.<sup>218</sup> Of the approximately 3000 mosques believed to have been active in Azerbaijan before the revolution<sup>219</sup>, only about half were still there in 1928 and by 1933 only 17 mosques were left in Azerbaijan.<sup>220</sup> In 1934 one of Baku's most revered mosques, Bibi-Heybat, was demolished.<sup>221</sup>

### Religious thaw and the creation of "Official Islam"

During the Second World War Stalin had to revise his restrictive internal policies to secure the support of and benefit from the available supply of manpower in the entire USSR. As a result of the repression during 1920s and 30s the beginning of the war was characterized by a number of outbreaks of anti-Soviet resistance, mainly in the Muslim republics of the Union. Additionally, among the war prisoners and volunteers from occupied territories fighting on the German side the number of Muslims was high. In 1943, for example, 40000 Azerbaijanis are believed to have been part of the German army.<sup>222</sup>

In order to reclaim regional support and to facilitate the recruitment of soldiers in the region, Soviet leaders established an official Muslim power-structure consisting of religious leaders, *muftis*, willing to support the Soviet

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<sup>216</sup> Haghayeghi (1996); Ro'i, Yaacov, (2000) *Islam in the Soviet Union. From the Second World War to Gorbachev*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>217</sup> Goyushkov and Askerov (2004).

<sup>218</sup> Abbasov (2001), Saroyan, Mark (1994) *Authority and Community in Soviet Islam*. In Marty, Martin E. and Appelby, R. Scott (eds.) *Accounting for Fundamentalisms. The Dynamic Character of Movements*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>219</sup> Thus, as noted by Goyushkov and Askerov this number probably also included Mosques in Zangrezur, Gekchi, Borchali and other regions that after the sovietization did not become a part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan.

<sup>220</sup> Saroyan, Mark (1997) *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union*. Edited by Edward Walker. Berkeley: University of California; Abbasov (2001); Yunusov (2004).

<sup>221</sup> Goyushkov and Askerov (2004). This Mosque was rebuilt in 1998 by the initiative of then president Heydar Aliyev 1998.

<sup>222</sup> Yunusov (2004).

policies and to serve as mediators between the Muslim population and the authorities. This line of action was based on institutional arrangements dating back to Tsarist times, namely the Religious Council in Oranenburg (its head of which was appointed by imperial decree), then responsible for all religious activities in Russia.<sup>223</sup> In 1944 four "Muslim Spiritual Boards" (*Dukhovnoye Upravlenye Musolman*), also referred to as muftiat, was established in Baku, Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Ufa and Buinaksk (Russia).<sup>224</sup> The muftiats' attempt to mobilize the Muslims for the war effort was however not met with any greater degree of enthusiasm, as the strictly censored preaching and their involvement in Soviet propaganda campaigns undermined the influence they were hoping to have on the population. The sanctioned structural affiliation between muftiats and mosques might also have contributed to this animosity. It was demanded that all registered mosques be affiliated with one of the four Spiritual Boards and thereby subject themselves to the administrative jurisdiction of one of these. It was up to the muftiats to ensure that mosques did not engage in "nonreligious activities" such as social services (including healthcare and housing), education (including establishments of schools and libraries), or any kind of economic or commercial enterprise.<sup>225</sup>

At this time the conditions for practicing religion in the country were also improved. In 1945 religious education once again, to some extent, received official authorization, as the Mir-i-Arab *madrassa* in Bukhara was reopened after being closed in 1925. For higher education the Imam Ismail Al-Bukhari institute in Tashkent was created.<sup>226</sup> These were however the only religious educational facilities that were allowed to function in the Soviet Union and apart from religion their curriculum contained ideological subjects such as "The constitution of the Soviet Union".<sup>227</sup> The number of attendees was very restricted. A smaller number of students were allowed to finish their religious education abroad in so called official friendship states such as Egypt, Libya, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Shi'ite dominated Iran was not on the list of accepted countries which is why, according to Roy, the *Sheikh ül-Islam* of Azerbaijan, the head of the Caucasus Muslim Board in Baku, is one of the leading *ulama* from late Soviet times that has never studied abroad.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Polonskaya, Ludmila and Malashenko, Alexei (1994) *Islam in Central Asia*. Reading: Ithaca Press.

<sup>224</sup> Ro'i (2000).

<sup>225</sup> Saroyan (1994).

<sup>226</sup> The Mir-i-Arab *madrassa* has since it was built in the 16th century been one of Central Asia's most prestigious religious institutes. At the time of my study 120 students took part in the five year long training course in Arabic and Qur'anology as a first step towards becoming an Imam.

<sup>227</sup> Roy (2000).

<sup>228</sup> Roy (2000).



*Illustration 1* The Mir-i-Arab Madrasa from above. Photo: Garth Bedford.

Through the state controlled theological education the Soviet Union managed to create an "official Muslim clergy" that was educated within its borders, acknowledged by the Soviet system and active within the framework of one of the four muftiats. The representatives of this "official Islam" did their best to adjust themselves to the prevailing situation and strived to establish a new identity including both Muslim and Soviet. As a matter of fact, as the religious authorities pointed out, many values promoted by Socialism were similar to those in the Muslim faith, like equality, religious freedom, land-ownership and so on. In this spirit some Muslim rituals such as the fast and prayers were adjusted to the spirit of the time. An example is Ramadan, shortened so as not to coincide with harvest time, as this would pose a threat to the fulfillment of the quota set out on the Five-Year Plan. Additionally the meaning of particular traditions was redefined to better fit in with the system. The traditional washing of one's feet before prayer was therefore promoted for hygienic reasons and *namaz* were recommended as a means of getting in shape.<sup>229</sup> However, as pointed out by Saroyan who studied the muftiats extensively, this did not mean that religious leaders were blindly following the commands of the Soviet government or that they tried to create a synthesis of Islam and Soviet state power. Rather their idea of Islam and the regime's view stressing "backwardness and obsolescence" were juxtaposed. Through this the representatives of Official Islam wanted to show that Islam and Socialism did not have to exclude one another, but that a mutually

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<sup>229</sup> Saroyan (1997).

advantageous coexistence between the two worldviews was possible.<sup>230</sup> This being said, many believers were still suspicious of the close relationship between the religious and the secular authorities.

According to Saroyan, their management was separate from the state. In his view this makes “Official Islam” in the Soviet Union different from “Official Islam” in other Muslim countries. According to him “unlike ‘Muslim’ countries, where ‘official’ religious hierarchies operate under the direct auspices of the state (in Egypt for instance), in the Soviet Union the ‘official’ Muslim establishment was nominally independent and self-financing.”<sup>231</sup>

At the same time official clerics were appointed to various public and administrative councils where they, according to Malashenko, “sat quietly”.<sup>232</sup> Also, being supervised by the newly founded Committee for Religious Matters of the Ministry of the USSR, the muftiats did to most believers appear as an indissoluble part of the Soviet political administration.<sup>233</sup>

Some other changes made during this time concerned the restrictive legislation on religion. Besides trying to secure the support of its Muslim population, a number of reforms were designed to present a more positive picture abroad of the Soviet Union’s own internal treatment of Islam. This became increasingly important as the country’s relations with Muslim states in other parts of the world intensified and gained in significance.<sup>234</sup> In this spirit religious leaders were sent on representation trips to other Muslim countries, publication of some Muslim literature was allowed as well as the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). However, the number of people actually given the green light to pilgrimage was low. Still in the 1980s only 20 persons yearly from the SSSR were granted permission — among them only 2–3 were Azerbaijani.<sup>235</sup>

## Unofficial Islam

After the war the offensive against Islam continued, although the muftiats were still allowed to function. Nevertheless, a result of the repression of public religion and the unpopularity of “Official Islam” was that local networks, in Central Asia often with roots in Sufi brotherhoods and in Azerbaijan based on *sayyids* (a descendant of Prophet Mohammed, a saint, a descendant of other Imams’ families or a great religious scholar), became the basis for practicing Muslim rituals and the continuity of time-honored tradi-

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<sup>230</sup> Saroyan (1994) pp. 521f.

<sup>231</sup> Saroyan (1994) p. 516.

<sup>232</sup> Malashenko, Alexei V. (1993) *Islam versus Communism: The Experience of Coexistence*. In Eickelman Dale F. (ed.) *Russia's Muslim Frontiers. New Directions in Cross-cultural Analysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University press; Bräker (1989) p. 165.

<sup>233</sup> Malashenko (1993), Bräker (1989).

<sup>234</sup> Broxup (1989), Roy (2000).

<sup>235</sup> Abbasov (2001).

tions. In the literature describing this issue this form of Islam has been referred to as oppositional, unofficial, underground, parallel and, in some Soviet sources, even illegal Islam. No matter which epithet is given, the development of such a non state-controlled religion indicates that the atheist policy was not particularly efficient, especially not in the countryside. It was difficult from Moscow to control what was really going on out in the villages and in many cases local party officials, despite their lip service to Soviet policy and their official criticism of Islam's backwardness, belonged to those observing traditional customs and conventions.<sup>236</sup> For example, the practice and celebration of male circumcision remained very common throughout the Soviet era. Religious connotations surrounding rites of passage such as marriage, birth and death were widespread. Moreover, in Central Asia fasting in the month of Ramadan appears to have been widely observed as well.<sup>237</sup>

One way the Soviets attempted to keep religious practice to a minimum was through limiting the number of mosques available to the public. The so-called unofficial Islam, however, had a vast number of places at its disposal. First, as Soviet authorities were shutting down mosques new ones were quickly opened in teahouses, storage spaces and other areas that officially filled a secular function, but were clandestinely refurbished for use as, for example, a prayer house or *madrassa*. Second, *mazar* (holy places) had an important function in unofficial Islam as places where people could come to pray or meet with the clergy. They could be physical objects such as trees, stones, caves or springs, but consisted in the majority of cases of a tomb. Many *mazar* were believed to possess various healing powers that could cure for example infertility, hepatitis, ear diseases and rheumatism. The Soviet Union repeatedly tried to reduce the popularity of these places for example through letting the muftiats, via *fatwas* (religious edicts) or more informal measures, condemn superstition and the worshiping of saints.<sup>238</sup> In Central Asia the Sufi orders were considered to be especially antagonist to "Official Islam" and were promoted as "clandestine anti-Soviet organizations made up by Muslim fanatics".<sup>239</sup> Another way to discredit Sufi leaders was to portray them as "opportunistic seekers of riches who use the road of religion to accumulate wealth".<sup>240</sup> Still, it turned out to be hard to control unsanctioned religious practice in general and the shrine-related practices in particular, both because of their number and their inaccessibility. As will be discussed later, instead of reducing its popularity the situation under Soviet control

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<sup>236</sup> Atkin, Muriel (1995) Islam as Faith, Politics and Bogeyman in Tajikistan. In Bourdeux, Michael (ed.) *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. New York: M.E. Sharpe; Louw, Maria Elisabeth (2007) *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>237</sup> Louw (2007).

<sup>238</sup> Saroyan (1997).

<sup>239</sup> Louw (2007) p. 4.

<sup>240</sup> Rorlich (1991) p. 203.

contributed to strengthening the said practices and making *ziyorat* (visit, pilgrimage) still today an inseparable part of post-Soviet Muslim culture.<sup>241</sup>

The situation in Azerbaijan seems, as pointed out by Saroyan, to have differed somewhat from that in other Muslim parts of the Soviet Union. In Azerbaijan during 1960–80s there were over 300 holy places (there referred to as *pir* or *Imamzade*) among which around 100 were considered particularly holy.<sup>242</sup> These places were either specialized, providing for specific needs, or universal, performing an “all-purpose” function.<sup>243</sup>



*Illustration 2* Ziyarat at the Mausoleum of Naqsband outside Bukhara. Visiting holy places continues to be an important part of Islam in the post-Soviet Muslim republics. (Naqsband was the founder of an influential Sufi order) Photo: Sofie Bedford.

While the muftiats of Central Asia and North Caucasus frequently expressed their displeasure with the traditions of shrine pilgrimage and saint worship, the Muslim Board of Transcaucasus, located in Baku, instead encouraged *ziyorat* and sought to make it a part of “official” Islamic practice. In the words of Saroyan “the ‘orthodox’ clergy of Transcaucasus thus pursued a strategy of appropriating the popular veneration of shrines and institutionalizing it into its own conception of legitimate Islam in order to legitimate its

<sup>241</sup> Poliakov, Sergei P. (1992) *Everyday Islam. Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, see also Louw (2007).

<sup>242</sup> Yunusov (2004).

<sup>243</sup> Saroyan (1997).



authority in the Muslim community”.<sup>244</sup> This he says appears to have been a result of the fact that, in contrast to the rest of the Soviet Union, the majority of Muslims in Azerbaijan are followers of Shi’ite tradition, where the clergy “has developed a historical tradition of shrine worship”.<sup>245</sup> Not only did the Muslim Board in Baku not condemn shrine pilgrimage, it additionally granted legal status to certain shrines, either as such or by legalizing them as mosques. By sponsoring yearly pilgrimage to selected vicinities as well as collecting the offerings from these sites the Muslim Board managed to incorporate them into their own network of religious institutions, thereby blurring the distinction between “official” and “unofficial” Islam.<sup>246</sup> This indicates that it is not really possible to talk about “unofficial” Islam in Soviet times as a clear-cut phenomenon. Despite the various periods of intense fighting against the Muslim faith, its institutions, religious holidays and rituals, Islam continued to be more important than the Soviet government ever cared to acknowledge. Much of this activity took place outside the muftiats’ institutional framework and could hence be classified as “unofficial” Islam.<sup>247</sup> Yet, these expressions of faith encompassed many ways to interpret and practice Islam in a number of different areas in the Soviet Union and, as Saroyan’s example shows, had varying relationships with official religious authorities.

In general, however, the “unofficial” Islam left unchecked by the state was presented by political leaders as a threat to the Soviet state, something that had an impact in much Western research on Soviet Muslims in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>248</sup> In 1993 Malashenko claimed that during the past five years Islam had become “one of the most important political forces in the Soviet Moslem region”.<sup>249</sup> Currently, most research instead agrees that “unofficial Islam” in most regards was actually completely apolitical.<sup>250</sup> Its practitioners were mainly just Muslims simply choosing the private worshipping of the shrine instead of the more public visiting of the mosque, and often they did not even have a choice, the village mosque being closed! Since the Soviet system provided limited access to religious education, most such activity was also rendered illegal no matter how innocent it was. Furthermore, many of those who practiced “unofficial” Islam seem to have agreed with the official *ulama*’s point of view that Islamic and Soviet ideologies did not neces-

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<sup>244</sup> Saroyan (1997) p. 113.

<sup>245</sup> Saroyan (1997) p. 114.

<sup>246</sup> Saroyan (1997).

<sup>247</sup> Khalid, Adeb (2007) *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

<sup>248</sup> Louw (2007).

<sup>249</sup> Malashenko (1993) p. 174.

<sup>250</sup> See for example Khalid (2007). That being said some of the Islamic opposition that surfaced in Central Asia in the end of the Soviet period was generated by individuals that received their religious training in the “unofficial” Islamic system.

sarily contradict each other. Louw gives an example of this from her field-work in post-Soviet Uzbekistan:

It became increasingly clear that resistance on the part of Soviet Central Asia Muslims, as well as the posited incongruence between Islam and Soviet communism had lain in the eyes of the observers rather than in the heart and minds of the actors involved. How would approaches postulating such an incongruence, for example, account for the fact that in post-Soviet Uzbekistan its not uncommon to meet elderly people visiting shrines of avliyo (Muslim saints), proudly displaying decorations received from the Soviet state?<sup>251</sup>

According to the official propaganda of the Brezhnev era religion had then all but disappeared and “the nationalities question had been resolved”.<sup>252</sup> Perhaps as a result of this the policy toward religious observance gradually got more relaxed towards the end of the Soviet Union’s existence.<sup>253</sup> However, as the above quote clearly shows the Soviet Union obviously did not succeed in totally eradicating devoutness among their citizens. That being said, the atheist propaganda campaigns and all other anti-religious work did have a certain consequences for the features and development of Islam in the region.

## The Soviet influence

### Stagnation of Islam

It is difficult to say exactly how successful or unsuccessful the Soviet anti-religious campaign really was. Some effects were directly visible such as the one concerning the traditional female head covering, which save few exceptions was totally abolished. Others were harder to spot, but still noticeable such as the undermining of religious institutions and weakening of the *ulama*. As a result of the atheist policy Muslim education suffered from a severe lack of educated teachers and teaching material. To a large extent it is possible to say that many people became totally illiterate in terms of knowledge of religious rites and knowledge about Islam in general. Most Azerbaijanis did not even know one *sura* from the Qur’an, did not conduct *namaz*, and did not fast during Ramadan.<sup>254</sup> Still, the fact that large parts of the Muslim population nevertheless stayed true to their faith was especially noticeable during religious holidays when mosques were visited by large groups of believers. In Azerbaijan this was rather obvious in the traditionally more

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<sup>251</sup> Loew (2007) p. 5f.

<sup>252</sup> Rorlich (1991) p. 186.

<sup>253</sup> Rorlich (1991).

<sup>254</sup> Goyushkov & Askerov (2004).

pious Shi'a-dominated villages along the Iranian border and in the Absheron peninsula, in particular during *Muharram*<sup>255</sup> when despite all attempts *Shakh-sey-vakhsey* processions were taking place<sup>256</sup>, with participants from both genders and all ages and occupations. Additionally, according to Soviet statistics many workers along the Iranian border took this day off. The holidays of Gurban Bayram (the remembrance of how Abraham was close to sacrificing his own son) and to some extent also Mohammed's birthday continued to be celebrated throughout Soviet times against the will of the regime.<sup>257</sup>

Many of the traditions that did live on during the Soviet period lost however their original content as knowledge about their source waned. Khalid gives one example of this from Central Asia:

Among Uzbeks and Tajiks national tradition demanded that at the end of every meal, the eldest person should pronounce 'Âmin' (Amen) as an expression of thanks to God. The ritual originally entailed a brief prayer in Arabic, pronounced while everyone held out their open hands to collect God's blessings, which they then splashed on their face. In Soviet conditions, the ritual came to comprise of a mumbled prayer (seldom with original words) and a rather perfunctory rub of the face.<sup>258</sup>

Additionally, as a result of the strict control of religious education in USSR, the country's Muslims had limited access to, and therefore lacked the opportunity to criticize and review the textual sources of Islam. Thus they were left out of the process of modernizing Islamic knowledge and redefining patterns of religious authority that proceeded apace in many other Muslim countries during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, at the two official Islamic institutes the handing down of Islamic knowledge in the Soviet Union was largely oral, which often resulted in, as mentioned above, a loss in the original meaning of various features. Moreover, Islam became synonymous with customs rather than textual interpretations. This, Khalid writes, contributed to a stagnation of Islam in the Soviet period.<sup>259</sup> The reason for Islam being able to preserve itself in terms of traditions and customs was that it came to be understood as an inseparable part of the cultural heritage of certain nations.

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<sup>255</sup> The first month of the Islamic year.

<sup>256</sup> On this day Shi'ites commemorate the third Shi'ite Imam Hussein. In remembrance of his martyrdom they express their grief and reenact the pain he suffered by thumping their chests or beat and flog themselves.

<sup>257</sup> Yunusov (2004); Goyushkov & Askerov (2004).

<sup>258</sup> Khalid (2007) p. 104.

<sup>259</sup> Khalid (2007) pp. 114f.

## Islam as a national heritage

The Soviet policy on nationalities appears rather contradictory. On the one hand, the main ideological goal of the Soviets was the creation of a *homo sovieticus*, a supra-nationality encompassing all others. On the other hand, as a result of the fear of competing supra-nationalities such as “pan-Islamism” or “pan-Turkism”, Stalin divided the Union into separate national political entities, all of which had to have its corresponding titular nationality (*natsionalnost*), defined as an ethnic community with a separate language, cultural customs and traditions.<sup>260</sup> To facilitate this “creation of nations” in the Soviet Muslim areas customs and traditions did play an important role. Even if initially traditions and customs were seen as an indication of the “backwardness” of these new nations, they gradually came to be emphasized as a sign of a nation’s important historical experiences and an inseparable aspect of its identity. In this way Soviet policy could be said to have created a space for Islam to survive qua aspect of the national heritage of specific nations. Khalid lists a number of traditions rooted in Islam but come to be seen as local, “Eastern” and Muslim:

An enormous range of behavior and values were subsumed under the rubric of national traditions: they included marking births, weddings, and funerals with often lavish feasts; circumcising all boys; eating certain foods, furnishings one living quarters in a certain way, and eating with ones hand rather than with utensils; placing high value on families and seeing marriage as a contract between two families rather than two individuals; paying respect to elders; and providing and valuing hospitality.<sup>261</sup>

As a result for many of those who called themselves Muslim, Islam was mainly seen as a signifier of ethnic or national identity. It would appear that this is one of the major Soviet influences on post-Soviet Islam. Omel’chenko and Sabirova who have been conducting interviews in post-Soviet Russian republics of Tatarstan and Dagestan show that this understanding of being Muslim is still at large. According to them:

Most frequently they [the respondents] identified themselves as being ‘simply Muslims’, in contrast to being a ‘real Muslim’, a ‘true, pure Muslim’ or a ‘committed (in the sense of complete) Muslim’. In calling themselves ‘simply’ Muslim, respondents understood their Islamic identity as a birthright; since their ancestors were Muslims, so they were Muslims and their children would be Muslims.<sup>262</sup>

The merging of religious and ethnic identity during Soviet times also affected what is considered Islamic practice. Just as Islamic traditions took on

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<sup>260</sup> Roy (2000).

<sup>261</sup> Khalid (2007) pp. 98f.

<sup>262</sup> Omel’chenko and Sabirova (2003a) p. 173.

an ethnic character, other traditions that Muslims celebrated but that had little to do with Islam also ended up as Muslim holidays.<sup>263</sup> Omel'chenko and Sabirova describe how the distinction between ethnic and Muslim rituals and traditions had become blurred in everyday practice:

Respondents sometime confused Islamic festivals with folk ones /.../ for example sabantuy (held at the end of the harvest time) was described as an Islamic festival in Tatarstan. This suggested a significant fusion /.../ of ethnic and Islamic identities.<sup>264</sup>

### Wahhabism à la Soviet

Just before the demise of the Soviet Union various Islamic groups and movements outside the control of government and official Islamic authorities started to appear. These were very different in character and included, for example, the all-union Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) aiming to spread Islam and spiritual rebirth inside the framework of the existing Soviet Union as well as the group Adolat which during a brief period in the early 1990s “took over” the city of Namangan in Uzbekistan imposing features of *shari'a* laws on the population.<sup>265</sup> Despite their differences, these and other groups believed to engage in Islamic activity opposing the official religious structure were commonly referred to as “Wahhabism” by those that did not approve of their existence. According to Roy “the final anti-Islamic campaign, in 1985–87, was launched to counter the penetration of ‘Wahhabism’ among the parallel mullahs”.<sup>266</sup> This term has since then become very popular in the former Soviet sphere and is frequently used by journalists, politicians, researchers and others interchangeably with expressions like fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism, always with negative connotations. Soviet sources from Gorbachev’s earlier years in power describe Wahhabism as “an extremely reactionary and nationalistic synthesis between religion and politics”. In much of the material dealing with the Muslim rebirth in the region after the fall of the Soviet Union there are also references to the so-called Wahhabis, often described as “beardy Muslim fanatics that without hesitation decapitate their secular opponents, without mercy eliminate Russian soldiers and capture journalists and foreigners”.<sup>267</sup> Especially obvious is this trend in Russian and Central Asian press. The president of Uzbekistan,

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<sup>263</sup> Khalid (2007).

<sup>264</sup> Omel'chenko, Elena and Sabirova, Gusev (2003b) Practising Islam. Rituals, Ceremonies and the Transmission of Ethno-Islamic Values. In Pilkington, Hilary and Yemelianova, Galina (eds.) *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia. Public and Private faces*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, p. 192.

<sup>265</sup> These and other groups will be further discussed in Chapter 12.

<sup>266</sup> Roy (2000) p. 153.

<sup>267</sup> Rotar, Igor (2001) *Pod Zelenym Znamenem Islama: Islamskie Radikaly v Rossii i SNG*. Moscow: AIRO-XX.

Islam Karimov, for example, often describes his hunt for Islamic militants as a war against Wahhabism.<sup>268</sup> I find it interesting that even though this expression, owing to its inaccuracy, is often strongly rejected by researchers interested in the former Soviet region, it has remained current.<sup>269</sup>

The expression was however not invented by the Soviets. Wahhabism is believed to originate from what today is Saudi Arabia when a certain Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791) reacted against the features of other religions, like worshipping of saints, an influential practice which had taken hold among local Muslim communities.<sup>270</sup> The goal of the Wahhabis was a return to what they call “original Islam”, based on *shari’a* and the Qur’an, and to recreate the Islamic society from the time of Prophet Mohammed. Wahhabism also became the basis of the Arab independence movement fighting for independence from the Ottoman Empire. Through an alliance between the Wahhabis and the clan of Saud, ancestors to the contemporary rulers of Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism became the basis for today’s political system in Saudi Arabia – a unity of religious and political power with Wahhabism as the official doctrine.<sup>271</sup>

According to some sources the use of the term in the former Soviet Union more concretely stems from the end of the Soviet period when a division in the Central Asian Muslim community, between so-called traditionalists opposed to change and reformists promoting renewal and revival of “pure Islam”, became apparent. One of the traditionalists was the most famous unofficial mullah, Muhammadyan Rustamov, more known under the name Dommulla Hindustani, who became the first to refer to the representatives of this reformist movement as Wahhabi, an expression he picked up during his time in India.<sup>272</sup> It is difficult to say with certainty that those referred to as Wahhabi in the Soviet context had any relation to Wahhabism in its original form. Instead some claim that their outlook is comparable to various Muslim

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<sup>268</sup> The “struggle against Wahhabists” is well documented, for example, in the weekly news updates: *RFE/RL Central Asia Report* ([www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)) and *EurasiaNet Weekly Update* ([www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org))

<sup>269</sup> See for example Akiner, Shirin (2003) *The politicisation of Islam in Postsoviet Central Asia. Religion, State & Society* 31 (2); 97–122; Rashid, Ahmed (2002) *Jihad: the Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Haghayeghi (1996). One exception is Evgeniy Abdullayev that uses the term “*Islamic opposition*” or “*oppositionist Islam*” to describe the religious activists in Central Asia, which in my opinion is a more relevant expression. Abdullayev, Evgeniy (2002) *The Central Asian Nexus*. In Rumer, Boris (ed.) *Central Asia – A Gathering Storm?* Armonk & London: M.E. Sharpe.

<sup>270</sup> Haghayeghi (1996).

<sup>271</sup> Delong-Bas, Natana J. (2004) *Wahhabi Islam. From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>272</sup> Babajanov, Bakhtiyor (2002) *Religiozno Opozitsionnie Gruppy v Uzbekistane*. In *Religiozny Extremizm v Tsentralny Avzii. Problemy i Perspektivi*. OSCE Mission in Tajikistan, Material from a conference in Dushanbe 25 April 2002.

movements in the Middle East (during the 1900s) which encouraged a renaissance of Islam.<sup>273</sup>

In any case I believe the Soviet (mis)use of this concept has played an important role in the mobilization of Islamic activism in the whole post-Soviet area. The official use of it to label all independent forms of Islamic organization, regardless of their content, seems to be the common denominator of everything written about the post-Soviet Muslim republics. Furthermore it has also spread among the public in these countries, then used to refer disparagingly to Muslim activities they find suspicious. As will be further discussed later on in this dissertation I believe that this concept has been rather important in the Azerbaijani context, for it has contributed to establishing a division between the state and certain Islamic groups as well as between certain groups and the society at large.

## Conclusion

Khalid writes: “nowhere is Islam unaffected by the reach of the modern state. The Soviet case is thus far from unique, but it is unique in the intensity of the state’s assault on Islam and the longevity of the regime”.<sup>274</sup> The communist fear of religion’s mobilizing power and official attempts to restrict and control religious belief and expression has had both short and long term consequences for the religious situation in USSR’s former Muslim republics. In the short run, the episodic brutal repression of religion and clergy in the region left the now self-governing Muslim peoples impoverished in respect of Islamic knowledge, literature and education, let alone spiritual leaders and facilities. During the religious “boom” in these countries after independence this was however to some extent addressed through an influx of literature in the country, the opening of many new and old mosques and free access to ecclesiastical education both at home and abroad, much of this through the assistance of foreign missionaries from other Muslim countries.

There are nevertheless other aspects of Soviet influence that are still to a large extent influencing the development of Islam in the post-Soviet states. Despite its anti-religious and atheist policies the Soviet Union did provide an opening for religious traditions and customs to live on. This was through the special emphasis on one’s national identity that every nation-state in the Soviet Union was supposed to have. To the extent Muslim rituals and celebrations became incorporated in this national identity they also became synonymous with ethnic traditions, hence encompassing the whole “nation” rather than just the believers. As a result being “Muslim” became a national identifier rather than an expression of a particular religious belief. As this

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<sup>273</sup> Roy (2000).

<sup>274</sup> Khalid (2007) p. 108.

categorization is not yet without purchase in the Muslim former Soviet republics, I believe it can be seen as a prevailing paradigm of sorts. Moreover, this merging of religious and ethnic identities seem to have made certain Islamic traditions “legitimate” in the eyes of the Soviet authorities as well as the public by de-Islamicizing them. At the same time however the anti-religious propaganda has been successful in the sense that the unequivocal expression of faithfulness is viewed with skepticism as a symbol of the “old” pre-modern society. Even though many people did “return to religion” after independence, I find that religious skepticism is another Soviet prevailing paradigm to be seen in the post-Soviet societies. In Azerbaijan, as I will return to later, it takes the expression of parents forbidding their daughters to wear the veil (as it is a symbol of the old repressive society), as well as the labeling of certain types of religious attributes “suspicious” or “Wahhabi”.

The fact that so-called Muslim Boards are still in place as “the highest Muslim authority” in post-Soviet Azerbaijan as well as in most other post-Soviet Muslim republics shows that little actually has changed since Soviet times when it comes to state – religion relations. Having an “official” Islamic leadership is not unique to the former Soviet Union. This phenomenon can be seen in for example Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt as well and in all these places an institutionalized, state-sponsored clergy is put in place and given a monopoly on the nomination of religious leaders and judges.<sup>275</sup> However, what is striking in the former Soviet republics is that these religious authorities are still functioning even though the state system that created them is gone. Under the communists, when the right to religious belief was restricted, the mosque of the Muslim Board was one of the few that were open. Under the auspices of the Board it gave people the choice to practice religion, but under strict control. In the opinion of most Azerbaijanis (and probably others too) there is little need for such an organ in a post-communist context; opportunities for believers since independence abound! New and old mosques are open and Muslims are, at least in theory, free to exercise religion as they wish. The continued existence of these institutions shows the inability of religious and political leaders to break free from the past, both institutionally and mentally. This can be interpreted as “path dependency”, as the continued existence of Muslim Boards is clearly a “return of the past” that indicates the difficulty of secular and religious authorities to reorient themselves away from the erstwhile Soviet institutional system. A more concrete focus on Azerbaijan in this regard will begin in the next chapter, where the concept of “official Islam” in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, as both example of “path-dependency” and of “prevailing paradigm”, will be discussed. The chapter starts off with a general introduction of Islam in Azerbaijan and hones in on the particular mosques under scrutiny in this study.

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<sup>275</sup> Roy, Olivier (1994) *The Failure of Political Islam*. London: I.B Tauris.



## 6. Official and Unofficial Islam in the Post-Soviet Azerbaijani Context

After last chapter's outline of the religious situation in the Soviet period, it is now time to start looking into the current state of affairs, to narrow down the focus to, Azerbaijani case. This chapter does that through an introduction of the religious environment in Azerbaijan, which will start with a general overview and continue along this line to discuss definite features of post-Soviet developments in more detail. In the overview I will return to last chapter's idea of a prevailing Soviet paradigm as well as a path dependency determined by Soviet institutions through the lingering notion and presence of "official Islam". It will also contain a presentation of "unofficial Islam" in the present Azerbaijani context, that is, an examination of the two mosque communities that are the main focus of this thesis, Abu Bakr and Juma.



Illustration 3 Map of the Republic of Azerbaijan. © International Crisis Group 2004.

## Background

The majority of the 7.5 million people in Azerbaijan consider themselves Muslim.<sup>276</sup> The Islamicization of Azerbaijan took place during the Arab conquest under Omar's caliphate, sometime between 639 and 643. At that time Zoroastrianism was prominent in the territory of what is now known as Azerbaijan and one of the terms of capitulation was that the Arabs agreed to respect the sanctity of the Zoroastrian fire temples (some of which are preserved and functioning in modern times).<sup>277</sup>



*Illustration 4* Firetemple on the Absheron Peninsula. Photo: Garth Bedford

As the country in the 1500s was taken over from the Turkic and Mongol dynasties by the Persian Shah, the Twelver Shi'ite branch of Islam became dominant.<sup>278</sup> However Sunni Islam continued to be influential in certain parts

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<sup>276</sup> Most sources give around 90%, see for example Motika (2001), Cornell (2006) or Hadjyade, Hikmet (2005a) Sociological Survey on the Amount and Quality of Believers in Azerbaijan in *The Final Report on the Program "State of Religion, Religion and State in Azerbaijan after the September 11"*, Baku: Far Centre for Economic and Political Research [in Russian]. More info about the FAR Centre can be found at [www.kitabxana.org](http://www.kitabxana.org).

<sup>277</sup> Shaffer, Brenda (2004) Republic of Azerbaijan. In Babak, Vladimir, Vaisman, Demian and Wasserman, Arey (eds.) *Political Organization in Central Asia and Azerbaijan*. London, Portland: Frank Cass.

<sup>278</sup> For more information on the Twelver Shi'ites in general as well as Azerbaijan in particular see: Brunner, Rainer and Ende, Werner (eds.) (2001) *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times. Religious Culture & Political History*. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill.

of the country and it is estimated that about 70% of the Muslim population in Azerbaijan is Shi'ite and 30% Sunni. Sunni Islam is traditionally dominant among Lezgins and Avars in the northern and western parts of Azerbaijan that borders the Russian Caucasus, while the central, eastern and southern parts (bordering Iran) of Azerbaijan as well as Baku and its suburbs, are traditionally Shi'ite communities.<sup>279</sup> An interesting feature of the Soviet policy against Islam in Azerbaijan in this respect was that, as it did not differentiate between Sunnis and Shi'as, Balci writes, "it unintentionally contributed to the smoothing out of differences between the two doctrines".<sup>280</sup> The post-Soviet official propaganda likes to stress that tolerance always existed between the two groups and, as a matter of fact, many mosques in the country still cater to the needs of both groups.<sup>281</sup> However, due to an increased knowledge about Islam in general and the return of many young people receiving religious or secular education in other Muslim countries this situation is noticeably changing.

Many Azerbaijanis (and others too) see their country as a bridge between "East and West" and pride themselves of their country's tolerant stance on other religions. Suleymanov for example, writes that Azerbaijan is a "place where Europe meets Asia, where the Turkic world meets Iran and the Caucasus, and different Islamic groups meet different Christian and Jewish ones".<sup>282</sup> Even if Islam is the dominant belief, other faiths like Christianity and Judaism have a long history of representation in Azerbaijan. As an example 165 kilometers northwest of Baku the village Krasnaya Sloboda (The Red Settlement) used to be the only completely Jewish settlement outside Israel.<sup>283</sup> In Baku city center quite well preserved Jewish quarters can be found as well. After independence Christian sects like the Evangelic Christians, Baptist, Adventists and The Jehovah's Witnesses have also been active in Azerbaijan. This multifaceted religious environment is not always however seen as an asset. In my fieldwork I was often told, both by state representatives as well as others, that religion and religious expression needed to be controlled in order to avoid chaos and conflict between confessions. Increased attempts to control religious organizations and to curtail foreign influences, as will be discussed later, has resulted in among other things a

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<sup>279</sup> Abbasov (2001).

<sup>280</sup> Balci (2004), p. 207.

<sup>281</sup> Dragazade (1994). Interestingly enough I appear to have visited the same Mosque as Dragazade, but ten or so years later, hearing the same thing.

<sup>282</sup> Suleymanov, Elin (2001) Azerbaijan, Azerbaijanis and the Search for Identity. *Analysis of current events* 13 (1), p. 1. See also for example Tohidi (2002) and Polonski (1999) for similar thoughts.

<sup>283</sup> Read more about the Krasnaya Sloboda settlement in Mikdash-Shamailov, Liya (ed.) (2002) *Mountain Jews. Customs and Daily Life in the Caucasus*. Jerusalem: The Israel Museum.

harsher climate for many foreign religious representatives during the late 1990s.<sup>284</sup>

During perestroika and after independence, Azerbaijan experienced something of a religious ‘boom’ as religion re-emerged in the public scene.<sup>285</sup> The few mosques that existed in Soviet times suddenly turned into thousands, other places of worship were restored, many religious organizations registered and the opportunity to study religion in the country as well as to travel to religious universities abroad was established. In 1993 the Muslim holiday of Gurban Bayram was again officially allowed to be celebrated and an Azerbaijani translation of the Qur’an published for the first time in many years.<sup>286</sup>

In response to the increased opportunities to publicly express their faith, the number of actual believers since independence seems to be on the rise. In a 2004 survey by the FAR Center (Center for Economical and Political Research, Baku) 96,7% of the respondents consider themselves religious, which can be compared to a 1998 survey conducted by the Institute for Peace and Democracy in Azerbaijan, when the percentage reached 71%.<sup>287</sup> The results of this type of surveys must however be taken with a grain of salt considering that, as discussed in the previous chapter, Soviet policy against Islam had led a large part of the population in Azerbaijan to gauge Islam as purely a part of the national identity rather than a religious belief.

## Islam as component of the secular Azerbaijani identity

Despite the Islamic revival Azerbaijan is in earlier research often referred to as a secular state, or even, as noted in the introduction, the most secularized of the post-Soviet Islamic republics.<sup>288</sup> This seems to be related to the Azerbaijani people as well as to the official position of the Azerbaijani state. As Dragadze has noted, at the beginning of independence conventional Muslim traditions such as daily prayers, the paying of charity tax and fasting were rarely followed even in the most rural areas.<sup>289</sup> At the same time, as Motika points out, Islamic traditions and beliefs were still part of many Azerbaijanis

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<sup>284</sup> Corley, Felix (2005) Azerbaijan: Selective Obstruction of Foreign Religious Workers. *Forum 18 News* 1 November.

<sup>285</sup> Even if I only discuss this so-called religious boom in terms of Islam many other Religions experienced an upswing in a similar way as well.

<sup>286</sup> Gasanov, R.M (2003) Islam v Obshestvenno-Politicheskoy Zhizni Sovremennogo Azerbaydzhana. *SocIs [Sociologicheskiye Issledovaniya]* 3.

<sup>287</sup> Hadjyade, Hikmet (2005b) *The Final Report on the Program “State of Religion, Religion and State in Azerbaijan after the September 11”*. Baku: Far Centre for Economic and Political Research [in Russian].

<sup>288</sup> Tohidi (2000); Dragadze (1994).

<sup>289</sup> Dragadze (1994).

everyday life, but understood as national instead of religious customs.<sup>290</sup> This view is supported by among others Polonski, who finds that in post-Soviet Azerbaijan "a nominal Islam prevails, where the form is what counts and the values are forgotten"<sup>291</sup>, a development that appears to be similar to that of other post-Soviet Muslim republics such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, discussed briefly in the previous chapter.

This nominal Islam mainly takes the expression of shrine pilgrimage and the worshipping of saints. This type of religious expression survived and possibly flourished during Soviet times. In this context Balci gives the interesting example of the shrine of Mir Movsim At Agha in Shovelan, 40 kilometers outside Baku. The pilgrimage to the grave of this saint who is known for his ability to conduct miracles actually started during the Soviet period after his death in 1951, showing that some religious activity was possible and, as noted earlier, even embraced.<sup>292</sup> The shrine of At Agha is still a popular destination for pilgrims, and so are other shrines, e.g. Ali ayaghi (Ali's foot), located in Buzovna, a suburb of Baku on the Absheron peninsula. The shrine consists of an indentation in the rock, which is allegedly the footprint of the prophet Ali (or possibly his horses).

The popularity of the shrines can be understood in many ways. First, their ubiquitousness itself makes them easily accessible by those in rural areas. Almost every village has a shrine of some sort.<sup>293</sup> At the same time even though most shrines, in contradistinction to mosques, are located outside the urban areas, people from the cities frequently visit them. Both Balci and Motika relate the popularity of the shrines to the fact that in post-Soviet times, when particular expressions of Islam had been objected to by the state, these places of worship represented a "neutral" kind of Islam attractive to worshippers uncommitted to any specific brand of Islam. There they cannot be accused of being affiliated with the "wrong" mosque or other unpopular Islamic organization.<sup>294</sup> I further believe that the shrines are favored because visiting them doesn't actually require any religious commitment or knowledge. Whereas a visit to the mosque might demand some knowledge about prayers and routines, the visit to the shrine is much more informal. Activities at the shrines might consist of circling a grave or other holy object, the kissing or touching of the same and, most importantly, the donation of cash, silk, sugar cubes, tea or other food as well as the tying of ribbons or strips of cloth at or near a shrine, all in order to get your wish granted.

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<sup>290</sup> Motika (2001a).

<sup>291</sup> Polonski (1999).

<sup>292</sup> Balci (2004).

<sup>293</sup> Saroyan (1997).

<sup>294</sup> Balci (2004); Motika (2001a); Dragadze (1994).



*Illustration 5* Post-Soviet Islam. All over the former Soviet Union Muslims are hoping to get their wish fulfilled by tying of pieces of cloth (or whatever at hand, such as rags, socks, hair scrunchies etc.) at places that are believed to possess supranational powers. Photo: Sofie Bedford.

For many of those who visit the shrines, Islam is incorporated in the secular context as a cultural and social aspect of life rather than as a religious directive.<sup>295</sup> A visitor to post-Soviet Azerbaijan describes the situation:

People identified themselves as Muslims and as members of a Muslim nation, but in the same breath defended materialism and the fact that there is no God. Others stated that they are Muslims and raised their glass and bragged that they have never prayed.<sup>296</sup>

As discussed above, this is often explained as a result of Soviet influence, emphasizing Islamic rituals as national traditions while detaching them from their religious context. Others say that the widespread secularism in Azerbai-

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<sup>295</sup> Shaffer, Brenda (2002) *Borders and Brethren. Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press.

<sup>296</sup> Safizadeh, Fereydoun (1998) On Dilemmas of Identity in the Post-Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. *Caucasian Regional Studies* 3 (1).

jan has even deeper roots. According to Swietochowski, Azeri intellectuals began the process of transforming the previously religious-based Muslim identity into a nationality-based Azerbaijani identity already during the time the country was a part of the Russian Empire.<sup>297</sup> This work culminated during the short-lived independent Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918–1920) when the doctrine of Turkic nationalism, promoting Islam as a part of a cultural heritage and the basis of a new Turkic identity, dominated political life.<sup>298</sup> More or less since this time Azerbaijan, both on state and popular levels, gives the impression of having been guided by an orientation towards Turkey and the West rather than towards its other Asian neighbors, and Islam has been a component, but not necessarily the primary one, of this Turk(ic) ethnic identity.<sup>299</sup> During Soviet times this view of Islam as an inseparable component of the ethnic identity of the Azerbaijanis was strengthened. At the same time, the notion that if not controlled Islam could turn out to be potentially explosive for the political status-quo took root among the political leadership. To a large extent remaining in the saddle after independence, these selfsame leaders carried these sentiments over to the post-Soviet context as well.

## Islam and politics in post-Soviet Azerbaijan: a complex relationship

The Soviet influence on ideas and institutions makes the relationship between religion and politics after independence in Azerbaijan complex. After Azerbaijan became a self-governing state the authorities decided that, on the one hand, the country would be secular, but, on the other hand, it would distance itself from the atheist politics of the Soviet Union. The idea of a secular state is “sacred” among the authorities, as religion and politics are to remain separate at all costs. At the same time political leaders promote religion as an important part of national ideology.<sup>300</sup>

In this spirit many Azerbaijani political leaders used religion in idiosyncratic ways to strengthen their leadership. Both President Abulfaz Elchibey and President Heydar Aliyev showed their commitment to religion by swearing the presidential oath on the Qur’an during their inauguration. They also took part in almost every important Muslim event celebrated. During an official visit to Saudi Arabia Heydar Aliyev even completed the *umra*

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<sup>297</sup> Hadjyzade, Hikmet (1998) A New Identity for a New Azerbaijan. *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 14; Tohed (2000); Swietochowski (2004)

<sup>298</sup> Hadjyzade (1998).

<sup>299</sup> Dragadze (1994).

<sup>300</sup> Shaffer (2002).

(smaller pilgrimage) to Mecca.<sup>301</sup> Furthermore, many of the political parties, pro-government as well as oppositional have to some extent realized the importance of taking religion into account when presenting their program; promising to solve the problem some veiled women are experiencing, promising to re-instate Azerbaijan morale values and assuring the public that they are frequent visitors to the mosque themselves.<sup>302</sup> One of the largest opposition parties, Musavat, even has a special department consisting of specialists formulating party policy in relation to religious issues.<sup>303</sup> While this way of displaying religion, as a part of the identity, appears to be accepted by the state, intermingling religion and politics is considered objectionable.

In general most Azerbaijanis also seem to share their leaders' view of Islam and strongly support the idea that religion and politics should remain separate.<sup>304</sup> As Altstadt notes:

Noteworthy by their absence from political life are religious themes or rhetoric. In keeping with Azerbaijan's long tradition of secular politics and anti-clericalism almost all political groups cast their demands in terms of national needs, economic development, political sovereignty or protection of the national homeland and its culture. Islam, although important in culture and personal life, has not been used for political mobilization, political organization, for unifying population, or defining any major political platform in Azerbaijan.<sup>305</sup>

Polonski too that finds that Islam does not appear to be an influential force in any level of Azerbaijani society. "They [people] respect it [Islam], they utilize it, but they are not led by it", he concludes.<sup>306</sup> On a similar note Valiyev and Valiyev write that "a supermarket in New York or the market in Istanbul is more attractive to the local population [in Azerbaijan] than the anti-American slogans of Ayatollah Khomeini".<sup>307</sup>

Nevertheless, during a brief period in the beginning of Azerbaijani independence a number of parties and social organizations with religious agendas existed, but have since been banned from the political arena. The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), for example, was created in 1991 and officially registered in 1992. In connection to the 1995 municipal elections the registration was however cancelled with the motivation that the party was unconstitutionally mixing political and religious activities and receiving financial support from abroad (Iran). In May 1996 four persons from the party's lead-

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<sup>301</sup> Sattarov, Rufat (2004) Islam as a Political Factor in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan. *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 4 (28): 7–14.

<sup>302</sup> Senior lecturer, Baku, April 2004.

<sup>303</sup> Gasanov (2003).

<sup>304</sup> Dragzade (1994).

<sup>305</sup> Altstadt, Audrey L. (1992) *The Azerbaijani Turks. Power and Identity under Russian rule*. Stanford: Hoover institution press, p. 209.

<sup>306</sup> Polonski (1999).

<sup>307</sup> Valiyev and Valiyev (2003).p. 11.



ership were arrested for “anti-state” activity and later received long prison sentences after which the party in principle has disappeared from the public eye.<sup>308</sup>

The crackdown IPA illustrates the state’s efforts at keeping the political arena secular by banning political parties and political leaders exhibiting religious connections. By incorporating Islam in their political platforms and programs as something more than just an ethnic identifier, they become representatives of an “oppositional” Islam which appears threatening to authorities, to a large extent because of apprehension towards what they themselves know to be true from Soviet times, that is, the mobilizing powers of religion. As I will get back to shortly, the fate of the Juma mosque community provides a more recent illustration of this policy. That being said there are many differences between the IPA and the Juma mosque. Perhaps the most important one is that whereas the Juma mosque community and its program are for the most part popular in Azerbaijani society, the government’s campaign against them being seen as illegitimate, people generally agree with the repression of the IPA, for it has a negative reputation of being run by a group of anti-Semitic, “Iranian-friendly”, uneducated “post-Soviet lumpen intelligentsia”<sup>309</sup>.

It would appear that just by promoting Islam as a part of the official state ideology the government’s ambition to keep religion separate from politics becomes problematic. By creating organs to control and regulate religious activity, such as the State Committee for the Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) that I will get back below, there is an obvious interference in religious matters by the secular state. This becomes even more noticeable through the intimate association between secular and religious authorities: although formally a relationship between two independent entities, it appears to be very similar to that obtaining during the Soviet era.

## The prevalence of Official Islam

When the euphoria during the religious boom that followed independence dampened, it became clear that President Aliyev intended to keep the separation established during Soviet times between “official” and “unofficial” Is-

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<sup>308</sup> Gasanov (2003); Swietochowski, Tadeusz (2002) Azerbaijan: The Hidden Faces of Islam. *World Policy Journal* 19 (3); Askerovich, Hajji Hadjiaga Nuri Ali, Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, Baku, Azerbaijan April 2004. Three of them were released after 3 ½ and the fourth died during his time in prison due to unknown circumstances. After that more members have been arrested again on similar charges. The latest such incident to my knowledge was the arrest of party leader Ali Akram Hajji in connection to clashes between police and inhabitants of Nardaran (a village outside Baku) as a result of their social protest, in June 2002. Nevertheless the party continued to exist under a more moderate leadership and without official registration.

<sup>309</sup> Polonski (1999) These formulations, but in English instead of Russian, can be found in Valiyev & Valiyev (2003) however without any mentioning of Polonski.

lam, as witnessed by his continued support of the Caucasus Muslim Board (*Dukhovniy Upravleniye Musolman Kavkaza*), the direct successor of the Stalinist Muslim Board of Transcaucasus<sup>310</sup>, discussed in the previous chapter.

According to the *Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief* Islamic religious communities in Azerbaijan are, as in Soviet times, “subordinated by the Caucasian Muslims Board, in terms of organizational matters [sic]”.<sup>311</sup> This means the Muslim Board is responsible for all mosques in the country and for appointing religious servants and associates. They are also responsible for education at the only official higher Islamic education facility, the Islamic University of Baku, whose graduates in theory are the only ones that can be appointed to work in the mosques subordinated to the Board. Other functions of the Board are to provide topics for Friday noon prayers and to organize the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca)<sup>312</sup>.

According to the directives of the Muslim Board the head of the board, *Sheikh-ül-Islam*, is a Shi’ite and his first deputy, the *Mufti* a Sunni. Even though on paper one has higher rank than the other they are, according to the first deputy, in reality working side by side as they have different responsibilities. While *Sheikh-ül-Islam*’s main responsibility is the Shi’a part of the population the *Mufti* is responsible for dealing with Sunni issues.<sup>313</sup> *Sheikh-ül-Islam* possesses quite extensive powers. He appoints the first deputy, the deputy, the other staff of the board and even the staff for the Islamic university in Baku.<sup>314</sup> *Sheikh-ül-Islam* has an elected body of 25 *Qazis* (judges) to assist him. These control the activities of local religious Boards in specific regions.<sup>315</sup>

Officially the Board’s authority includes all Shi’as of the CIS and all the Sunnis in the whole Caucasus area. In reality however, as pointed out by other researchers and mentioned by representatives of the board as well, this authority cover only Muslims in Azerbaijan and Georgia as in North Caucasus a number of local Muslim Boards exist.<sup>316</sup> Even the impact of this authority can be questioned. Many mosques and most religious servants in Azerbaijan seem officially to obey the *Sheikh-ül-Islam* and the Muslim board. My impression however, which can be supported by other literature, is that the Muslim Board in general has very little authority among the wider popula-

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<sup>310</sup> *Transcaucasus* is a translation of the Russian *Zakavkazie* meaning “the area beyond the Caucasus Mountains” referring to the republics that today are called Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Today this area is more often referred to as South Caucasus.

<sup>311</sup> *Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief*, Chapter 1, Article 8.

<sup>312</sup> Agayev, Hajji Akif, Deputy of the Caucasus Muslim Board, Baku, April 22 2004.

<sup>313</sup> Musaev, Hajji Salman, First Deputy, Caucasus Muslim Board, Baku, May 2005.

<sup>314</sup> Hadjyzade (2005b) as well as interviews with representatives of the Caucasus Muslim Board in 2004 and 2005.

<sup>315</sup> Hadjyzade (2005b) pp. 7–10.

<sup>316</sup> Motika (2001a) and Musaev, Hajji Salman, First Deputy, Caucasus Muslim Board, Baku, June 2 2005.

tion, who questions the need of a Soviet-created Muslim board in the post-Soviet system.<sup>317</sup> This critique perhaps becomes especially relevant when, as noted above, the Board's responsibilities cannot be said to have diverged in any significant way since Soviet times.

The same appears to be true for the official rhetoric of the Board's leaders. As noted by Saroyan:

What is perhaps surprising about the recent forms and content of the argumentation of the religious scholars is its essential continuity with the traditions of Soviet Islamic argument. /.../If in the past the ulama praised Soviet power for the realization of Islamic ideals, under perestroika they praised the Soviet innovations of glasnost and perestroika for allowing restitution of religious rights and self-esteem to the pious population.<sup>318</sup>

This finding indicates that even though, as in fact during Soviet times, the Muslim Board is supposed to be an independent body, detached from the state, its leaders easily adopt to changes in politics and act very loyal towards whoever is in power. One example is when *Sheikh-ül-Islam*, at the congress of the Caucasus Muslim Board in 2003, called on all Muslims to vote for the incumbent president, Heydar Aliyev, during the forthcoming presidential elections in October — using the slogan “To oppose Heydar Aliyev means to oppose the will of Allah”!<sup>319</sup>

The Board's relationship with the state has nonetheless not been without problems. According to some sources the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations was unofficially established to balance and control the Muslim Board, which has led to rather complex relations between the two bodies.<sup>320</sup>

However, it is not only the Board's loyalty to the state that has given it a rather negative reputation. Many, believers and non believers alike, also seem to be especially skeptic towards the head of the Board during the time of this study, *Sheikh-ül-Islam* Hajji Allahshukur Pashazade, elected to this position in 1980 while the Board was still under Soviet control. During my

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<sup>317</sup> See for example Motika (2001a).

<sup>318</sup> Saroyan (1994) p. 527.

<sup>319</sup> Useinov, Arif & Danill Shchapkov (2003) The Head of Caucasian Moslems Has Been Elected For Life In Baku, But He Is Not Recognized By All Of Them, *Russia and the Moslem World* 11 (137): 41–42, p. 41. As Heydar Aliyev stepped down from the October 2003 presidential elections on the grounds of ill-health it became his son, Ilham that won the presidency. Heydar Aliyev died just a few months later (on December 12 2003).

<sup>320</sup> Balci (2004); International Crisis Group (2004) Azerbaijan: Turning Over a New Leaf? *ICG Europe Report* 156. According to Nazli, though, when the first chairman of this committee, Rafik Aliyev, was replaced in 2006 this might have helped smooth these relations. In August 2006 the new chairman Orujov held the committee's first meeting with the Muslim Board since its establishment during which he critiqued the committee's previous management's work and promised increased cooperation between the two organs. Nazli, H. Kaan (2007) Azerbaijan. In *Freedom House Nations in Transit*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

fieldwork in Azerbaijan I was at numerous occasions assured that *Sheikh-ül-Islam* had in fact been a KGB spy during communist times, an accusation which has resulted in a loss of respect from the general public.<sup>321</sup> The fact that *Sheikh-ül-Islam* at the above mentioned 2003 conference was elected as the head of the Board for life did little to improve his reputation.<sup>322</sup> Interestingly enough even those who say they are not religious still have an opinion about *Sheikh-ül-Islam*. A taxi driver told me he once saw Pashulzade in a TV show and took an instant disliking to him as his appearance did not correspond well with his religious mission. “He showed his big villa and even the refrigerator that was full with food. He himself is getting fatter and fatter every year. This is wrong to do when many people don’t even have food”, he concluded.<sup>323</sup>

Another problem shadowing the official religious administration is corruption, which in general constitutes one of the major problems of Azerbaijan society. There is a widespread concern among people in Azerbaijan over who collects the contents of the *Nazir Qutusu*, the “black boxes”, and what the money is being used for. *Nazir Qutusu* refers to boxes used to collect donations placed strategically inside or outside most of the mosques in the country. According to the Muslim Board the money is collected by the local *Qazi* and then used for paying salaries, renovations and other practical purposes. Some people are however convinced that most money goes directly to the pocket of the head of the Muslim Board *Sheikh-ül-Islam* and his associates. Interestingly enough, such suspicions do not stop the public from donating money through the boxes. “Nobody knows how much money is in there and where it goes. Everybody hopes it is for a good cause and a religious purpose,” I was told by one respondent.<sup>324</sup> Another person explains the donations as a result of the Azerbaijanis limited knowledge about religious worship. “In Azerbaijan”, he said, “people believe the way you express your spirituality is through paying money”.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Considering that the members of the board at that time were handpicked by the Soviets as being especially cooperative I can understand the origins of this rumor.

<sup>322</sup> Useinov & Shchapkov (2003).

<sup>323</sup> Nazim, taxi driver in Baku, May 2005.

<sup>324</sup> Nazim, taxi driver in Baku, May 2005.

<sup>325</sup> Teacher, Baku, September 2005.



*Illustration 6* Donation at the Bibi-Heybat Mosque. Basically every car that passes by this spot just south of Baku stops to make a bequest, in order to ensure safe traveling. Photo: Sofie Bedford

To round-up, even if it is just one of the pieces in the puzzle, I see the prevailing notion of an “official” Islam as an important feature when trying to understand the mobilization of Islamic activism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Thus, this is something that I will return to continuously throughout this dissertation. Both mosque communities that I will be focusing on do in one way or another question the legitimacy of the state-sponsored religious authority as well as the view of Islam as only a part of a national identity. The time has now come for me to introduce these communities a bit more thoroughly and elaborate on what has made their mobilization controversial in the eyes of the political establishment.

## Islamic activism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan

### The Juma community

The major trouble for the Shi’ite Juma mosque community started when they refused to renew their state registration and also disputed the right of the Muslim Board to oversee their activities.

The Imam of the Juma mosque associates this requirement to the situation under the Russian empire when all subjects had to obey the tsar:

Their [the members of the Muslim Boards'] goal is to lead the Muslims and make them — I apologize — sheep. That is to make them just sit and pray in the mosque, and obey the tsar. Today Nicolay, tomorrow Nicolay the second, then the sixth and suddenly its not even Nicolay anymore but someone else and they will obey him too.<sup>326</sup>

The schism between the state and the community escalated when the mosque's popular Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, was arrested during a political demonstration in 2003, accused of using his religious position for political purposes, illegal according to Azerbaijani law.<sup>327</sup> After his release he continued to loudly criticize the government for the lack of human and political rights in the country, which further fuelled their displeasure. The dispute around this community intensified in the summer of 2004 as they were evicted from their mosque. The 14th century Juma mosque, where the community has been located since 1992, used to be a carpet museum during Soviet times. The mosque is located within the Old Town, a designated national heritage site, and therefore allegedly belongs to the state.<sup>328</sup> Since the state decided that the building was in desperate need of renovation the mosque has been closed since the community's eviction. The community has filed the case of their eviction at the European Court of Justice, but so far (2008) nothing is resolved. In the meantime the community continues its activities elsewhere.<sup>329</sup>

As will also be further discussed, the Juma Imam, in his own words, promotes a “democratic” approach to Islamic practice and worship, which is allegedly what made this congregation especially popular among young educated Azerbaijanis. The mosque community has around 1000 members, a majority being under 35 years old.<sup>330</sup> However, this approach to Islam does not appear to be appreciated by everybody. The fact that the Imam received his religious education in the Islamic republic of Iran, a country with which Azerbaijan's relations are complicated to say the least, has made him and his community suspect in the eyes of both representatives of the government apparatus as well as some other religious communities. The Imam has been accused of “preaching a pro-Iranian position”, which has further resulted in

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<sup>326</sup> Ibragimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004.

<sup>327</sup> *Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, Section 3, Chapter 5, Article 85. I will get back to this law when discussing the Political Context in Azerbaijan in chapter 9.

<sup>328</sup> Rzayev, Shahin and Abbasov, Rufat (2004) Azerbaijan: embattled Mosque defiant. *Caucasus Report Service, Institute for War and Peace* 241.

<sup>329</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam, Juma Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004, May 28 and September 2005.

<sup>330</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam, Juma Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004, May 28 and September 2005.

him and his community being referred to as Shi'a radicals in some circles.<sup>331</sup> Among the general public Ilgar Ibrahimoglu and his community however appear to be popular. Especially during and just after his prison term in 2004, I got the impression that most people I met saw the Imam as something of a martyr, suffering for his work for human and religious rights. This dual view was also supported by others' observations. Goltz for example writes that:

Among Western diplomats in Azerbaijan, he [Ibrahimoglu] is referred to as 'the Sheikh.' Local and international human rights advocates call him a 'friend.' In the eyes of Azerbaijani officials, however, Ibrahimoglu is a 'dangerous fundamentalist,' 'political rabble-rouser' and a 'shameless self-promoter.'<sup>332</sup>

### The Abu Bakr community

The Sunni Juma<sup>333</sup> mosque, better known as Abu Bakr mosque, has often been pictured as a hotbed of Muslim radicalism, terrorism and extremism. In early spring of 2001, the Military Court for Grave Crimes sentenced a number of Azerbaijanis who planned to fight in Chechnya. As all the aspiring fighters had been praying in the Abu Bakr mosque and were allegedly recruited there by Chechen rebels the Imam of the Abu Bakr mosque was summoned to testify on the case. During another trial concerning the pan-Islamic Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement it also became known that its members had visited the Abu Bakr mosque.<sup>334</sup> Endeavoring to close the mosque as a result of the above events proved, however, unsuccessful, but restrictions were put on their activities and their selling of religious literature was allegedly banned.<sup>335</sup> The charges might have been dismissed but the relationship between the community and the state was severely damaged. In connection to the trial the mosque received a lot of negative public attention that resulted in the label "Wahhabi" mosque.<sup>336</sup> In this context, the book *The Thieves of Honor...Wahhabis*, written by the eccentric Hajji Abdul,<sup>337</sup> is a

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<sup>331</sup> Representative for SCWRA, Baku, April 22, 2004.

<sup>332</sup> Goltz, Thomas (2004) Closure of Mosque does not Auger Well for Azerbaijani Freedoms. *Eurasianet* 5/27/04.

<sup>333</sup> I was explained that as *Juma* means Friday a *Juma Mosque* is basically a mosque where Friday prayers (the most important prayer of the week) is conducted and therefore many mosques have this name.

<sup>334</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2003) *Azerbaijan: International Religious Freedom Report* and Valiyev (2005a).

<sup>335</sup> Fuller, Liz (2002) Could 'Alternative' Islam Become a Force in Azerbaijani Politics? *RFE/RL Newslines* 6 (50). This ban however does not seem to stop religious literature being sold from a stand across the road just outside the Mosque entrance.

<sup>336</sup> See for example Rashidoglu, A. (2003) Vakhabism – Shiism: *Stolknoveniye Religioznikh Techeniy ili Voina za Neft. Zerkolo* 44.

<sup>337</sup> Creator of Azerbaijan's first religious NGO, Tovba and now affiliated with the Imam Hussein Mosque in Baku. For more on Hajji Abdul and his religious and Political activities

good example of the common understanding of Wahhabism and the attitude towards the Abu Bakr community in particular. Already in the first paragraph it is stated “Wahhabism is lacking the potential to build and create – it can only destroy”. The whole book continues in the same spirit, especially noticeable in this respect are the chapters “Girls that become Wahhabi are forced to drink blood” and “Abu Bakr – a damned place”.<sup>338</sup>



*Illustration 7* The Abu Bakr Mosque. Photo: Sofie Bedford

The accusations of Wahhabism also follow from the fact that the construction of the mosque was financed by the Azerbaijani branch of a Kuwaiti society called The Revival of Islamic Heritage.<sup>339</sup> Furthermore, the Imam of the mosque, Gahmet Sulemanov graduated from the World Islamic University of Medina, Saudi Arabia and according to the community’s webpage this mosque is the biggest in Azerbaijan for the followers of Sunni Islam.<sup>340</sup> As the majority of Muslims in the country are traditionally Shi’a this is in

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see Motika, Raol (2001b) *Islamskie Seti v Azerbaydzhane 90-kh Godov*. In D.E. Furman (ed.), *Azerbydzhan i Rossiya: Obshestvo i Gosudarstvo*. Moscow: Letnii sad.

<sup>338</sup> Hajji Abdul, (2004), *Vori Chesti.... Vakhkhabisti*. Baku: Araz.

<sup>339</sup> Valiyev and Valiyev (2003).

<sup>340</sup> The webpage for the Mosque Abu Bakr: [www.abubakr-mescidi.com](http://www.abubakr-mescidi.com) used to be available in Azerbaijani, Russian and English. At the time of writing (November 2008) only the Azerbaijani version of the main page seems to remain. I did find another Russian version of the Abu Bakr webpage: [www.abubekr.narod.ru](http://www.abubekr.narod.ru) that seem to contain all the same information as the previous version, at least on the main page.



itself quite controversial. Moreover, the mosque has fast become one of the most popular mosques in the city of Baku, which is generally considered a Shi'a stronghold. While more traditional mosques have few if any visitors it is estimated that as many as 8000 people come to Abu Bakr for Friday prayer, most of these, as mentioned previously, under 35 years old.<sup>341</sup>



*Illustration 8* Friday Prayer at the Abu Bakr Mosque. After my observations outside the mosque during Friday mid-day prayer I can confirm that there were generally a large number of visitors. A huge amount of cars were parked along the road next to the mosque as well. Photo: Sofie Bedford

Also the Abu Bakr community did initially refuse to register with the state. What's more, during its first years of existence the Imam's authority was questioned, as he was not appointed by the Caucasus Muslim Board. At some point an alternative Imam was assigned to the mosque by the religious authorities although this did not seem to have affected the work of the mosque much. The leaders of the Abu Bakr mosque have since been rethinking their strategy and now their official position is that the community cooperates with the Muslim Board when necessary, and so they have received their state registration. Still, among the general visitors to the mosque the Muslim Board is not very popular. During interviews there one woman de-

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<sup>341</sup> I got the number 7000 in an interview with Imam Sulemanov and have also read it in other sources — see for example Rzayev, I. (2003) Upravleniye Musolman Kavkaza Obyazano Vipolnyat Ustav. *Echo* February 14.

scribed the Board as a “waste of space” (*pustoye mesto*) and she insisted that the Board was Shi’a biased. “They gave humanitarian aid, but first asked ‘are you Sunni or Shi’ite?’”, she said.<sup>342</sup> Moreover she complained about the corruption in the Board in regards to their monopoly on organizing the *Hajj* to Mecca. According to her “it’s very expensive to do the Hajj. That’s why only those who have close friends or relatives in the Muslim Board can go”.<sup>343</sup> The attitude towards “official Islam” is not the only issue where the official line of the leadership in the mosque and the visitors is at variance, rather it seems that underneath the mosque leadership’s outward stance towards the state it is possible to find a skepticism towards the way post-Soviet Azerbaijani society has developed not unlike what is heard among Juma mosque community members.

## Conclusion

After independence the Soviet secular mindset seemed to prevail both on the state as well as at the public level in Azerbaijan. The simmering conflict between the state and particular Muslim communities, questioning the state’s attempt to renew control over religious expression in the late 1990s, showed that there were those who wanted something from religion. The remainder of this thesis will analyze the mobilization of the Juma mosque community and the Abu Bakr mosque community, in order to shed some light on this new turn of events. This is to be done using the framework of analysis outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. According to this framework the mobilization process has group specific aspects (organizational, cognitive), contextual aspects (national political and extrinsic) and is also influenced by the interaction between the movements and the state which they oppose. Hence, as I continue to analyze the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities’ mobilization processes the respective chapters that follow will in turn focus on each of these components, starting with the organizational.

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<sup>342</sup> Woman 5, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>343</sup> Woman 5, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

## 7. Mobilization and Organization: Free Spaces for Young Seekers

From the theoretical introduction it could be concluded that one of the main components of the mobilization process was organizational. Without social networks, members and leaders would not be consolidated and in the absence of free spaces the mobilization would not have anywhere to take place. In this chapter I will elaborate on the organizational aspect of mobilization as exemplified by the cases of the Juma and the Abu Bakr mosque communities, respectively.

The lack of visible administrative structures in the mosque communities studied makes it a little awkward to talk about mosque visitors in terms of being members of a particular organization. A mosque is not exactly a place where you have to terminate your membership to stop being active. Still, as will be discussed in this chapter, all the visitors that I had a chance to talk to did express a feeling of being in some sense affiliated to the mosque under discussion. They had chosen to visit it for very particular reasons and also seemed to be emotionally attached to it. Hence, I am using the word member throughout this thesis, but more figuratively than literally.

### The story of the mosque visitors

#### Recruitment along social network lines

The Shi'ite Juma mosque and the Sunni Abu Bakr mosque have many similarities in terms of who goes there and why. Both mosques have a much higher number of regular visitors than in other mosques in Baku. Both appear to be places where young and well-educated people can feel represented. That both Abu Bakr and Juma stand for something new is supported by the observation that they are visited mainly by the younger generation of Azerbaijanis, many of whom have or are getting higher education, speak English and other languages and are experienced travelers. Not only young men, but also young women are finding their way to the mosques and allegedly as many women as men are among the visitors at both mosques. There

are also nationalities other than Azerbaijanis represented (for example Russians).<sup>344</sup>

Governmental pressure put on these two communities by the authorities (which will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapters 9 and 10) has brought with it quite extensive publicity and an increased interest, as much from the local population as from foreign scholars and journalists, for the developments in the mosques. In 2001 and 2002, when the Abu Bakr mosque was frequently, in various trials, accused of militant Islamism, the mosque was often visited by foreign reporters who documented the events. Similarly, in the two weeks following his arrest in 2003, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, Imam of the Juma mosque, claimed to have given over 70 hours of interviews to news media and others. All the publicity surrounding the quarrel between him and the establishment made him a hero among his followers and others in society, and additionally increased the number of community members. The same seems true for the Abu Bakr mosque where the constant mentioning of the wicked “Wahhabi mosque” in the news made people find their way thither, as they were curious about that “dangerous place”.

As stated by Gerlach and Hine, among others, recruitment to a movement often takes place after the individual has made some sort of first informal contact with the movement or its message, often through informal social networks.<sup>345</sup> This holds true in the Azerbaijani cases as well. Most newcomers to the mosque communities seem to have been inspired by friends, relatives or teachers who were already visitors. One young man for example says the Imam in his home village encouraged him by talking a lot about the Abu Bakr mosque in Baku.<sup>346</sup> At the same time some people express very practical reasons for choosing a particular mosque, such as living in the vicinity.<sup>347</sup>

Both mosques also have webpages that are used for spreading information about their work. The Juma mosque can be found at [www.juma-az.org](http://www.juma-az.org), but is also connected to the page [www.deyerlar.org](http://www.deyerlar.org) that is run by the Center for the Protection of Conscience and Persuasion of Freedom (known in Azerbaijani as DEVAMM), a Human Rights NGO. Due to the fact that Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is the head of both Juma mosque and DEVAMM, the activities of the two have become quite hard to separate. The Juma mosque community’s webpage is interesting as it in some ways manifests the mosque’s position as something “more” than a mosque. Besides Friday prayers and *hadiths* the

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<sup>344</sup> There are at least no official membership lists to confirm this and personally I tend to think that the numbers might be slightly exaggerated. When I visited I did see many women, but overall there were more men present. Among my interviewees only one was of Russian nationality (most however spoke Russian, some had lived in Russia and at least one was married to a Russian).

<sup>345</sup> Gerlach and Hine (1970).

<sup>346</sup> Man 5, Abu Bakr, Baku, June 4 2005.

<sup>347</sup> Man 3, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

webpage contains information about the different programs that the mosque runs as well as news on, for example, terrorism and religious rights. The Juma mosque additionally regularly publishes the newsletter *Deyeler/Tsenosti* (Values), distributed in many mosques and carrying information about upcoming events. This way of spreading information has become more important as the community has been evicted and is working out of quite anonymous temporary premises.

The Abu Bakr webpage, mentioned earlier, has a very active online forum where it is possible to ask questions about religion which the Imam answers once a month. These to a great extent concern very basic issues about how to act as a “true believer”, like for example what to do if you missed a prayer or how to hold your hands when praying. Beside the question & answer session the forum also has a discussion section where community members talk amongst themselves.

### Self-fulfillment versus ideological conviction

The discussion on recruitment to social movements often focuses on whether membership is motivated by the individuals’ expected gains (the rational actor approach), a conviction about the movement’s “cause”, or perhaps both. In the Azerbaijani cases both mosques, for example, engage in humanitarian work, such as blood donations or providing food and clothes for orphans and the poor, and this seems to be valued features of their activities.<sup>348</sup> Still, in the initial stage it is not the prospect to help others that appears to be the main attraction for new members. Rather, the opportunity for self-fulfillment strikes me as by far a more important factor in deciding to join the community. In this respect the educational programs of the mosques are a feature that influenced many first-time visitors. Many for example found their way to Abu Bakr or Juma in search of somewhere to learn Arabic. “I came here to study Arabic and I found the truth”, one woman in Juma explained.<sup>349</sup> In the Juma mosque the visitors appreciated the open-minded approach taken to education. As one of the male visitors pointed out, “nobody says it’s like this or like that. If you wonder if there is a God you have to read and find out for yourself”<sup>350</sup>. The lectures by the Juma community are not only of religious nature, for the Imam teaches human rights and other secular themes.

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<sup>348</sup> A list of all the programs of the Juma Mosque can be found on their webpage under “Programmes”.

<sup>349</sup> Group discussion, women, Juma Mosque community, Baku, May 2005.

<sup>350</sup> Group discussion, men, Juma Mosque community, Baku, September 2005.

One girl explains why she appreciated these lessons:

Ilgar [Ibrahimoglu] has taught us that we have rights, but also obligations as citizens. Earlier we did not know what this meant. We also learned about different violations of human rights, such as the problem with not being allowed to wear the veil. We did not know about this.<sup>351</sup>

When asked why she was frequenting the mosque another girl from the Juma community stressed the variety of activities offered, but also that the Juma mosque is a place where women feel comfortable visiting, in contrast to other mosques:

It [the Juma community] follows all the shari'a laws. Women are separated from the men. There is no box for contributions. Education is free. There are many different projects. There is a 'Discussion House' where different topics are discussed. There are programs in both Russian and Azerbaijani. Everybody can join. There are open lectures on many topics — enlightening activities. There is a library. In short it provides everything that can develop the human being.<sup>352</sup>

### Search for identity

Another aspect of the mosque visitors' wish for self-fulfillment is their "search for identity", often referred to in studies of other post-Soviet areas as well. As mentioned earlier, one result of the Soviet attempt to neutralize religion was that the expression "Muslim" came to denote a national and cultural, rather than a religious, meaning, as religious rituals were put forward as part of a national identity. It was not uncommon for many secular Muslims, even those who proclaimed themselves to be atheists, to take part in Muslim rituals. Most Muslim men were for example circumcised and high ranking party officials were buried according to Muslim traditions. According to this logic you were a Muslim because your parents were Muslims, their parents were Muslims and their ancestors were also Muslims.<sup>353</sup> But this "Muslimness" did not single you out as a believer. As the Soviet Union crumbled, this ethnic and cultural understanding of Islam was challenged as religion once again got a chance to reappear in public life. Previous research often relates the major impact of the religious renaissance in this region to a social-economic and spiritual crisis brought on by the in many cases very drastic fall of the Soviet Union. Whereas earlier the communist ideology had furnished the answer to all questions, now there was suddenly nothing (or everything) to believe in and in this context religion could once again offer

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<sup>351</sup> Group discussion, women, Juma Mosque community, Baku, May 2005.

<sup>352</sup> Group discussion, women, Juma Mosque community, Baku, May 2005.

<sup>353</sup> Omel'chenko and Sabirova (2003a)

guidance.<sup>354</sup> This reasoning is also consistent with social movement theory, which points out that when official facades or ideologies fall into disarray, new opportunities for mounting a challenge crop up.<sup>355</sup> Under these circumstances, religion appeared as one stable point amidst chaos in the collapsing Soviet system.<sup>356</sup> Religious identity provided points of reference in a society that was in total flux and also became the basis of many emerging social networks which came to replace those undergoing disintegration.<sup>357</sup> As Juergensmeyer points out, religion in some places came to be the symbol for an anti-Russian movement. In places like Lithuania, Armenia, East Germany, Poland and Ukraine religious movements were at the forefront of opposition to Soviet control and the emergence of new nationalisms.<sup>358</sup>

In Azerbaijan the fall of the USSR resulted in a boost for religious beliefs as well. Whereas many in the older generation were satisfied with owning or reading the Qur'an, many among the young took the step to be actively engaged in a religious community. During my interviews in Abu Bakr and Juma very few people said they hailed from religious families. Instead, for most, both in Abu Bakr and Juma, "coming to Islam" is a very recent thing (two–three years on average) and a result of great contemplation and decisiveness. This is also supported by research done by Guyreva on veiled women in Azerbaijan in 2003. Among her respondents most had been wearing the veil for two or three years, only a few for as long as seven to ten years. It was obvious that this was a very important choice for them as they all could refer to the exact year and date of their veiling (which is also consistent with what I found during my conversations with veiled women in the Abu Bakr mosque). Guyreva relates their veiling to a search for stability in an unstable everyday life of recent warfare (the Karabakh conflict<sup>359</sup>), lack of employment and a volatile political situation. All her respondents answered that the veil provided them with "inner harmony, stability and strength, that

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<sup>354</sup> Omel'chenko and Sabirova (2003a).

<sup>355</sup> Gamson, William A. (1988) Political Discourse and Collective Action. In Klandermans, Bert, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow (eds.) *From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research Across Cultures*. Greenwich: JAI Press inc.

<sup>356</sup> Omel'chenko and Sabirova (2003a).

<sup>357</sup> Agadjanian, Alexander (2001) Revising Pandora's gifts: religious and national Identity in the Post-Soviet societal fabric. *Europe-Asia Studies* 53 (3): pp. 473–488.

<sup>358</sup> Juergensmeyer (1993).

<sup>359</sup> Even though it is clearly an important part of Azerbaijan's history in many ways I chose not to go into details about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in this dissertation as it is not explicitly relevant for my topic. For more information see for example Human Rights Watch (1994) *Azerbaijan: Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh*, New York: Human Rights Watch, De Waal, Thomas (2003) *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York and London: New York University Press or Goltz, Thomas (1999) *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic*, Armonk & London: M.E. Sharp.

it helps them to believe in themselves as well as having hopes for the future”.<sup>360</sup>

During my interviews with visitors in Abu Bakr they often related to “finding Islam” as something that “just happened”, often through some sort of revelation or a dream. Many also referred to their community as a family and coming to the mosque as coming home.<sup>361</sup> A lot of them also recalled that they earlier felt “lost” and had been “searching” for something which they now believe has been One girl put it thus:

I came to Islam three years ago. I did believe before, but not in a particular way. I suffered from depression and stress and I was lost. I wanted to pray and I saw some people at the university that were believers. I asked them and they explained to me [about Islam]. Then I started to study Islam and other religions. The people I talked to at the university went here [Abu Bakr] and I saw the light.<sup>362</sup>

The visitors, both in Abu Bakr and in Juma, experience that they have found something in religion that no other ideology has been able to provide them with. Conversations I had also indicated that prior to “coming to Islam” many did try to find what they were looking for in other religions, which underlines their desperate need for something spiritual to believe in.

Additionally, it would appear that the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities, being perceived as representatives of something new, have had a major impact on attracting the young people of Azerbaijan. It further seems that this image of the mosques is to a large extent shaped by their popular leaders. The image of the leader also becomes the image of the mosques contributing to the communities’ increased popularity.

## Imams – the movements’ window to the world

As the formal leaders of their respective communities the Juma and Abu Bakr Imams play a very important role in deciding what image the community should display for the world outside the mosque. By and large they are the ones being interviewed and published as the “voice” of the communities. Moreover, a tacit understanding seems to be in place which states that all official meetings with community members have to be approved by them. Yet one gets the impression that their strength lies very much in their reputation and charisma, rather than in their power to coerce.

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<sup>360</sup> Gureyeva, Yuliya (2005) *Zhenschini v Khidzhabakh v Azerbaydzhanе: Islam, Gender, Povsednevnost’*. In Rabzhayeva, M.V. (ed.), *Gendernie Raznotecheniya*. St Petersburg: Aleteya, p. 244.

<sup>361</sup> Man 7, Baku, June 4 2005; Women 3, 4, 6, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>362</sup> Woman 6, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.



Both Imams are young (born in the 1970s), religiously well educated and articulate, characteristics often associated with the community as a whole, which does not come as a surprise granted their role as spokespersons for the movement. The image of the Juma mosque community as the defenders of human rights in Azerbaijan is due to the Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, being an active human rights activist. Moreover, he did at the time of this study hold the position of secretary general of Azerbaijan Chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA), was the leading coordinator of the Center for Protection of Conscience and Persuasion Freedom (DEVAMM) and the director of the Institute of Human Rights and Civil Stand (IHRCS). As mentioned earlier, Ibrahimoglu had been arrested in October 2003, during a protest against alleged irregularities in the presidential elections, which resulted in Ilham Aliyev's victory. Ibrahimoglu himself believes that his arrest was "a punishment for [his] human rights activities and also for [his] modernist approach to Islam." "I do human rights work, religious work and journalistic work. All of these activities are dangerous in Azerbaijan", he explains.<sup>363</sup> According to the SCWRA, however, the dissatisfaction of the authorities with his activities is based on the fact that his political opinions are not compatible with his role as religious leader<sup>364</sup>, his refusal to register his community with the authorities, as well as indications that (among other illegal links) the Imam has Iranian support and is preaching a pro-Iranian position.<sup>365</sup> The election turmoil and its aftermath created an image of the Juma Imam as not just very active, but also "righteous" and "not afraid to speak the truth", a view widespread among mosque visitors and non-visitors alike. Many have read about his human rights activism and feel encouraged by his efforts to stand up against the government. Even a taxi driver that repeatedly told me he was not religious and did not go to the mosque still held the Imam of the Juma mosque in the highest regards:

Ilgar is a good man. He says we should speak up. According to the Qur'an it is also bad to see something bad being done and not say anything. So when the government is doing bad things we should speak and not be afraid.<sup>366</sup>

The high religious educational level of the Imams, being able to field questions about religion, seems very important to visitors of the studied mosque communities, especially in the Abu Bakr mosque. The Imam of Abu Bakr, Gahmet Sulemanov, was born in Baku in the 1970s. He refers to himself as the "last soldier of the Soviet army" for he served in the Azerbaijani army

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<sup>363</sup> Ibragimoglu, Ilgar, Juma Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004.

<sup>364</sup> See note 426 for more details. By participating in the demonstrations organized by the political opposition against the election results Ibrahimoglu is considered to have violated this law.

<sup>365</sup> Representative of SCRWA, April 22 2004.

<sup>366</sup> Nazim, taxi driver, Baku, May 2005.

before his studies abroad, first at the University of Khartoum in Sudan and then in the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia.<sup>367</sup> Since his return to Azerbaijan in 1998 he has been the religious leader of the mosque where his youth, deep spiritual awareness and charismatic appearance has made him very popular among the habitués. These often referred to the fact that the Imam studied at a prestigious university and therefore was considered more knowledgeable about Islam than most. “The sermons here are more based on the Qur’an [than in other mosques]. They are more close to the Islam of the Prophet”, one visitor explained.<sup>368</sup>

Nevertheless, for many of the visitors, the community provided more than just educated Islam. It also offered a space where they themselves could question traditional ways of religious worships and find others who did too.

## The mosque as a free space

“Rather than creating new such spaces movements try, when possible to transform existing communal institutions into such protected environments”, Gamson writes.<sup>369</sup> In Muslim societies this often results in the mosque becoming a place frequently utilized not only for religious practice but also as a place where mobilization can take place. It is after all a natural gathering place: it is easy for Islamic activists to offer sermons and lessons, and for study groups to propagate the chief message of the movement, organize collective action and to recruit newcomers away from the scrutiny of the authorities. In other words the mosque provides both the people needed and the network to facilitate the diffusion of ideas favored by the movement.<sup>370</sup> Wiktorowicz compares the role of the mosque in the mobilization process with that of the churches in the civil rights movement in the United States:

In this manner mobilization through the mosque is analogous to the use of churches by the civil rights movement in the United States, though the role of the mosque as a ‘free space’ has declined in recent years as regimes have extended state control over public religious institutions.<sup>371</sup>

It became clear from my visits to the mosques that they do play a vital role in the consolidation of the movements and the mobilization of members. The mosque is not only a place where already existing “messages” can be diffused, but perhaps more importantly the mosque is a place where new ideas, opinions and concerns surface or are formulated and discussed. Again, the

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<sup>367</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam, Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku April 20 2004.

<sup>368</sup> Man 1, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>369</sup> Gamson (1992) p. 61.

<sup>370</sup> Wiktorowicz (2004).

<sup>371</sup> Wiktorowicz (2004) p. 10.

mosque is not only a place to pray, but too a place to meet the likeminded, discuss problems, ask questions, study and just hang out. This is especially true for some of the women that frequent the Abu Bakr mosque, as their strict religious orientation in many cases prohibit them from seeing friends outside the family in any other context. In the next chapter I will also argue that the mosque community has come to serve as a free space to those members who have come to be at odds with their family because of their newfound religiosity. As for the Juma community members, the state's seizure of the Juma mosque by the police in June 2005, on the one hand limited the community's organizational capacity by forcing them to gather in private houses to pray. Lectures and administrative work has to take place in a small office building outside the city center. On the other hand the incident has served to cement the collective identity of Juma members by singling them out as the defenders of human rights in Azerbaijan. One girl explains:

The mosque is a place where we gather, or go when we have a problem. The mosque is a place where we meet to discuss religion and other things. When they violated our rights I was in shock. They took away the right for me to exercise religious activity. I realized the need to fight. Fight for my rights.<sup>372</sup>



*Illustration 9* The closed Juma Mosque (April 2004). Photo Sofie Bedford.

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<sup>372</sup> Group discussion, women, Juma Mosque community, Baku, May 2005.

Because of the central role of the mosque as a “free space” the seizure of the mosque was a traumatic experience for the visitors, yet this event also buttressed their collective identity, making the Juma group appear as victims of state repression. Another girl describes this feeling:

Many of us were there as the police entered during prayer to throw us out. Many felt very bad about this afterwards. We felt violated.

But, no law can stop the truth. We are trying to continue on as usual and hope that time will tell that the truth will win.<sup>373</sup>

As can be noted, the above quote also refers to this incident as something that bolsters the members’ conviction of the need to change the situation in Azerbaijan. On a similar note the Juma Imam expresses careful hopes for the future:

The believers have managed to prove one thing – that you can take away the walls around them but not their spirit. Nobody can crush the Juma ideals. These ideals are alive in the hearts of thousands of visitors, and the proof hereof is that not one of our programs has been discontinued, despite the unbelievable difficulties we have faced.<sup>374</sup>

There is also a risk that the free space can become un-free if your position in the community changes. Gamson points out that so-called cultural free spaces, no matter how free they are, sometimes can feel like prisons to a person trying to leave the group but lacking the strength to withstand social pressure and to break free.<sup>375</sup> If you leave the group this might mean goodbye to all your friends as well since they might not accept your withdrawal. I met one person that used to frequent the Abu Bakr mosque but had now had come to question the community’s ideals. This individual therefore did not feel accepted there anymore and dropped by the mosque less and less often. “Some of my friends think that I am too liberal. They get aggressive when we talk about religion so we avoid that”, the person said and continued:

My parents forbade me to go there [the Abu Bakr mosque]. First I was fighting them, now I understand why.

The Islam that they [the community] are representing does not fit to the conditions nowadays.

They are against public life. They say that everything is from the devil. Opera is from the devil. They always say: “the Qur’an says” but this is only their interpretation of the Qur’an.

Now it is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but they teach Islam from the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Group discussion, women, Juma Mosque community, Baku, May 2005.

<sup>374</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar (2005) Mechet ‘Juma’ Vchera, Segodnaya i Zavtra. *Deyerler* 2.

<sup>375</sup> Gamson (1992).

<sup>376</sup> Visitor, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

The quite conservative religious ideology promoted by the Abu Bakr group will be discussed further in the next chapter, which focuses on the collective identity of the movement and its framing.

## Conclusion

The mass appeal of Islamism has its roots in worldly frustrations and denials and those frustrations and denials have been given a religious idiom.

Islamism is basically an indigenous response to prevalent socio-economic and political problem.<sup>377</sup>

This statement by Faksh can be said to exemplify the habitual slant in previous research on Islamic movements.<sup>378</sup> According to this view, Islamic mobilization was mainly, or at least partly, a result of frustration with socioeconomic conditions, as basically understood by Gurr's relative deprivation theory.<sup>379</sup>

As this chapter shows, in the Azerbaijani context socioeconomic frustration does not strike me as the main inspiration for those who approach the mosque communities studied here. A preponderant number of people who approach the Abu Bakr and Juma communities can be said to represent the new "urban intelligentsia". They are well educated, have experience from abroad and even high status jobs. Instead they chose to join one of these mosque communities because they see them as an alternative to old, traditional mosques, where visitors are past their prime and the quality of sermons and lectures is, by comparison, poor. While this insight might appear contrary to the understanding, referred to above, of how Islamism develops, it is not surprising to scholars of social movement theory. According to many studies of civic activism the higher a person's socioeconomic status the greater the chance that he/she will become an activist. Having the funds increases the likelihood of a good education, the education in its turn helps people develop relevant skills and make contacts, plus it keeps them informed on social quandaries. Finally, the necessary degree is expected to

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<sup>377</sup> Faksh, Mahmud A. (1997) *The Future of Islam in the Middle East: Fundamentalism in Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia*. Westport: Praeger, p. xii.

<sup>378</sup> See for example Sivan, Emmanuel (1997) *Radical Islam: Medieval Methodology and Modern Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Almond et al (2003).

<sup>379</sup> According to the theory a feeling of "relative deprivation" arises when "raised value expectations that are not fulfilled lead to a feeling of frustration that in its turn can contribute to violent Protest". Gurr, Ted R. (1970) *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. This view has also been rather criticized, see for example Hafez (2003).

provide a high status job, which facilitates further useful skills and contacts.<sup>380</sup>

Just as in other social movement studies, the Azerbaijani cases show that most people come in contact with the movement through somebody in their pre-existing social networks, such as a family member, a co-worker or a friend. Additionally, the fact that both mosques conduct various forms of education (in the Juma case not only religious but also “secular” education) may, at least initially, have been significant. In this respect the reputation of the Imams as educated and religiously informed appears to have been crucial, aside from the other characteristics alluded to above, namely young, articulate and charismatic.

For most community members the community of the mosque fills a void in their search for identity, providing them with a place where they can feel at home. One can say that in the post-Soviet chaos the Abu Bakr and the Juma mosques became the “free spaces” where many people, dissatisfied with their situation, could find what they had been looking for and kindred spirits who wanted to work in concert towards changing political or social conditions. In the next chapter I will go further into this “wish for change” and other aspects of the movements’ shared cognitions.

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<sup>380</sup> Verba Sidney, Nie, Norman and Kim, Jae-on (1978) *Participants and Political Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. London & Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Lindén Tove (2008) *Explaining Civil Society Core Activism in Post-Soviet Latvia*. Stockholm: Stockholm University.

## 8. Mobilization and Identity: Representing a New Religious Reality

The next component of movement mobilization to be discussed is the cognitive. In this context this refers to the consolidation of the identities of individual believers and the transformation of these identities into the collective identity of a social movement. Another important component of the cognitive aspects of mobilization is to analyze how this collective identity comes across to others outside the movement, the “framing” of the movement and their activities. As in earlier chapters this will be done by studying the cases of the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities.

### Framing the need for change and the plan of action

#### Abu Bakr: realignment and change from within

According to Snow and Benford the framing of issues by social movement activists serves three main purposes: to diagnose a situation, to offer solutions to it and finally to provide the rationale needed to motivate the collective action that follows.<sup>381</sup> In the case of Abu Bakr the “diagnosis” of the situation in Azerbaijan is not always very outspoken. Nevertheless, something that came across as important to community members during my interviews was that they experienced a lack of guidelines for young people in contemporary Azerbaijan and, consequently, moral decay. Furthermore, from my conversations with the Imam and the visitors, as well as in discussions on the mosque’s webpage forum it appeared that community members saw a need to change their country in other respects too. The failure of democratic reforms, high level of corruption in society and lack of religious (and other) freedoms, for example, were issues which engaged the respondents.

Examples of this can be found in a very interesting discussion that took place on the Abu Bakr webpage forum under the headline *Islam in Azerbaijan* in August 2003. It concerns the political situation in Azerbaijan and the

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<sup>381</sup> Snow and Benford (1992)

starting question is whether or not to vote in the upcoming presidential elections. The discussion on the webpage is interesting because it shows that there is a debate inside the community about a social issue which, at least in this discussion, a majority of members experience it as worrisome. When at one point the signature “Omar Abdul-NUR” (one of the few in this discussion that represents the mosque’s official stance to accept the political status quo) writes: “Our government is not Islamic, but we have a lot of Muslims. This does not give us a reason to rebel against our government. No!” He is met mainly with negative replies.<sup>382</sup> Signature “bilal” writes: “What does an Islamic state have to do with anything? This concerns one simple fact – to not obey and not join forces with what is not legitimate”<sup>383</sup>, and later on he further clarifies: “/.../at least do not obey idiots”.<sup>384</sup> “Omar Abdul-NUR” persists in his opinion that the situation is not so bad in Azerbaijan:

In our state nobody can stop a person from living in Islam. Muslim girls are still let into school if her head is covered (the way it is popular in Turkey). Today nobody looks twice at a guy in short trousers and long beard. The nickname WAHHABIT [sic], earlier heard is today used less frequently.<sup>385</sup>

Many other discussants disagreed with this stance. In an attempt to smooth things over signature “XATTAB” writes:

Brothers, there is no need for insults, all Muslims should know, and it is openly visible that Azerbaijan is not an Islamic state. This does not mean that few or many Muslims live here, but the most important factor is the law that the leadership uses to rule. That law in our country is *kufir* (godlessness). God willing a time will come when we can change this.<sup>386</sup>

Signature “Iafa” seems to agree with this as she writes:

Where is the morality [in Azerbaijan]? Where is the mercy (*miloserditse*)? How can we say that Islam is developing in a state that is number one on the list over corrupt countries? This is preposterous (*diko*)! For me America is a more Islamic state than Azerbaijan.<sup>387</sup>

From the above discussion it can be extracted that some members do experience the lack of religious freedom and widespread corruption in the country as against Islamic ideals and problematic. They express a wish for change, but at the same time show little faith in the current secular leadership making this happen. Still, the official rhetoric of the mosque leaders, as indicated

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<sup>382</sup> Abu Bakr webpage forum, Aug 20 2003.

<sup>383</sup> Abu Bakr webpage forum, Aug 18 2003.

<sup>384</sup> Abu Bakr webpage forum, Aug 19 2003.

<sup>385</sup> Abu Bakr webpage forum, Aug 20 2003.

<sup>386</sup> Abu Bakr webpage forum, Aug 23 2003.

<sup>387</sup> Abu Bakr webpage forum, Aug 27 2003.



above, makes it clear that the community is distancing itself from the political sphere and if change is to take place it is to be initiated through other channels. When asked about elections during one of my interviews with him (in this case the parliamentary elections of 2005) the Imam clarified what he presented as the community's point of view:

We [the community] do not engage ourselves in that kind of things. I am not interested in that. I stand for a religious point of view. We, the people are obeying Allah, and except for Allah we should not kneel for anyone. You should not worship idols, you should not steal, not drink, not do drugs and so on. To have a feeling for the people is what is important to me.<sup>388</sup>

This idea that politics does not concern believers as they have another leader to follow is reflected on the community's webpage forum too. Most contributors do seem to agree that if you live in accordance with Islam you should not take part in the electoral process. The signature "XATTAB" for example writes:

Brothers and sisters — do not go to the elections! This is *shirk*<sup>389</sup> according to the Qur'an.

/.../ how could we go to these 'tagutish' [sic] elections and vote for a Tagut (idols, pagan non-Islamic law). Tagut – this is to join, to obey someone else then Allah [sic].<sup>390</sup>

Signature "Safiya" expresses an opinion that is common in Azerbaijan in general, not only among these believers. In her opinion it is pointless to vote in any case:

Going or not going, our votes are still not worth anything to anyone. Everybody does what he or she feels like anyway. I am not planning to vote, this is a principal issue for me! Especially since it is not allowed according to Islam.<sup>391</sup>

This quote reflects the frustration which many Azerbaijanis feel with how the political situation has developed since independence. The initial euphoria attendant with independence, when Western style democracy and freedom were hailed as a model, has all but died out upon the realization that official statements turned out to be empty rhetoric, leading many citizens in former Soviet countries to feel dejected and to turn their backs on elections and other political activities.

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<sup>388</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, June 4, 2005.

<sup>389</sup> *Shirk* is the Islamic concept of the sin of polytheism, but also in a more general way refers to serving anything other than Allah.

<sup>390</sup> Abu Bakr webpage forum, Aug 25 2003.

<sup>391</sup> Abu Bakr webpage forum, Aug 30 2003.

Nevertheless many of the Abu Bakr visitors do seem to nourish a hope and a conviction that change is achievable, if not through political means. The common understanding is that change should be bottom-up rather than top-down – a change in underlying values in society rather than a change of laws. According to one of the visitors:

The situation in Azerbaijan cannot be changed with revolution – we need evolution. It doesn't help to have meetings and stand there and scream all sorts of things. The only way to change the society is from within, with changed values and moral.<sup>392</sup>

From what I gather in my interviews there is a belief that the mosque will be playing an important role in promoting this change. “The mosque is already playing an important part in this process. If ten thousand people believe in this way of thinking they can and will influence others”, one visitor says.<sup>393</sup> On the webpage forum “Omar Abdul-NUR” suggests this transformation should start in the family: “Now our goal is to attract as many people as possible to Islam. We should raise true righteous Muslims in our family so that there will be more of us.”

During our conversations the Imam often highlighted the mosque's important role as an engine of change among the population:

It [the mosque] is already very important. We are one of the biggest mosques for Friday prayer, at least 7000 people pray here. 98% of these are young. Before they came here some of them were heavily addicted to drugs and now they not only do namaz, they do all [five] namaz during the day. We have saved some from serious problems in society. At least one percent we have managed to save. We have purified them.<sup>394</sup>

The views described above could be categorized as a “realignment frame”, according to Della Porta and Diani's definition. The realignment frame “emphasizes the need to restructure political system on the basis of new collective identities, without entailing a global de-legitimization of the established members and procedures of the polity.”<sup>395</sup> In the Abu Bakr case this means expressing a need for change, but not through replacing the current people in power but rather through the promotion of a new way of thinking and being among members of the mosque community. The motivation behind this is found in the moral exhortations of the Islamic faith, the dissemination of which forms the basis for making this change real.

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<sup>392</sup> Man 6, Abu Bakr, Baku, June 4 2005.

<sup>393</sup> Man 6, Abu Bakr, Baku, June 4 2005.

<sup>394</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, June 4, 2005.

<sup>395</sup> Della Porta and Diani (1999) pp. 80–81.

## Juma: anti-system frames and political change

The leadership and members of the Juma mosque express quite a different view of the situation. In their opinion both the problem and the solution are related to the political leadership. They view the undemocratic situation in Azerbaijan and consequently the lack of various freedoms as a major issue that needs to be addressed. The Imam elaborates on this:

There is no type of freedom in Azerbaijan — absolutely none! In Azerbaijan the [political] power sometimes gives us small ‘presents’ in the shape of human rights and freedoms. I do not appreciate this. We want to create a normal democratic state in Azerbaijan. If we do not get a democratic society we will also not get any freedoms. You cannot build freedom with tiny pieces. You have to build democracy and then you will get freedom, both religious and other.<sup>396</sup>

The problem according to the Imam is that the current leadership does not accept opinions that differ from theirs. Anyone who expresses a deviant view is in trouble and likely to be considered an enemy of the state.<sup>397</sup> Despite this the Juma rhetoric calls for an active fight against social ills, never mind that this might get you in trouble. The Imam draws parallels to other freedom movements, saying that they showed the importance of taking a risk to get what you want:

You do not get freedom as a gift. If there were not those in the world that had been in prison we would probably not have had women’s rights, afro-American rights et cetera /.../ if we for example keep quiet about what is happening in Guantanamo it will continue. You have to fight. Say that this is wrong.

Human rights activists must disturb the power and do things even if the power doesn’t like it — that is important.<sup>398</sup>

This line of reasoning can be related to what Della Porta and Diani call an “anti-system frame” which “advocates a radical transformation of the polity”<sup>399</sup>. All the more so as Juma community members in one of our conversations pointed to three ways of accomplishing a change in the system: to leave and fight in exile, to stay in the country and fight politically and finally to help develop civil society.<sup>400</sup> Albeit originally endorsing this last alternative, i.e. building up a civil society, the Juma community more and more appears to position itself on the political arena. With the Imam leading the way the

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<sup>396</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, May 28 2005.

<sup>397</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, May 28 2005.

<sup>398</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, May 28 2005.

<sup>399</sup> Della Porta and Diani (1999) pp. 80–81.

<sup>400</sup> Group discussion, men, Juma Mosque community, Baku, September 2005.

community decided to publicly join forces with the democratic opposition block, Azadliq, during the November 2005 parliamentary elections.

The Juma community's fight for change is inspired, not by any explicitly religious standpoint, but by a desire to obtain certain rights they believe they are entitled to but consider themselves deprived of by an undemocratic government. In general, in our conversations, both the Imam and community members prefer to express themselves in terms of liberal and democratic values, rarely having recourse to religious rhetoric. When the Imam did mention religion it was in the spirit of advocating a "democratic, liberal, European view on Islam". "Religious does not need to mean undemocratic", he said, and further tried to explain that the concept of Islam often is misunderstood, as it has come to be connected with something negative:

I think it is just that we have forgotten what Islam has, now we are reminding about this. Islam is not shari'a, its not radicalism, extremism, it's not to take a stick in your hand and run, Islam is science, it is nationalism; it is a positive approach to all questions. Islam is dynamics; it is loving those close to you, and so on. We are trying to incorporate this in life. Not 'just like that' (*prostotak*), but in reality.<sup>401</sup>

The Imam says the community's struggle for civic liberties is inspired by the need to create a better future for the next generations. If nobody does anything, he says, the new generations will have to suffer the consequences of being deprived of their rights in an undemocratic society:

I myself chose this fight because I think that everybody should start with himself or herself. If we don't do this today then our children and grandchildren will be in danger. As long as there is no democracy and human rights here they will be. And nobody will build this for us. We have to do it ourselves in Azerbaijan.<sup>402</sup>

To summarize, both the Juma and Abu Bakr communities give the impression of being in agreement on the need to restructure the existing social and political conditions in which the country finds itself. Yet their views on how to go about it and why this needs to be done differ. While the Abu Bakr community, at least according to the Imam, distances itself from national politics, it is nonetheless interested in changing several aspects of Azerbaijani society which it sees as morally reprehensible and lacking in religious values. This change however is to be achieved from the bottom up, through influencing individual mindsets rather than from the top down, via political power. This differs from the ever more politicized activities of the Juma community. Even though in Juma the community members too see educating individuals as a way of constructing a civil society and influencing public

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<sup>401</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004.

<sup>402</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004.

opinion, their main goal is still related to bringing about change in the way the country is governed. While the Abu Bakr mosque profiles itself as religious purists and protectors of morality in Azerbaijan, the Juma community is more concerned with promoting democracy and human rights. These groups might strike the reader as two very different collectivities yet more similarities exist between these two groups than might be expected.

## Consolidating the “we and they”

### New movements versus old structures

A collective identity cannot be developed unless it is recognized as such by others. Insofar as it is denied or opposed by other social and political actors, the construction of a collective identity becomes a source of conflict. This shaping of a “we and they” often becomes a crucial part of the identity construction process.<sup>403</sup> While “we” are the members of a certain collective or ingroup, “they” are typically the adversaries, the outgroup, who have different interests and values. By creating this exclusive identity the movement construes adversaries and delineates what is at stake in the conflict. It can also legitimate a certain course of action.<sup>404</sup>

Based on my interviews and observations, I feel the general consensus among the visitors of both Juma and Abu Bakr Both mosques was that they saw themselves as part of something new in the religious life of Azerbaijan, in contradistinction to the stale and outdated way of believing promoted by unenlightened state-controlled religious establishments. As a result, among the believers, “they” became more or less synonymous with “traditional mosques” subordinated to the religious authority (e.g. The Caucasus Muslim Board discussed in chapter 5 and 6). This is in theory independent but, as I have argued earlier, has in practice turned out to be an organ implementing the state’s religious policy, just like its Soviet counterpart. The image of the mosques as innovative is strengthened by both Imams, who present their mosques as an alternative to other mosques frequented by “old people” and mired in corruption.

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<sup>403</sup> Melucci (1995) p. 47–48.

<sup>404</sup> Gamson, William A. (1995) *Constructing Social Protest*. In Johnston, Hank and Klandermans, Bert (eds.) *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Below the Juma Imam explains how his mosque differs from the “others”:

We do our own thing – we are creating an alternative. We are showing that this is possible. We are followers of the practical. We are showing that it is possible to do things differently. It is not necessary to use the mosque as a source of income. It’s not necessary to put ‘black boxes’ in the mosque for collecting money. It’s not necessary to use the mosques for bad things — for corruption. Not necessary that only old people should be gathering in the mosque. And so on. It doesn’t have to be that way that the ‘intelligentsia’ does not come to the mosque. I think they have to come!<sup>405</sup>

Even though the Abu Bakr Imam denies having any bad relations with the Muslim Board he expresses a very similar view of his mosque as unlike any of the more traditional mosques, noting for example the inadmissibility of pecuniary dealings and the absence of the ill-reputed “black donation boxes”:

In our mosque, maybe you have noticed, it is clean. People only come here to for namaz. In other mosques, if you go, you will see old people. They [who run these mosques] want for people to come and die there, so they can read the last words for them and in this way they are making money. There are places to wash the body of those who die, and there they are selling ‘this and that’ for those who die. Really, other mosques are for the dead, ours for the living. We are saying that when you are dead your place is at the cemetery, not in the mosque!<sup>406</sup>

The issues emphasized by the Imams were repeated in conversations with visitors, who often highlighted the uniqueness of “their” mosques (though many do not exclusively attend the said mosques). Mosques other than Abu Bakr and Juma had been “tried” out by many before settling on the one they preferred. When describing this process the corruption theme was once again often brought up. “I tried different mosques, but there everything was about money, and people did not know what they were doing. I saw many things that were wrong”, said one woman from Abu Bakr.<sup>407</sup> “If you go to another mosque the mullah immediately asks who died. And it is very expensive. A funeral costs around 200 dollars”, a man in Abu Bakr pointed out.<sup>408</sup>

Additionally, similarly to what was expressed by the Abu Bakr Imam above, “other mosques” are often described by community members as “dirty”.

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<sup>405</sup> Ibragimoglu, Ilgar, Imam, Juma Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004.

<sup>406</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam, Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, April 4 2004.

<sup>407</sup> Woman 1, Abu Bakr, September 2005.

<sup>408</sup> Man 3, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

One girl that had been coming to Abu Bakr for four years told me why she did not like the other mosques she visited: “I was reading a lot, was interested in religions. But felt disgust for Islam [when I visited other mosques], what I saw in the mosques was not the right Islam. It was dirty”.<sup>409</sup> It appears that this is figuratively speaking. The Islam characteristic of these mosques is described as sullied because clergymen had turned the houses of worship into a place to do business; moreover, the level of religious knowledge, if both laymen and clergy can be believed, was sometimes felt to be lacking.

I interpret much of the anti-corruption and “anti-dirty-traditions” discourse among the Abu Bakr community members as a critique not only of an outdated religious policy, but of the secular authorities supporting these antiquated structures. What is more, as will be discussed below in greater detail, the fact that the state since the beginning has referred to the Abu Bakr mosque and its visitors as “dangerous radical Wahhabis” has contributed to a consolidation of their collective identity (in this case, opponents of the secular authorities). The image of their identity as oppositional is strengthened by the community’s aversion to the representatives of “Official Islam”. As expected, the identities of the Juma and the Abu Bakr mosque communities share many similarities in this respect. At the same time a process appears to be underway in which the two communities in question are positioning themselves against one another, creating another “they” alongside their opposition to official social structures.

### Sunnis and Shi’as: tolerance lost

According to official Soviet rhetoric the polarization between Shi’as and Sunnis, present in many other Muslim countries did not exist in Azerbaijan. This is to some extent still a valid observation. In many mosques controlled by the Caucasus Muslim Board Sunnis and Shi’as pray together, in one mosque in Shemakha I was even told that Sufis (not too often heard of in Azerbaijan) pray together with Sunnis and Shi’as. Be that as it may, this neighborliness is somewhat overwrought and more related to the lack of knowledge about the two great branches or divisions of Islam and what constitutes the differences between them than to any genuine wish for coexistence. Nevertheless, in the post-Soviet Azerbaijani society attitudes are slowly changing as people, especially the young, are becoming more knowledgeable about Islam itself (through, for example, religious studies abroad).

In the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities it was obvious that regulars, to a great extent, considered their way of believing right and others wrong. In the Abu Bakr mosque, for example, I was told by community members that “the Shi’as” were spreading evil rumors about them. Some recounted problems encountered when visiting Shi’a mosques, being told

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<sup>409</sup> Woman 1, Abu Bakr, September 2005.

they could not pray “their way”.<sup>410</sup> With reference to education, some of the Abu Bakr visitors regarded the Baku Islamic University as “not good”. “They are teaching Shi’a – the wrong Islam. Shi’a – that is Iranian Islam”, one woman clarified.<sup>411</sup>

As an example of what is wrong in Shi’a Islam the Imam in the Abu Bakr mosque referred to saint worship and the visiting of holy places, both very popular activities in Azerbaijan. Then he returned again to how Islam for some had come to be a way of making money:

There are many places where people go and throw or touch rocks – we [the Abu Bakr community] believe that this is not right — this is not Islam. Or when a person dies — he was probably a good man, we don’t argue with that — people start worshiping his grave, kissing it et cetera. They start saying for example: Ah, Ahmed, — if that was his name — help me! Ahmed, give me a child! Ahmed, I want to be a minister! Help me to become a minister! Ahmed! And so on. We say: this is not right, this is not Islam. And when we say this people chose not to go there. When they go they in general leave money so when they don’t go that ruins the business. And because of this our major opponents are those who are under Iranian influence and Mullahs [who make money from the holy places].<sup>412</sup>

One particular aspect of this new Sunni–Shi’a conflict is the issue of “name calling” — a common topic in the social movement literature.<sup>413</sup> It would seem that the ongoing Sunni–Shi’ite controversy refers to a battle of names where the goal is to prove that the other party represents something unsound. What is more, there appears to be a specific animosity noticeable in this regard between the Juma and the Abu Bakr mosque community. Among the Abu Bakr visitors I often heard negative comments about the “Shi’ites” in general and the Juma community in particular. Often these referred to the “Shi’ites” as if they were planning an Iranian style revolution. One man in Abu Bakr, for example, told me:

Religion and state are separated, but there are those religious leaders that are engaged in politics, those who studied in Iran. They want to do a revolution. He [Ilgar Ibrahimoglu] is supported by the opposition and is promoting an Iranian model. That is bad as it is radicalism.

I don’t believe in an Islamic state — then Iranians will take power and I don’t want that.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Man 2, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>411</sup> Woman 2, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005. An interesting observation in this Context is that although the Turkish sponsored theological faculty at Baku State University is Sunni rather than Shi’a it is similarly unpopular among the Abu Bakr visitors.

<sup>412</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 20 2004.

<sup>413</sup> Jenson, Jane (1995) What’s in a Name? In Johnston, Hank and Klandermans, Bert (eds.) *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>414</sup> Man 8, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.



Similarly, I met equally negative views of the Abu Bakr community members in the Juma community, referring to them as Wahhabis, radicals and terrorists. One man clarified the differences between the two communities: our Islam, he said “follows shari’a, but not in the same way as Wahhabism — that is terrorism”.<sup>415</sup>

The fact that the Juma mosque was closed but that Baku’s other controversial mosque, Abu Bakr, managed to stay open after threats by the authorities to close it down caused much aggravation in the Juma community. It has also given rise to conspiracy theories about underhand cooperation between the government and the Abu Bakr leadership. “We are closed, but Abu Bakr stays open. That is where youth is radicalized. It is very interesting that the state lets Abu Bakr stay open even though they [the state representatives] say they are against radicalism”, one man said. Another continues: “Who closed the Juma mosque? Not only the state but also the Wahhabi sheikh [Gahmet Sulemanov] was responsible for this. They [the Abu Bakr community members] call everybody that is not with them ‘infidels’ and this lead to radicalism”.<sup>416</sup> In an interview with an online magazine the Juma Imam even suggests that the Azerbaijani state is promoting Wahhabism:

The government [of President Ilham Aliyev] spreads Wahhabism. At first, I wasn’t sure, but now I am.

Ilham Aliyev has the Wahhabis in control. He pays them. The government does arrest people from Abu Bakr mosque, but this is to show that Ilham Aliyev is against Abu Bakr as well as Juma.

/.../they [state representatives] don’t like it when people understand and love each other. When the government gets people to think about al-Qaeda, they don’t think about their other problems. Aliyev doesn’t need a real Islam, he wants a radical Islam, and so there will be a fight between the two Islams. It’s the development of an Islam that the West is afraid of. President Aliyev spreads the notion that the government is killing terrorists. But they don’t want the real Islam.<sup>417</sup>

### Radical Wahhabis and radical Shi’ites: the labeling of opponents

The use of “name calling” is not limited to the mosques and their worsening relationship. On several occasions representatives of the state have made clear they view the Abu Bakr and Juma communities as troublesome. The chairman of the SCWRA, at the time of this study, identified three types of Islamic radicals in Azerbaijan: radical Shi’as, radical Sunnis and Wahhabis during one of our conversations. Even though it was not stated outright, the context left no doubt that by radical Shi’as Aliyev referred to the Islamic

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<sup>415</sup> Group discussion, men, Juma Mosque community, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>416</sup> Group discussion, men, Juma Mosque community, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>417</sup> Rahder, Karl (2005) Azerbaijan’s Struggle for Identity. *ISN Security Watch* 07/11/05.

party of Azerbaijan<sup>418</sup> and the Juma mosque community, by radical Sunnis to different Turkish groups active in Azerbaijan such as the Fetullah Gülen movement, and by Wahhabis to the Abu Bakr mosque community. He clarified that he did not want to call these groups extremists. Nonetheless, it was obvious he is worried about their existence:

We could say [these groups are] religious extremists, but we do not since people believe that extremists almost always are terrorists. They [the radicals] are those who do not accept other religions. /.../ religious egoists we can call them. There are radical Shi'ites, radical Wahhabis and radical Sunnis. They are those who do not want the relations between religions to be normal.<sup>419</sup>

Moreover, Aliyev expressed concern with the growing number of young people involved in the “Wahhabi movement” and their extreme type of faith:

Certain radical believers demand from other citizens — relatives, parents, friends — that they too should lead a religious life. According to them you must grow a beard, wear short pants and pray. If you don't they'll call you an infidel and according to Wahhabi rules they may kill you or destroy your property.<sup>420</sup>

Naturally the Abu Bakr community members do not refer to themselves as Wahhabi. In an interview the Imam of Abu Bakr downplayed the fact that his mosque in the media has been called a “den of Wahhabis”:

Wahhabist is just a word used by society. In America, if they want to destroy some targets, they use [Osama] that is why they are keeping him alive. And for Russia, it is necessary to use Chechnya. This is a great political game.<sup>421</sup>

In my first interview with him the Abu Bakr Imam explained how the troubles the mosque had been facing was related to the fact that they follow Sunni Islam while the majority of Muslims in Azerbaijan traditionally are Shi'ite:

We have some problems, since in Azerbaijan, like you know, there is almost only Shi'as. Iran is close to us, and they don't want such a big Sunni mosque in the center of Baku, they don't want Sunnis here and they don't want 7000 people to come here on Fridays. Therefore some want to give us a bad reputation, saying that we are Wahhabi, and this and that. Or that we are terrorists or want to fight against the republic and so on. In short it is all a lie.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> For a little more information about this party see Chapter 6.

<sup>419</sup> Aliyev, Rafik, Chairman SCWRA, Baku, May 28 2005.

<sup>420</sup> Aliyev, Rafik, Chairman SCWRA, Baku, May 28 2005.

<sup>421</sup> Rahder (2005).

<sup>422</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 4 2004.

The Imam himself prefers to use the more neutral term *Salafi* when referring to the religious direction of the community.<sup>423</sup> Some community members even refuse to acknowledge that there is such a term as Wahhabism, saying that it has no basis in the Qur'an. As one man said: "Wahhabism – there is nothing called Wahhabism. There is only Islam as Islam was in the beginning, people who live according to the Qur'an."<sup>424</sup> During our conversations members referred instead to their community as: "Islam as it was in the beginning" or "Islam according to the Qur'an", "true Islam", "pure Islam" or "Islam that is close to the Islam of the Prophet". They also attempt to live their lives pure, as somebody said, "like it was in the 7<sup>th</sup> century" which means not listen to music, not dance (if it is not to special drums), not drink alcohol, not go to movies or cafés or engage in other such secular activities. Married women stay at home if their husbands do not allow them to work and boys and unmarried girls cannot meet without a curfew. This behavior indicates a return to a traditional lifestyle not very common in post-Soviet Azerbaijani society, especially not in the capital, which has made community members suspect in the eyes of many non-visitors.

Additionally the general usage of the word Wahhabi and the frequent public usage of the term in connection to the mosque and its visitors seem to have cemented the community's "Wahhabi label". Yet as the number of worshippers to the mosque increases many people in Baku have come to know someone, or know of someone that is visiting Abu Bakr. According to community members themselves, this has contributed to a more positive attitude towards the community in the population at large.

Also the Juma mosque community has been subject to "name calling", even though this has not been as explicit as in the Abu Bakr case. Mainly it is the community's controversial Imam that in government-controlled media has been associated with various groups, countries and criminal institutions. In his own words:

The first month they [the journalists] said he [Ibrahimoglu] was al-Qaeda, second month they said he was a Taliban, the third month they said he had some dirty links with Iran, forth month it became clear that he was protestant and that he was just playing a game here to benefit the West. It turned out [according to the media] that he was neither al-Qaeda nor Taliban, not connected to Iran but was promoting Western ideas.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> The Arabic word *salaf* means forefathers or pioneers and refer to the very first generations of Muslims. The behavior of these forefathers is the norm for how Salafis lead their live. As a result Salafis are guided by a very orthodox, ultra-conservative view of Islam. Even though I personally do not see the need to put a religious label on the Abu Bakr ideology it would seem that what Roy has referred to as "neofundamentalism" is rather similar to what this community represents. See Roy (2004).

<sup>424</sup> Man 3, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>425</sup> Ibragimoglu, Ilgar, Imam, Juma Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004.

An example is a representative of the SCWRA who in one of our conversations referred to the community as Shi'a radicals. Shi'a radicals, he explained "are religious activist that have chosen to enter the political arena, which according to Azerbaijani law is prohibited".<sup>426</sup> This clearly relates to the case of the Juma mosque and, again, more specifically to the political involvement of the Imam, arrested in 2003 for unconstitutional political activity.

To conclude, by singling out these groups as controversial and referring to them negatively the state can be said to have created their own opposition. The labeling of the visitors of these mosques as "radical" have strengthened their collective identity and contributed to their framing of what and who is the problem. By enhancing the groups' communal feeling as a "we" standing together against a threat represented by the government itself, this latter has created its own role as "they". In the next section I will look into how this "we" feeling has been expressed and manifested by members in the movements and how attempts by the state to contest the legitimacy of these manifestations have only served to further reinforce the collective movement identities.

### The *hijab* and the beard as movement identifiers

The collective identity embraced by members of a social movement is publicly manifested through the use of specific models of behavior. These can be expressed through styles of clothes, a particular language, demeanor and/or certain symbols.<sup>427</sup> In the case of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan the most obvious and most publicly debated such symbols are the long black beard and the *hijab* (veil).

In order to look like Muhammad and his contemporaries the men in the Abu Bakr mosque grow long beards, have short hair, and usually wear ankle-short trousers. This look is among most in the general public therefore considered to symbolize a "Wahhabi" and especially the beard seems to be a constant issue of confrontation.

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<sup>426</sup> According to *The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Freedom of Religious Belief"*, Chapter 1, Article 5 'religious associations shall not partake in the activity of political parties and help them financially'. The law further stipulates that 'in case of being appointed to work for a state agency or transfer to a state post, the activity of a cult servant, as a spiritual person, shall be suspended for a relevant term'.

<sup>427</sup> Gamson (1995).

One older man in the Abu Bakr mosque gave examples of several beard-related incidents he had suffered during his travels to various regions of Azerbaijan while working as a taxi driver. He described the most recent one:

Three days ago two policemen in the Kurdamir region approached me. They came up to me and asked what I was doing there. They checked my documents for a long time. They said to me: 'we have representatives for the Nurcu sect here and we have Wahhabis. That's why we are so careful'. Then they asked 'why are you not in the [particular] mosque today? We are celebrating a Shi'ite holiday. You should go to that mosque! Why are you Sunni? You need to be Shi'ite! Why do you have a beard?'<sup>428</sup>

The issue of the *hijab* and its place in a secular society has been equally controversial in Azerbaijan where many women have been affected by a law banning women from wearing the head scarf in photographs on all identity documents, including driver's licenses and internal passports. The initial decree from Azerbaijan's interior ministry stating that women must be pictured without the *hijab* dates back to the late 1990s. The situation escalated in July 2005 when the old Soviet identity card expired and women seeking to renew theirs faced difficulties when refusing to remove the *hijab* for their photograph. Those without a valid ID would not be able to apply for a passport to travel abroad, nor were they allowed to register at a hospital, vote and, in the worst cases, attend university. During the voting for the 2005 parliamentary elections the country's Central Election Commission allowed old ID cards to be used, but only as a temporary measure.

While the authorities insist the rule is created to protect the secular nature of Azerbaijan, the right to wear the *hijab* as an expression of religious freedom has been advocated by many NGOs and human rights groups. It is also one of the issues prioritized by the Juma mosque community. Under the slogan *Our Headscarf is Our Honor* they, together with other groups, have initiated court cases in Azerbaijan as well as in the European court of Justice to reinstate the right of women to wear a veil in official documents. In some ways this has made the wearing of the veil oppositional in Azerbaijan, not unlike the situation in Algeria during the revolution, as described by Fantasia and Hirsch.<sup>429</sup> Also in nearby Turkey the veil has become an issue that symbolizes the conflict between official secularism and Islamism. The Turkish example is interesting because the understanding of religion and devoutness that developed in Turkey during the Kemalist era has a lot in common with religious policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, still under the sway of USSR conceptions.

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<sup>428</sup> Salikovich, Melikov Galib, Abu Bakr, Baku, June 4 2005.

<sup>429</sup> Fantasia and Hirsch (1995).

As in Azerbaijan, official secularism in Turkey proscribed outward religious attributes and confined one's faith to the private sphere. "[In Turkey] One should not be able to tell whether a random person walking down the street was a strong believer or not", Özdalga clarifies.<sup>430</sup>

The removal of the veil played a major symbolic role in Soviet anti-religious campaigns. The campaign *Khudzhum* (attack) was launched in the entire Union as a movement to remove the veil from all Muslim women.<sup>431</sup> In Azerbaijan, to commemorate this memorable event (considered a step forward by many Azerbaijanis), there is a statue, located in central Baku, of a woman removing her veil. The statue is called "Free Woman of the East" (*Svobodnaya Zhenschina Vostoka*) and symbolizes the "eradication of backwards traditions and the emancipation of the whole society through the emancipation of women after the establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan".<sup>432</sup>



*Illustration 10* Free Woman of the East. I found it rather ironic that this statue was located in front of the building that, at the time of the study, held the Iranian Bank in Baku. Photo: Sofie Bedford

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<sup>430</sup> Özdalga, Elisabeth (1998) *The Veiling Issue, Official Secularism and Popular Islam in Modern Turkey*. Richmond: Curzon Press, p. 20.

<sup>431</sup> Yunusov (2004).

<sup>432</sup> Gureyeva (2005) p. 242.

The symbolic importance of this event has contributed to the controversy surrounding the veil in today's Azerbaijan. Gureyeva, who studied veiled women in Azerbaijan, describes the veiling as a way for girls to "distinguish themselves by choice of an alternative lifestyle different from their parents, who have been influenced very much by the communist ideology".<sup>433</sup> During my interviews with women in the Abu Bakr mosque it became clear that prevailing Soviet attitudes had in some cases created serious problems in the families of "born again" Muslims, especially in cases where women had chosen to express their newfound faith by wearing the veil. "When I realized what God wanted from us and started to wear the hijab my husband threw me out. He said: 'you have to choose between God and me'. I chose God," one woman announced.<sup>434</sup> Another girl declared: "my parents do not allow me to fast or to wear the hijab. Their opinion is inherited from Soviet times. They think we [in the Abu Bakr mosque] are fanatics. People here think that the hijab is for old people only. But I don't care. I have found the goal in my life."<sup>435</sup>

Not all girls are however strong enough to withstand family pressure and therefore have to hide the fact that they are wearing the veil from their parents. In this way the mosque, and the mosque community, becomes a place where they relax as they do not have to keep their religiosity secret. It is possible to draw a parallel to the situation in Turkey where Özdalga notes the controversy of the veiling, an "issue" which splits close friends and even members of the same family. Also the examples she gives from "the street", where many among the Turkish general public believe wearing the veil today is unnecessary and something to be frowned upon. The Turkish debate very much resembles the attitudes many young woman wearing the veil in post-Soviet Azerbaijan are facing.<sup>436</sup>

The beard, the short trousers and the veil are not only symbols by which the movement members can position themselves. Even though they might be of positive value to the members of the community, these symbols also serve their opponents to identify someone who is not following the rules. The rules in this context are not always outspoken but rather tacit (except for the case of wearing the *hijab* in official photographs). While there is for example no law against having a beard, this religious expression is seen as a symbol for something that is not commonly accepted in society and therefore should be opposed. The negative attitudes towards religious symbols were encouraged by communist officials and are still prevalent today. Even many of those who are born in independent Azerbaijan have been raised in an anti-religious atmosphere and see "extreme" religious expression as something bad.

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<sup>433</sup> Gureyeva (2005) p. 247.

<sup>434</sup> Woman 3, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>435</sup> Woman 6, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>436</sup> Özdalga (1998).

## Conclusion

At a first glance the mobilization of the Abu Bakr and the Juma mosque communities seem to have very little in common. Although they in a sense share a similar goal, to achieve change in Azerbaijani society, how this is framed in the respective movements differs a great deal. While the Juma community argues in terms of religious freedom and civic rights the Abu Bakr rhetoric is mainly concerned with religious values and morality. Similarly the Juma way to a transformed Azerbaijan goes through the political arena and via the creation and mobilization of a civil society whereas Abu Bakr promotes a change of values and ways from within, starting with friends and family. Consequently, it is also possible to see how the activities of the Abu Bakr mosque are consistently inward-oriented, while members of the Juma mosque are becoming increasingly politicized. While these frames provide the action framework for the specific movement, the community's collective identity is also developed in relation to society at large and other social and political actors in particular. Especially important in shaping this collective identity is to define the "opponent". In the cases of Juma and Abu Bakr, both communities share a sense of representing something new in society. In this way their opponents become the representatives of what is outdated, which includes both secular and religious authorities, inasmuch as they both cling to an obsolete system originating in a defunct era. Additionally, increased religious knowledge and the state's tendency of labeling opponents in disparaging terms has led, not just to a polarization between state and mosques, but to growing animosities between the Sunni Abu Bakr and the Shi'ite Juma mosque communities, as they accuse each other of spreading a misguided religious message throughout the country. Nevertheless, the state's wish to discourage the activities of the said controversial communities by labeling them "Wahhabis" and radical Shi'ites, among other things, has proven ineffective. This appears to have, if anything, attracted rather new members to the mosques, now more popular than ever before. "Name calling" is however just one of the issues that Islamic activists face in Azerbaijani society. In the next chapters other measures taken by the state to restrict the movements' activities will be discussed within the national political context that regulates movement mobilization.



## 9. Mobilization and Political Structure: Democratic Deficiency and Strict Secularism

Besides their organizational resources and the consolidation of action frames and a collective identity, social movements are both restricted and empowered by features in their national political context which influence their capability and as well as tactics, actions and choices available to them. In this chapter I will take a closer look at these political aspects, both formal and informal, that has affected the mobilization of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan. As in previous chapters the Soviet attitude towards religion and the shadow this attitude casts over the structures and institutions in the post-Soviet Azerbaijani system constitutes a thread throughout this analysis.

### An inopportune political context: institutional and legal repression

Despite substantial progress in certain fields Azerbaijan is not yet a democratic state. In this context it therefore does not seem adequate to talk about a “political *opportunity* structure” as common in social movement terminology, but rather an *inopportune* institutional and political structure restricting the activities of religious, and other types, of opposition. Most researchers seem in general to agree with the gloomy picture Rasizade paints of the situation in Azerbaijan ten year after independence, likely to hold true for many other post-Soviet countries as well:

The short-lived euphoria of independence has been replaced by the somber realization that the so-called ‘transition period’ could extend well beyond most people’s natural lifetimes. The promise of peace, freedom and prosperity, which seemed to come with the end of communism, has disappeared into the distance a mere ten years later.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Rasizade, Alec (2002) Azerbaijan after a Decade of Independence: Less Oil, More Graft and Poverty. *Central Asian Survey* 21(4): 349–370, p. 349.

In short, even though Azerbaijan in relation to other former Soviet countries might be considered quite progressive, peculiar features of the general state of its politics contrast markedly with a so called Western liberal democratic model. Other researchers nevertheless claim that Azerbaijan is on the right path and point to the progress made by Azerbaijan in recent years in the fields of, say, corruption eradication and election processes. According to Cornell the parliamentary election held in Azerbaijan in November 2005 “constituted a significant step forward in Azerbaijan’s bumpy road toward democracy”.<sup>438</sup> Still, the question is if this progress is too little, too late. Much of the euphoria after independence has in any case changed into distrust of democracy among the public. The political situation is characterized by corruption and nepotism. The cult of personality that has evolved around the deceased former president Heyday Aliyev, father of the present president, indicates the presence of political values that have little in common with a representative democracy.<sup>439</sup>



*Illustration 11* Cult of Personality. Pictures of the two Aliyev Presidents, father and son, often accompanied by nationalistic slogans, are strategically located all over the country. Here outside the railway station in Baku. Photo: Sofie Bedford.

<sup>438</sup> Cornell, Svante E. (2005a) Azerbaijan’s Parliamentary Elections: A Step Forward. *Updated text of remarks at W.P. Carey Forum Central Asia- Caucasus Institute John Hopkins University- SAIS*, November 7, 2005.

<sup>439</sup> International Crisis Group (2004).

The population's distrust of democracy is accompanied by political resignation. If there is no democracy there is no point in voting, many seem to argue. An analysis by International Crisis Group in the aftermath of the 2005 parliamentary elections supports this observation:

/.../ fraudulent polls have led some in the opposition to believe that the only channel of appeal open to them is in the street. Azerbaijani citizens are clearly the greatest losers of all: indifferent to elections that do not reflect their will, having lost belief in their ability to affect changes through the ballot box, less than half – 46,8% even turned out on election day.<sup>440</sup>

The opposition undisputedly faces great difficulty as far as freedom of expression is concerned. This appears to be especially noticeable in times of elections. In 2003, following the presidential elections that brought Ilham Aliyev to power, violent clashes between opposition parties and their supporters, who accused the authorities of rigging the vote, and police forces left one person from the opposition killed, many injured and 600–700 opposition leaders and supporters in prison. Most were soon released but some remained behind bars, including several prominent opposition figures. Following demonstrations, many opposition supporters and their relatives were fired from their jobs.<sup>441</sup> With respect to the November 2005 parliamentary elections, the government refused to allow the main opposition group, the Azadliq bloc, to hold rallies in the center of Baku or in a number of Azerbaijani regions. When the opposition nevertheless decided to rally, once again demonstrators and police clashed several times.<sup>442</sup>

To return to the mobilization of Islamic activism, in such an anti-oppositional atmosphere it is not surprising that groups involved in religious activity considered controversial by the state are strictly controlled and opposed as potential challengers. As a consequence, despite the fact that many political leaders have flirted with religion as a means to increase their popularity, state policy maintains a strict division between religion and politics.

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<sup>440</sup> International Crisis Group (2005) Azerbaijan's 2005 Elections: Lost Opportunity, *Crisis Group Europe Briefing* 40, p. 3.

<sup>441</sup> Human Rights Watch (2005), Azerbaijan Parliamentary Elections 2005: Lessons Not Learned, *Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*.

<sup>442</sup> Human Rights Watch (2005).

## Eliminating the political threat of religious movements and leaders

Article 48 of the Azerbaijani constitution states that everybody in the country has full religious freedom as follows:

- Everyone enjoys the freedom of conscience.
- Everyone has the right to define his/her attitude to religion, to profess, individually or together with others, any religion or to profess no religion, to express and spread one's beliefs concerning religion.
- Everyone is free to carry out religious rituals; however this should not violate public order and contradict public morals.
- Religious beliefs and convictions do not excuse infringements of the law.<sup>443</sup>

Article 25 similarly declare the right of equality for all citizens “irrespective of race, nationality, religion, language, sex, origin, financial position, occupation, political convictions, membership in political parties, trade unions and other public organizations”.<sup>444</sup> In this way the republic's legislation serves to secure the freedom of believers, but at the same time it seeks to limit their possibilities to be politically active. As in other post-Soviet Muslim countries the fact that the Azerbaijani republic is secular and democratic according to its constitution is highly valued. There are certain features of the constitution and the 1992 *Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief* which clearly indicate this wish to keep state politics and religion separated. Article 5 of this law, for example, says that “in the Azerbaijan Republic, religion and religious associations shall be separated from the state” and further that “the state shall not instruct religious associations to fulfill any state's affair and does not interfere with their activities”. Furthermore “religious associations shall not partake in the activity of political parties and help them financially”.<sup>445</sup> Article 85 of the constitution states that “religious men” might not be elected deputies of the Milli Majlis (Parliament) of the Azerbaijan Republic.<sup>446</sup> Article 89 stipulates that upon taking on a position in a religious organization a deputy of the Milli Majlis will be deprived of his powers.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> *Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 48.

<sup>444</sup> *Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 25.

<sup>445</sup> *The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan “On Freedom of Religious Belief”*, Chapter 1, Article 5.

<sup>446</sup> *Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, Section 3, Chapter 5, Article 85. “Religious men” according to the English version of the constitution is “*religioznii deyateli*” in the Russian version which in my understanding indicates being “active” in the religious field rather than being just a believer.

<sup>447</sup> *Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, article 89. See also *The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan “On Freedom of Religious Belief”*, chapter 1 article 5 for vice versa: “In case of

Among state representatives the above mentioned legislation is seen as a means to prohibit anyone involved in religious activities to express political views. This for example has led to the arrest of Imam of the Juma mosque, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, in connection to his participation in the demonstrations protesting the 2003 presidential elections. It has also prevented him and other “religious men” from running in the parliamentary elections.<sup>448</sup> In one of our interviews Ibrahimoglu gave me his views on the separation of state and religion, which he saw as artificial and just another way for the state structures to show they are in control:

In our country religion is separated from the state. But that is only on the paper. In reality the government is deeply involved in religious affairs. The bureaucrats are used to regulate all issues connected to the administration of religious rituals. And they get seriously annoyed when somebody does not want to see them as the middleman between himself and the Almighty.<sup>449</sup>

That the Imam does not believe in a strict separation between religion and politics became quite obvious during the parliamentary elections of November 2005, when the community decided to join forces with the main democratic opposition block. Despite requests from the political parties, Ibrahimoglu was, nevertheless, unable to be a candidate for the block due to government’s regulations.<sup>450</sup> As in 2003, Ibrahimoglu was one of the key participants in the demonstrations protesting the outcome of the 2005 elections.<sup>451</sup> While in 2003 he was sentenced to prison by participating in demonstrations organized by the political opposition against the election results, in 2005 he seems to have been able to avoid a legal rerun consequent upon his renewed political activism.

The state’s intention to keep religion and politics separate gets blurred by the intimate association between secular and religious authorities. Furthermore, the creation of a state committee to coordinate the work with religious organizations seems to indicate that the authorities to some extent continue to play a role as overseers of religious activity in the country. This committee has come to be the main government organ used to supervise and regulate the work of all religious organizations, the “controversial” ones in particular.

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being appointed to work for a State agency or transfer to a State post, the activity of a cult servant, as a spiritual person, shall be suspended for a relevant term.”

<sup>448</sup> I personally know of at least two such persons Hajji Abdul, founder of the Tövba organization and religious leader in the Baku Imam Hussein Mosque and Hajji Hadjiaga Nuri Ali Askerovich of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, but there are most likely more such cases.

<sup>449</sup> Ibrahimoglu (2005).

<sup>450</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, September 2005.

<sup>451</sup> See for example: Socor, Vladimir (2005) Kerimli Battle-cry Sparks Melee in Baku. *James-town Foundation* November 28.

## State Committee for Work with Religious Associations: Stemming the threat of imported religious radicalism

The first few years after achieving independence, Azerbaijan was characterized by religious openness. This was a result of a wish to distance the independent country from their atheist Soviet past, but probably also an indication of the political chaos that the quite sudden independence brought with it. In contrast to the strict control during Soviet times it was now, among other things, permitted to study religion domestically as well as to travel abroad to do so. There was a great curiosity among people to learn more about religion and about their Muslim roots. Many other Muslim (and non-Muslim) countries saw as their call to accommodate this and traveled to Azerbaijan to spread religious knowledge and literature. The early 1990s therefore saw an intense foreign religious activity by Muslim Arab, Iranian, Turkish as well as Christian missionaries from different Western countries. In this period most religious books and the majority of the *ulama* came from abroad while young people went to Iran, Turkey or Arab countries to study religion. The speedy growth of missionary activity at this time started to worry Azerbaijani authorities. To tackle this problem the Azerbaijani parliament adopted an amendment to the *Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief* in 1996 banning the activities of “foreigners and persons without citizenship” from conducting “religious propaganda”.<sup>452</sup>

The establishment of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) in 2001 was another step on the way to control the activities of foreign missionaries.<sup>453</sup> A presidential decree determined that the main duty of the SCWRA was to “create relevant condition for /.../ ensuring the freedom of religious faith, to ensure control over the abidance to the other legislation acts on the freedom of religious faith, and to regulate more seriously the relations between the state and religious institutions.”<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> *The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan “On Freedom of Religious Belief”*, Chapter 1, Article 5. The fear of alleged foreign radical influence on religion will be further discussed in Chapter 11 that focuses on external aspects of Islamic mobilization in Azerbaijan.

<sup>453</sup> Different versions of the Committee’s name exist. This is the name given on the English version of the Committee’s webpage. On the Russian version the name at some point has been changed to the State Committee for Work with Religious Education while it is still the same in English. I found no explanation for this name change. Certain sources refer to it as State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations — see for example the below quote from Corley (2003b).

<sup>454</sup> *Presidential decree no 512*, June 21, 2001.

On the committee's webpage this mission is elaborated on in more detail, stating that monitoring the activities of missionary religious organizations in Azerbaijan constitutes the SCWRA's most important responsibility:

The [Azerbaijani] society is opened for some sects, about which the majority of population never has heard up till present. These sects originated from non-traditional religious currents and spread outlooks, which are alien to Azerbaijani people, and via different ways reach consciousness and hearts of people. The necessity of regulating of this contradictory process in the frame of corresponding legislation, guaranteeing freedom of religion, proclaimed by Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic, supervision observance of legislative acts relating to freedom of religion and belief and registration of religious association, made establishment of the State Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan for the Work with Religious Associations actual [sic].<sup>455</sup>

Another action taken to regulate the activities of foreign religious figures was the official 1997 announcement requiring all religious communities to renew their official registration.<sup>456</sup> This process was earlier handled by the Ministry of Justice but since the creation of the SCWRA it has become its responsibility. Failure or refusal by certain communities to register has met with government pressure and interference, as seen in the case of the Juma mosque. Official registration is important for religious communities because without it such a community is not recognized as a legal entity and cannot, therefore, buy or rent property, nor hold a bank account.<sup>457</sup> According to the former chairman of the SCWRA, as of spring 2004 the re-registering of organizations was completed.<sup>458</sup> However, the SCWRA and the registration process itself faced strong criticism from religious rights organizations, such as for example Forum 18, a Norwegian organization for religious freedom.

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<sup>455</sup> Webpage of the SCWRA – [www.dqdk.gov.az](http://www.dqdk.gov.az).

<sup>456</sup> *The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Freedom of Religious Belief"*, Chapter 2, Article 12.

<sup>457</sup> Corley, Felix (2003b) Azerbaijan: Religious Freedom Survey. *Forum18News*. 25 June. Forum 18 is a Norwegian initiative to promote the implementation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In their news reporting they focus on threats and actions of religious freedom around the world. More information can be found on their homepage — [www.forum18.org](http://www.forum18.org).

<sup>458</sup> Aliyev, Rafik, Chairman SCWRA, Baku, April 22 2004. Some sources quote him saying this already in 2003, see Corley (2003b).

According to Forum 18's 2003 Religious Freedom Survey many religious organizations were, for example, labeled "unpopular" and therefore denied registration:

The powerful State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations, which has overseen the registration process since it was established in 2001, has a wide range of techniques for dealing with registration applications it regards as unwelcome: it pressures religious communities to withdraw those applications, ignores them, returns them repeatedly for 'corrections' of 'errors' or rejects them. Indeed, as registration applications need prior approval from local authorities before they even reach the committee, the scope for unpopular religious communities to be barred from registering is wide.<sup>459</sup>

Other tasks for the SCWRA include the supervision of religious education and of imported religious literature.<sup>460</sup> So far, only the Baku Islamic University and its four branches managed to re-register, out of the 100–150 *madradas* (Islamic institute for higher learning) believed to have existed earlier (even though, allegedly, education in Arabic language and Qur'an studies is still to some extent carried out in many mosques).<sup>461</sup> The chairman of the SCWRA during the time of this study, Rafik Aliyev, believes this small number shows that through the new law the state has managed to get rid of *madradas* run by foreign missionaries, now outlawed, which were previously used to spread their radical Islam in the country:

No *madradas* are registered [until 2005]. If they openly present financing, program, planning, and normal working conditions they are welcomed to be registered. But still after 4 years nobody is interested in registering. It's not beneficial for them. They want to be isolated.

I do not think that anybody from abroad wants to sponsor a school that is working openly and are preparing [religious] specialists for the Azerbaijan society. They want to export their ideology and we do not want to import that. We only import what we need.<sup>462</sup>

Besides its main supervisory functions the SCWRA also engages in a number of other activities such as organizing conferences, workshops and forums all in the spirit of "interreligious understanding" A flagship was the campaign "Religions against AIDS and narcotics", conducted locally in 2005 in cooperation with UNDP and including representatives of various faiths and denominations. They traveled all over Azerbaijan during three months educating people and informing about AIDS and narcotics. This was followed

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<sup>459</sup> Corley (2003b).

<sup>460</sup> Fuller, Liz (2001) Azerbaijan Moves to Impose Tighter Control over Religious Organizations, *Eurasianet Azerbaijan Daily Digest* Aug 27.

<sup>461</sup> Center for Religious Studies, Baku, April 15 2004.

<sup>462</sup> Aliyev, Rafik, Chairman SCWRA, Baku, May 28 2005.



up by a publication discussing the role of religion in the fight against AIDS.<sup>463</sup>

Another big project on the agenda during my second round of interviews (2005) was the establishment of Spiritual Rehabilitation Centers, first in Baku and then in other regions. These would “help victims of religious sects to re-integrate in society”.<sup>464</sup> According to the then chairman, Rafik Aliyev, most of the youth that need treatment are former Wahhabis [sic!], which in this context, as has been noted earlier, means worshippers at the Abu Bakr mosque. This is interesting as even though the relations between the state and this mosque have stabilized over the years, the chairman’s comment indicates that this mosque is still in some degree judged problematic. As he described it many of the youth that have been in this “sect” are “ill” and need treatment. That this view is not uncommon is supported by the fact that this topic also popped up in my discussions with youth in the Abu Bakr mosque. Many of them told me how their parents expressed a wish for them to undergo psychotherapy in order to be cured from religious fanaticism.

Considering that many of Azerbaijan’s contemporary political leaders not too long ago were a part of the Soviet communist party system and strong defenders of the atheist policy, this attitude and the experienced urge for religious control and restrictions are understandable. The chairman of the SCWRA is one example of a former communist dedicating himself to working with religious questions. The impression I got was that even though he is generally seen as a respected academic, his position as a former university teacher of atheism rendered his mission to act as a defender of religious rights and tolerance (as the head of the SCWRA) a travesty in the eyes of many citizens.

Above I have tried to describe how the Azerbaijani legislation in its attempt to separate religion and politics has created an inopportune political context for religious movement mobilization. Inspired by Ferree (as discussed in Chapter 2), I argue that these legal and institutional measures taken can be characterized as “soft repression” in the way that they clearly aim at hindering religious movements from become a political force. Besides these official measures other more informal structures are simultaneously at work preventing the activities of those religious groups perceived as oppositional. These informal governmental (and institutional) strategies can also be described as soft in most cases, although, as will become clear, in some instances these have reverted to “hard” repression.

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<sup>463</sup> More information on this program can be found in the publication: Aliyev, Rafik (2005) *Religia Protiv SPIDA*. Baku: UNDP and SCWRA.

<sup>464</sup> Aliev, Rafik, Chairman SCWRA, Baku, May 28 2005.

## State repression: From black PR to physical abuse

Besides the state's formal regulations in regard to religious associations, signs exist of what can be referred to as an informal "black public relations strategy" being applied towards its religious opponents. One main organ for carrying out this strategy is the government controlled press which routinely presents a disagreeable picture of the state's opponents and those who support them.<sup>465</sup> One such example is a notice in the online newspaper, *Baku Today*, claiming that the then Norwegian ambassador to Azerbaijan appeared intoxicated in the Juma mosque.<sup>466</sup> Both the ambassador and the Juma mosque community say that the content of the article, which also accuses the ambassador of supporting illegal Christian missionary activities in Azerbaijan, lacks any basis in reality. Considering the reputation of the then Norwegian ambassador and his involvement in the "Juma case" the news is an attempt to discredit him in the eyes of the Azerbaijani population. The background is that following the election turmoil in 2003 Ibrahimoglu was given refuge at the Norwegian embassy (at that time located in the close vicinity of the Juma mosque), since there had been attempts to arrest him in the mosque.<sup>467</sup> By doing this, and also later expressing support for the Juma mosque and its visitors, the Norwegian ambassador at the time earned a reputation as Ibrahimoglu's special defender.

The Abu Bakr community has suffered from similar problems. As for "black PR", almost everything written about the mosque in some periods referred to them as Wahhabi, and as discussed earlier, the connotations of this term connects it to extremism, radicalism and terrorism in one way or another. These slander campaigns are definitely something that can be related to what Ferree characterizes a "meso-level stigma".<sup>468</sup> The way the mosque communities have been displayed in the media and other public situations sends a message: the worshipers at Abu Bakr are portrayed as dangerous terrorists and the Juma community is stigmatized as a group with a suspicious agenda, most likely aiming at the overthrow of the elected government. In the Abu Bakr case this image seems to have had a wider impact than in the Juma case, perhaps because the fear of "Wahhabism" was already

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<sup>465</sup> Lack of independent media is still a problem in Azerbaijan as much of the news media outlets are owned by people affiliated to the ruling elite. See for example Freedom House (2007) Country Report: Azerbaijan. In *Freedom in the Press*. 2007 edition. Washington: Freedom House. It seems "black PR" is a common phenomenon in the Post-Soviet sphere. See for example Krastev (2006) for a (rather provocative) discussion on how in his view political technocrats (political analysts or political consultants with direct or indirect links to the Kremlin) "contaminates the Political environment" in Russia through "black PR".

<sup>466</sup> Caucasus Muslims Office Condemns Norwegian Ambassador, Claiming He Visited Mosque While Intoxicated. *Baku Today Net* 09/07/2004.

<sup>467</sup> Corley, Felix (2003a) Azerbaijan: Election Crackdown On Independent Muslim Leaders. *F18News* 20 October. The Norwegian embassy was later evicted from their premises in Baku's Old Town. Some believe this was punishment for supporting Ibrahimoglu.

<sup>468</sup> Ferree (2005).

established in the former Soviet Union. Moreover, in the case of the Juma mosque, the Imam's extensive meetings with international press and diplomats during and right after his arrest managed to promote an alternative positive picture of the mosque community — as proponents of democracy in Azerbaijan — that to a certain extent outweighed the treacherous image.

Nevertheless, these stigmas have in certain cases resulted in a more physical victimization of those affiliated with the mosques. Both in the Juma and the Abu Bakr mosque there were issues with landlords — people were being evicted as their connection to a certain mosque made them a potential problem. Furthermore, some community members say they have been arrested, more than once, for no apparent reason. Bugging telephone lines, constant house searches as well as harming of friends and relatives were other forms of pressure described. During an interview with Juma community members one man explained how this has led him to hide the fact that he is a believer and especially that he belongs to the Juma community. "I work at a state-owned TV-station," he said. "Very few there know that I go to the mosque. I am afraid to tell them."<sup>469</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the Abu Bakr mosque community was facing its most intense intimidation in the early 2000s. Following the revelation that Azerbaijanis going to fight in Chechnya and Hizb-ut-Tahrir members had been among the mosque's visitors, there were calls to close the mosque. However, after the Imam of the mosque had testified on these cases the mosque remained open. Gradually the medial and physical assaults on the community in Baku diminished. I was nonetheless told during my interviews that problems still persisted for the believers outside of Baku. These were often harassed, say by getting their beards shaved off, being arrested or beaten up — all while being accused of extremism.<sup>470</sup>

Apparently, in many of these cases the assaulters are not necessarily representatives nor acting on behalf of the national authorities. The examples with the landlords show how stigma works. If somebody is connected to a certain controversial mosque then this person is expected to be a problematic tenant, hence gets evicted. The arrests and assaults on the Abu Bakr community in regions outside Baku, I was told, were carried out by local police and local "authorities" that do what they think is demanded from them by the top, even though this is not necessarily the case. A major part of the problem can be linked to be the prevailing images of how religion "should be", inherited from Soviet times. As discussed in previous chapters, a sense that religious belief is something that should not be too public is still widespread. To grow a long beard and wear short trousers might be to show off one's faith in

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<sup>469</sup> Group discussion, men, Juma Mosque community, Baku.

<sup>470</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam, Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004 and June 4 2005. I have also seen later reports on "beard shaving", for example Corley, Felix (2008) Azerbaijan: Muslims Banned From Praying Outside Mosques, Raids On Jehovah's Witnesses Continue. *Forum 18 News* 18 September.

a much too obvious way, which is experienced as intimidating by those who wish religion to be practiced in private — out of sight. The Abu Bakr Imam complained about these attitudes in our talks:

Say for example that I was a Wahhabi — that should not concern anybody. Problems exist, but it is not with the government, it is at a lower level. It is civil servants who don't want this [type of religiosity]. And it doesn't matter to whom we complain. We get no help. We still have this problem.<sup>471</sup>

The Imam's indignation indicates that national authorities do not seem to take full responsibility in making sure freedom of religion is guaranteed when it comes to controversial believers. As an example, a man who had his beard forcefully shaved off says that he approached "all newspapers, the presidential palace, the SCWRA and others", but never received any replies from anywhere.<sup>472</sup>

Be that as it may, some actions taken against the activities of controversial communities are clearly on the initiative of higher political levels, and hence represent a more formal repression. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of the Juma Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu. In this case, the state has been trying everything in its power to hinder him from continuing his, and the community's, activities. After three months in jail he was finally put on trial, found guilty, given a five year suspended sentence, and released.<sup>473</sup> His outspoken fight for religious freedom and human rights has made the Imam of the Juma mosque a requested speaker at international human rights conferences and similar events. The government did not however see his international engagements as positive. At a number of occasions after his arrest he has not been permitted to leave the country, thus missing out on OSCE conferences (in Brussels and Warsaw), meetings with the Committee for Human Rights in Geneva and election monitoring in Georgia.<sup>474</sup> What is more, in the spring of 2004, the Azerbaijani government decided to evict the Juma community from the mosque building, under the charge that the group was not an officially registered religious organization and was illegally occupying a state building. As the community resisted the eviction, police stormed the mosque on June 30, 2004 during the time of morning prayer, and removed worshippers by force. This was repeated a few days later. During these incidents a number of community members sustained injuries and some were arrested.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, April 20, 2004.

<sup>472</sup> Salikovich, Melikov Galib, Abu Bakr, Baku, June 4 2005.

<sup>473</sup> For news coverage of this see for example: Azeri imam convicted over Protest. *BBC News* June 2.

<sup>474</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, May 28 2005.

<sup>475</sup> For news coverage on these events see for example: Peuch, Jean-Christophe (2004) Azerbaijan: Authorities in Baku Target Shi'a Mosque, say it is being Illegally Occupied. *RFE/RL* March 03 2004; Abbasov, Shahin and Ilham Rzayev (2004) Mosque Controversy

## Repression and enhanced mobilization

If briefly returning to the types of repression and mobilization outlined in the framework for analysis in Chapter 3, the above discussion shows that repression in these cases has chiefly been “soft”. But the soft repression seen in Azerbaijan widens Ferree’s definition, inasmuch as it includes formal as well as informal attempts, linked to state structures, to try to neutralize religious mobilization. Over and above countenancing a ruinous image of its critics, state repression has taken the shape of legal restrictions on civil society activities in general and religious organizations in particular. At the same time there have been instances of “hard repression” in Azerbaijan as well, where direct force has been used against the opposition. The incidents of beatings and forceful shaving of beards are two such examples and the seizure of the Juma mosque is another. It furthermore seems that repression in these cases has been both preemptive and reactive: preemptive with regard to the way that legislation and institutions have been shaped to hinder the mobilization of religious groups, but reactive in the sense that the actual mobilization of these groups has led to a series of harmful actions on the part of the state, as instantiated by the “black PR campaigns”, arrests etc. described above. Finally, even though repression in Azerbaijani cases can be described as on the whole selective, some of the restrictions put in place by legislation and institutions are indiscriminate, educational control and censorship affecting a wider general audience. Tougher suppressive tactics target first and foremost the “spokespersons” of the mosques, that is to say, the Imams, but even those visiting these particular mosques are, too, harassed. That said, it is hard to fit the repression the Abu Bakr and Juma mosque communities are facing into any of the ideal types of repression envisioned by the theoretical framework.

As far as the effects of state repression on movement behavior goes, the chief conclusion is that the measures taken by the authorities to control and dampen Islamic activism have had the contrary effect, acting as a catalyst to the greater mobilization experienced by both movements. Hard repression notwithstanding, there has not been any indication of “hard” mobilization in Azerbaijan during the time of this study. Because the repression is not indiscriminate and mainly soft it still leaves room for the “soft” mobilization processes to proceed. Even in the case of the closed Juma mosque the authorities seem to have allowed the mosque community to continue their activities in alternative locations. The authorities might not have encouraged this development but neither have they completely prevented it, indicating a degree of openness or pragmatism in state–movement relations. What both

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Deepens in Azerbaijan Following Police Using Force. *Eurasianet* 7/06/04; 'Dissident' Azeri Mosque Raided, *BBC News*. June 30 2004.

the “soft” and the “hard” repressive strategies have done to the mobilization process is to reinforce the opposition groups’ collective identity, incidentally stabilizing the feeling of *we* (the victims) and *they* (the old structures, the repressive state, family and friends who read the papers and get the wrong ideas).

## Conclusion

The beginning of independence in post-Soviet Azerbaijan saw very little in the way of national restrictions on and control of religion. During the time of the so-called religious boom, a great number of foreign and local religious movements initiated activities in the country. It was not until a few years later that the government came to realize what was happening and to fear the potential of these movements. Through the new law on religion the freedom of action of religious organizations became severely curtailed in many ways; certain sections in the constitution can also be seen interpreted as directly limiting religious liberty and the freedom to mobilize. The post-Soviet Azerbaijani political context recalls thus the situation in the Soviet Union as far as the relationship between religion and state politics is concerned, both in terms of institutions and political culture.

Religious organizations in the Azerbaijani context face soft repression in terms of institutional restrictions legitimized by a need to protect the secular state from religious threats. State policy dictates a strict division between religion and politics, prohibiting “religious men” from taking part in any form of political activity. This division appears ambiguous for various reasons. Not only is it difficult to grasp who exactly should be considered a “religious man”, but state controls on religion — via censorship, educational monopoly and registration of religious communities — makes it obvious that the authorities already are involved in the sphere of religious activities.

Besides these formal restrictions the movements in questions have also faced more informal types of repression directly and indirectly linked to their conflict with the state. These have taken the shape of an abundance of negative publicity as well as harassment in different ways. In none of the cases has the repression put a stop to mobilization. Rather it seems that the movements’ collective identity and action frames have been revitalized whenever singled out by the state as “opponents”.

Finally, one interesting aspect of this state–movement interaction is that while the Juma community’s mobilization has become more overt in the face of repressive measures the Abu Bakr community has for its part turned more covert. These differences are at the heart of the next chapter which looks more closely at the state–movement relations through the interaction context presented in Chapter 3.

## 10. The Interaction Context: Fear of Opposition Creates “Strange Bedfellows”

In the previous chapter the political context in which Islamic activists in post-Soviet Azerbaijan operates and the restrictions they face as social movements in a non-democratic context have been analyzed. The political structure does not however influence all social movements in the same way and to the same extent. While the Juma community has grown more overt and publicly entered the political arena the Abu Bakr community has been increasingly distancing itself from the public. Whereas the Juma community’s relationship with the state has turned more and more conflictual, the Abu Bakr community is being perceived as less oppositional by government representatives. Through the lens of the interaction context outlined in Chapter 3, the nature, strategies and tactics peculiar to each movement vis-à-vis their opponents will constitute the subject of this chapter. Differences in the mobilization process of each movement will also be highlighted.

### “Unholy alliance” between the secular state and religious conservatives

In the theoretical discussion a distinction was made between so-called sociocultural movements, looking to change people’s way of thinking and acting, and political movements which direct their activities towards bringing about change in laws and decisions arrived at via formal political institutions. According to the theory, the state’s reaction to a political movement depends on whether the issues raised by the movement are considered low-profile or high-profile on the political agenda, that is, whether or not they constitute a threat to the core tasks and interests of the state. Consequently some issues are more threatening than others and hence met with a higher degree of repression. Sociocultural movements are instead distinguished by their introvert nature and serene actions, therefore not perceived as a threat by the authorities.<sup>476</sup>

In a way this theoretical reasoning is highly applicable to the Azerbaijani cases. The Abu Bakr community can be said to represent a so-called so-

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<sup>476</sup> Kriesi et al (1995).

ciocultural movement. Its activities are characterized by a withdrawal from both public and political spheres. Instead the members of the mosques are instructed to facilitate a change of society from within, or rather from the bottom-up, starting with the family sphere. To invite friends and family to Islam through inspiring them is an important part of the mosque's work. Rucht writes that the strategy of a sociocultural movement is to change individual behavior, that is, to encourage the adoption of divergent cultural practices and alternative lifestyles.<sup>477</sup> In the Abu Bakr case this translates into embracing a religiously conservative way of life where secular pleasures and participation in the secular political sphere are avoided, family life is prioritized and morality sacralized. In everyday life this means skipping a number of social practices considered typical of contemporary Azerbaijani society, such as voting, bribing and drinking alcohol. Although optional, many mosque visitors moreover decide to carry or wear, notwithstanding their eccentricity, religious symbols, like a beard or the veil, in order to show their affiliation with a community.

The Juma community represents the other type of movement, namely political, as its main goal appears to be to change society through changing the political system. At the same time it should be noted that the Juma congregation is still a religious community, rather than a political movement, and much of their identity as a group is dependent on their choice of a "religious lifestyle", even if not to the extent that can be observed in the Abu Bakr case. Furthermore, the community is still active mainly on a civil society level. Nevertheless, it appears that their activities are gradually moving towards the political arena. During my first interviews with members of the mosque in 2004 their work was much more focused on civil society than on politics. The Imam even made a point at that time of stating that he was not "political" (even though his presence at the post-election demonstrations spoke against it). The Juma community has had good and long-lasting relations with secular opposition parties, and to facilitate their fight for a "normal civil society" and freedom in Azerbaijan, it decided to join forces with the democratic opposition block, Azadliq, in the November 2005 parliamentary elections. The Azadliq (Freedom) block consists of leaders from the three main opposition parties: Musavat, the Azerbaijan People's Front (APFP) and the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP). It called for "free and fair elections and a complete change of political leadership, in particular criticizing the government for failure to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and distribute oil funds widely".<sup>478</sup> The Juma community's support was primarily noticeable through the Imam's active participation at meetings and rallies that were

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<sup>477</sup> Rucht (1990) pp. 162–163.

<sup>478</sup> The agreement between the three parties was signed on 7 July 2005. For more on political parties, see Eurasianet, Azerbaijan Elections 2005 ([www.eurasianet.org/azerbaijan/index.html](http://www.eurasianet.org/azerbaijan/index.html)); International Crisis Group (2005).



part of the Azadliq election campaign.<sup>479</sup> With the community publicly announcing its support for the secular opposition parties a definitive shift towards a more political line was undeniable. Moreover, during my second year of interviews visitors even acknowledged an interest in creating a “Muslim Democratic Party”, which also illustrates this shift:

There should be a Muslim Democratic Party. If there are Christian Democratic Parties, why can there not be a Muslim party? We don't create that kind of party right now, as it is not needed. As for now we are supporting the democratic opposition block Azadliq.<sup>480</sup>

As noted earlier, while the state's opposition towards the Juma Imam and community members escalated to the point that they were evicted from their mosque, the relationship between the Abu Bakr mosque community and the state has improved. The Imam and community members experience less bad publicity and a more accommodating atmosphere (at least in Baku). The state had at the time of this study discontinued its attempts to close the mosque. It would seem that one major reason for this lays precisely in how the focus of the two movements, on political and sociocultural issues, respectively, differs. As outlined throughout the previous chapters, in most post-Soviet states religion and politics are considered a lethal combination. Thus, the fact that a religious organization, such as the Juma mosque community appears on the political arena is seen as a major threat by the post-Soviet authorities. On a more theoretical level this conclusion also raises interesting questions about the differences between issues raised by social movements in democratic contexts and those raised in less-democratic contexts. While in the Western context, studied by for example Kriesi et al., it was issues like nuclear energy programs or immigration raised by the social movements that concerned the authorities the most, the Juma mosque case interestingly enough reveals that in the Azerbaijani context questions associated with human rights, religious freedom and the separation of religion and politics faced the harshest opposition from the state.<sup>481</sup> Perhaps it is not the fact that the Juma community is raising these issues per se that is the problem, but rather that by ventilating them publicly it openly opposes the way the post-Azerbaijani society is currently run, something that the authorities are not ready to accept.

This failure to accept and embrace political criticism is of course not unique to the Azerbaijani context: it is a common feature in many transitional states where democratic norms are not yet fully implemented. Nonetheless, what is interesting in the Azerbaijani situation is the difference in the

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<sup>479</sup> See for example: Azerbaijan: New Orange Revolution? *Human Rights House Network* 12 September 2005.

<sup>480</sup> Round table discussion, Juma, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>481</sup> Kriesi et al (1995).

approach taken by the state towards the Juma and the Abu Bakr mosque communities. In the light of secularism being such an important feature of the independent state's constitution, it is fascinating that the activities of the "liberal-democratic" Juma community have been hindered by all available means (including imprisonment of the Imam and closure of the mosque) while the activities of the "conservative-fundamentalist" Abu Bakr community are tolerated, even arguably co-opted by the state. In sum, it has not encountered the same degree of official "hard" repression. Even though this might be to slightly exaggerate this tendency, it is still an interesting finding that so much in the state-social movement relations in this context depends on the explicitly political. I would argue that even though the Abu Bakr movement might be "sociocultural" and the visitors "non-political", the way they express their collective identity can be, and is, read as a statement questioning the legitimacy of the post-Soviet Azerbaijani secular state. Yet the fact that their activities are focused on a change of values in society rather than a change of politics is keeping them off the state's radar.

## Playing by the rules

Another topic of the interaction context is how the movement chooses to pursue their goals — by using tactics that the state has or has not. A closer look at this indicates that it is rather difficult to apply this differentiation to the Azerbaijani context. As has become clear by now there is little real possibility to be officially sanctioned by the state if your group has been labeled oppositional. On the one hand the Juma mosque community can be said to have tried to act according to political regulations by working with the registered political opposition, but on the other hand its religious affiliation makes this illegal and hence its tactics by definition "non-sanctioned". Furthermore, the Juma Imam continues his refusal to register his community, quoting, in his defence, the ninth article of the *European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*.<sup>482</sup> This spurn makes the whole existence of the mosque community "non-sanctioned", that is, illegal, which fuels its "outlaw" reputation. Moreover, the Imam has, as referred to earlier, repeatedly questioned the authority of the Caucasus Muslim Board.

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<sup>482</sup> *European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, Article 9: Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

According to the Imam the community has been approached by government representatives with ideas on how to reach a solution to the problem, but in his mind the suggested solutions were nothing but superficial attempts to smooth things over, leaving pressing social ills untouched:

For example when I was released from prison somebody came and wanted us to do a pilgrimage to the grave of Heydar Aliyev. We, of course did not want to do that. Somebody else came to the mosque and asked: ‘What do you want? Perhaps we can solve this problem?’ ‘Sure’, I said, ‘I am not hiding what we want. We want a functioning civil society in Azerbaijan and human rights and under this government we do not see that happening. Or at least it is very unlikely’. As long as it [the government] has some sort of support it will not give way.<sup>483</sup>

By referral to international declarations of freedom signed by Azerbaijan, seeking support from and allying with other national and international Human Rights organizations such as IRLA and DEVAMM, as well as attending international conferences, the Juma community is trying to attract the attention of a wider audience to what they see as a problematic religious situation in Azerbaijan. Even though these actions are not illegal they cannot be said to be sanctioned by the state. The international attention given to the Juma case makes it harder for the government to ignore the community’s demands and, among government officials, exacerbates their dislike of the community.

As the Abu Bakr mosque community has no official political ambitions and does not work publicly, they cannot be said to pursue their goal within any government sanctioned framework. After some initial controversy, it does seem however that the community has decided to “play by the rules”, that is doing its best to comply with the various demands raised by the authorities — to register with the Caucasus Muslim Board and in other ways co-operate with secular and religious authorities when requested. Before the 2003 elections the Imam in the Abu Bakr mosque even went so far as to publish a book with a title encouraging his community to “Obey the Ruler”, in this case the Azerbaijani president. According to the Abu Bakr leadership, community members are not themselves to get involved in politics, yet the community is ready to support the established power structures. This message seems to resound among community members, for in my conversations with them they often prided themselves on the community’s correct relations both with the deceased former president Heydar Aliyev as much as with his son, the new president Ilham Aliyev.

I was also told during my meetings with Abu Bakr visitors that Heydar Aliyev stood above the “witch hunt of Wahhabis” because he understood

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<sup>483</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, May 28 2005.

more about religion than others (such as the representatives of the Caucasus Muslim Board for example):

In 1994 Heydar Aliyev was doing the Hajj with his family. When he returned he said: 'our youth must study Islam the way it is'. He meant to study the Qur'an, the Sunna and the words of the Prophet [as we do here]. Everything else is make-believe.

During the opening of the Bibi-Heybat mosque Sheikh-ül-Islam said to Heydar Aliyev: 'Wahhabism is developing fast in Azerbaijan' and Heydar answered that there is no such thing as Wahhabis in Azerbaijan.<sup>484</sup>

Though, as Chapter 7 showed, not all members share this love for the president. On the contrary, they blame social problems in the country on the current government. Additionally, despite the pro-government rhetoric, most community members, including the leadership, acknowledge that their sympathizers are still facing bigotry in the region (recall the "local strong men" who like to extirpate any sign of religious otherness). One visitor elaborates on this: "It's just that some of the bureaucrats in the regions have their own agenda. They consider themselves kings in their region (*khozyayin svoego rayona*) and they don't listen to anyone else. 'You can complain to somebody, but I am the king here' is their attitude".<sup>485</sup> Similarly, the Imam acknowledges that the situation in the regions is still problematic:

In some regions, of course not in Baku but for example Khachmaz and Sakatala, the police take our brothers, beat them, hold them for up to 15 days, torment them there, cut their beards or force them to shave. Well, what kind of democracy is that?<sup>486</sup>

Nonetheless, appeasement on the side of the Abu Bakr leadership appears to have largely satisfied the state, which has more or less discontinued all official repression directed against the mosque.

Returning to some of the theoretical propositions of the interaction context, according to Kriesi et al. how political movements react to government strategy is thought to be influenced mainly by the effects this interaction is believed to have for their chances to successfully influence politics. This makes them more likely to adapt their action repertoire to the changing external conditions.<sup>487</sup> The Juma case however shows a different approach. Instead of adapting to the present situation by perhaps focusing on lower-profile questions that would seem less threatening to the government, the Juma community went ahead with 'full speed'. If earlier the questions they focused on were considered high-profile (such as human rights and religious

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<sup>484</sup> Man 3, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>485</sup> Man 6, Abu Bakr, Baku, June 4, 2004.

<sup>486</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, April 20 2004.

<sup>487</sup> Kriesi et al (1995).

freedom) but their activities still to some extent introvert, taking their work to the national and international arenas made their mobilization more extrovert. This development shows the distinctiveness of a non-democratic context. Just as discussed above, the authorities in Azerbaijan, as it is common in non-democratic contexts, perceived the said “high-profile” work the Juma mosque community engaged in, even before it publicly sided with the political opposition, as political and controversial. Therefore the group’s sole option would be to tergiversate and improve relations with the authorities. That the community would move in that direction was unlikely given that human rights work is an important part of their collective identity. As a result a collision course between the state and the Juma seems to have been unavoidable.

In the Abu Bakr case, liaising with the government was a more realistic option. Its actual activities not regarded as a threat by the state, cooperating with the authorities was gauged as an administrative formality by the religious leadership. Hence, the movement’s work continued as before, only officially the mosque was now incorporated in the sanctioned religious network.

## Entering politics: accepting the invitation from the enemy’s enemy

From the analysis it can be concluded that the state’s repression of the Juma mosque community seems to have resulted in a merge of political and religious opposition. The Juma mosque has extended its activities beyond the religious sphere and begun to officially support political parties. This liaison between religious and secular opposition is interesting because it indicates how the presence of political allies can influence mobilization. Consequently, it shows that this feature of a “Western” political opportunity structure might also be important in non-democratic contexts, such as Azerbaijan. Theoretically the alliance between Juma and Azadliq lends credence to the idea that when a group which normally acts outside the political arena is approached by an opposition party it might decide to change its strategy if the timing seems right. This however appears to be the case only if the movement is “political” (rather than “sociocultural”) since visitors in Abu Bakr had also been approached by the democratic opposition, but had decided to turn down the invite.<sup>488</sup> We may conjecture that a movement, hoping to bring about change in existing politics, sees an established political party as something that can help them achieve their goal. A sociocultural move-

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<sup>488</sup> Man 8, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

ment, hoping to change the thought and conduct of the population, might not find this type of ally valuable for their purposes.

Moreover, judging the capabilities of an ally is related to the timing of the potential alliance. If the approaching party at this point in time has good chances of political success, say, to win seats in an upcoming parliamentary election, the likelihood of cooperation might be greater than if the party had just lost an election. This seems to have been the case with the Azadliq movement, which represented the first successful attempt to gather the largest opposition parties under a common umbrella. At this time optimism was high among the population in general and the political opposition in particular regarding their chances in the upcoming election. If the ally in question is supported by international organizations or other influential players, this might also have an impact on whether or not to cooperate with it. Given the developments in other former communist states during the so-called “color revolutions”, Azadliq, as well as the population in general, was expecting the same level of support from the international community that had been extended to the opposition movements in these countries. Even though the aftermath of the 2005 elections showed that Azadliq did not have as strong a support as it had wished for in this respect, the Juma community was probably still influenced by this perception.

## Good religion should be neither seen nor heard

Theoretically, sociocultural movements are expected to have a strong inwards orientation and are expected to withdraw from (external) political activity when facing opposition, in particular in a political system that is not very open. The strategy of political movements, on the contrary, calls for greater visibility inasmuch as they are hoping to bring about change in existing politics. According to this reasoning, the more exteriorized a movement's activities are, the less likely the state is to tolerate it.<sup>489</sup>

The above argumentation does accurately describe the mobilization processes in the studied Azerbaijani cases. Even though initially the community seems to have been largely focused on their internal programs, the activities of the Juma community have gradually become more outward-oriented. This new political orientation has increased their visibility in the public arena, where they take part in or support various rallies organized by opposition parties. In connection to this the authorities have also intensified their attempts to discontinue the community's activities. However, neither the seizure of the community's mosque nor other formal or informal pressure brought to bear on the community has managed to stop it, let alone the Imam, from being active. After these incidents it has become even more

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<sup>489</sup> Kriesi et al (1995).

obvious that Ibrahimoglu does not shy away from confrontations on the public arena to defend his and his community's rights. As one more example, on June 30, 2005, Ibrahimoglu, together with a group of community members, marked the one-year anniversary of the eviction by breaking the seal and entering the Juma mosque to conduct prayers, although the mosque remained officially closed. Members of the Juma mosque community also participated in demonstrations earlier in the day in front of the SCWRA, which led to the brief detention and subsequent release of the Imam.<sup>490</sup> Considering it their duty to defend human rights in society, the Imam explains the community's refusal to stand back from their run-ins with the authorities. "Independent of if we like what they do or not, if it is Muslims, Christians or others that are being attacked — if it is a violation of human rights we have to do something about it," he clarifies.<sup>491</sup>

In general, Islamic activism in Azerbaijan has yet to experience the more outspoken and provocative techniques normally associated with social movement activism. The groups in question have conducted quite a few public events such as demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins and boycotts. In the case of the Abu Bakr mosque community such public actions have taken place, which is also one of the reasons for the improvement in relations with the authorities. The activities of the mosque community are mainly for visitors in the shape of lectures, prayers and everyday conversations. External activities extend to "recruitment" among friends, families and social networks, but even these are non-public and informal. Many discussions on the mosque's webpage forum, as well as some of the discussions I took part in when visiting the mosque, could very well be understood as oppositional speech situations according to Johnston's definition (see Chapter 3). Given that these are not conducted in public and do not openly question the political status quo, they are not perceived as threatening by the authorities in the way that the Juma mosques activities are.

It would seem that the one aspect, discussed above, of the Abu Bakr community that does provoke members of the political establishment as well as part of the public, is the visitors' public display of devotion through religious symbols or marks. These may be interpreted as challenging the established social order and remain the source of whatever direct conflict takes place between members of the community and other social groups.

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<sup>490</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (2005) *International Religious Freedom Report 2005. Azerbaijan*.

<sup>491</sup> Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, Imam Juma Mosque, Baku, May 28 2005.

## Conclusion

While initially the speedy growth and popularity of both the Abu Bakr and Juma mosque communities seemed to have been equally disturbing to the authorities, the situation has since then changed. Gradually the Juma community stayed high on the authorities' target list while the Abu Bakr community's existence and activity to a much larger extent appeared tolerable. This can be understood as a result of the fact that the Juma mosque community via its often public activities and the type of questions they raise, its open criticism of the political system and its alliance with the secular political opposition block, implies a challenge to the political order of a much greater magnitude than the Abu Bakr community's. Even though dissatisfied with the social situation, the Abu Bakr community has agreed to "play by the rules" dictated by the state by officially accepting the "religious status quo" and registering the organization. Additionally its activities are generally carried out away from the public eye and do have the earmarks of abstaining from political demands. The state's fear of opposition has in this case created a pair of "strange bedfellows" in the sense that the authorities to some extent tolerate the mobilization of the co-opted religiously conservative Abu Bakr mosque community. (It could be argued that, if taken to the extreme, this mosque is against certain secular values!) At the same time the authorities seek to prevent the mobilization of the Juma mosque community, anxious as they are about its active human-, civil- and religious rights defenders.

Even though this is not theoretically surprising, given the conspicuous political nature of the Juma community's activities, it appears a bit counterintuitive in the Azerbaijani context. First, the Sunni Abu Bakr community represents a minority in overwhelmingly Shi'ite Azerbaijan. The impression conveyed is that the state would embrace the activities of the dominating religious denomination, especially given the notorious reputation of the "*Salafi*" orientation of the Abu Bakr mosque. Second, the choice to suppress the work of the group with a largely secular agenda as opposed to the one engaged in religious proselytizing is rather unexpected in a state that treasures secularism. What these cases insinuate is that the authorities' dislike of open political opposition and their outspoken fear of politics tinged by religious beliefs constitute weightier determinants of their approach than the movements' underlying goals.

One of the reasons often given by the authorities for their strong wish to keep religion out of politics is the concern they feel about Azerbaijan becoming an "Islamic republic à la Iran". Furthermore, much of the controversy arising out of the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities' mobilization is related to alleged foreign influences. These extrinsic aspects will be further discussed in the next chapter.



## 11. Mobilization and Extrinsic Influence: Radical ‘Wahhabis’, Revolutionary Iranians and Compliant Turks

In this chapter the analysis will be structured around aspects of mobilization external to the national context. The theoretical framework identified three such aspects: direct involvement by foreign states or extrinsic social movements, international constraints on the state by external actors, and diffusion of ideas and activists stirring up social movements. This chapter finds it hard to point to any direct extrinsic involvement in the development of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan, at least in terms of interventions such as financial or military support for any of the movements. At the same time, as Azerbaijan has an extensive international presence and is situated in an area considered strategically important, international constraints and opportunities have to a certain extent been present and may have influenced the movements’ mobilization in various ways. Furthermore, in a globalized world exposure to ideas of various kinds are almost unavoidable. But of greater significance when it comes to external aspects of the mobilization processes in the Azerbaijani case is the *alleged* religious influence emanating from other Muslim countries. The ways in which such suspicions have influenced the policy-making process as well as attitudes in general, and the studied communities in particular, will be at the heart of this chapter.

### The international community: promises and disappointment

Throughout history the Azerbaijani oil industry has always been an important factor attracting external actors to the region. Already at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Baku was known as the “Black Gold Capital” and recently the country has been considered among the twenty oil-richest countries in the world. The privatization process and post-independence legislation pertaining to the domestic oil industry led a great number of interna-

tional oil players to seek investments in Azerbaijan.<sup>492</sup> The ensuing oil boom took off when President Heydar Aliyev, after years of negotiations, in 1994 signed the “Deal of the Century”. This was a Production Sharing Agreement (PSA), signed by the Azerbaijani government and a consortium of eleven, mainly Anglo-American oil companies with British Petroleum (BP) and American Oil Company (AMOCO) being the main shareholders to develop domestic hydrocarbon resources. “The Deal” made Azerbaijan the first former Soviet Union state to sign a PSA with foreign oil companies.<sup>493</sup>

Additionally a large number of relief and development organizations are working in Azerbaijan. The 1994 ceasefire in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh left almost 20 percent of Azerbaijan’s territory occupied by Armenian forces and made over 800,000 persons internally displaced (IDP) or refugees. As the ceasefire failed to create conditions for these to return to their homes, humanitarian agencies like the Red Cross, the International Rescue Committee, International Medical Corps and others have been forced to move from short-term relief to long-term development programs accommodating the needs of IDP and refugee populations. Among the major donors in Azerbaijan are the European Union, International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank Group.<sup>494</sup>

Azerbaijan’s participation in international organizations such as The Council of Europe<sup>495</sup> has contributed to certain expectations among the opposition concerning the support international community may be able to provide in the process of achieving democracy and civil liberties in the country. There seems to be awareness among the population at large, and the political opposition in particular, of the existence of a number of rules and regulations which must be observed by member states in international organizations. This awareness has galvanized people into defending their rights and encouraged them to seek international support in cases where the state does not agree with them. This can be seen in both the closed Juma mosque case and the pro-hijab case where the defenders have filed applications at the European Court of Justice. Raised expectations were nonetheless cruelly disappointed when the international community remained largely passive during the violent November 2003 post-election events, when police brutally stopped a demonstration protesting the victory of president-to-be Ilham Ali-

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<sup>492</sup> Yürükel, Sefa Martin (1999) Nationalism and the Foundation of National Identity in Azerbaijan. In Høiris, Ole and Yürükel, Sefa Martin (eds.) *Contrasts and Solutions in the Caucasus*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

<sup>493</sup> International Crisis Group (2004).

<sup>494</sup> Laurila, Juhani (1999) Power Politics and Oil as Determinants of Transition: The Case of Azerbaijan. *Bank of Finland Institute for Economies in Transition (BOFIT) Online* 10. For a list of donors, programs and implementing agencies involved in development work in Azerbaijan see [www.azerweb.com](http://www.azerweb.com).

<sup>495</sup> Despite not fulfilling all the conditions for a membership Azerbaijan became a member of the Council of Europe on 25 January 2001.

yev. Although some reports did acknowledge that the voting process left much to be desired and notwithstanding protests by the opposition concerning the obvious electoral fraud, the election was accepted by the major international players (in this case OSCE, the United States and the European Union), The *OSCE Preliminary Statement* on the elections said that the voting in the presidential election was “generally well administered in most polling stations”.<sup>496</sup> Albeit the final report did state that the elections “failed to meet OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections”<sup>497</sup>, no new vote was demanded and the election of Ilham Aliyev was confirmed. That this failure on the part of international actors to question what happened during and after the 2003 elections would generate disappointment among the Azerbaijani opposition is clear. The consequences however might be of greater import, if Rasizade is to be believed:

The 15 October 2003 presidential election went down in history of Azerbaijan as a turning point for three reasons. First it provided legitimacy for the transfer of power from ailing President Heydar Aliyev to his son Ilham. Second, it demonstrated the unwillingness of the so-called ‘international community’ to risk jeopardizing geo-strategic and economic interests by univocally condemning blatant falsification of the ballot. And, third, by failing to condemn falsification of the ballot the international community has signaled to other entrenched Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) leaders that they have little to lose by following the Azeri example.<sup>498</sup>

The feeling of betrayal by the West (and the United States in particular), as far as the democratic opposition is concerned, has also an indirect linkage to Islamic activism. Many observers believe that this disillusionment could provide a potential upswing for oppositional Islam, once people realize that secular opposition is powerless. That the Islamic opposition might be radicalized by the Western failure to check internal corruption gives cause for alarm, particularly in a country unaccustomed to extremism.<sup>499</sup> In the case of the Juma mosque religion and politics are merging, a sign of greater influence for religion in this sphere, even though nothing is pointing to a radicalization of the community’s activities.

On a different note, there are instances when international connections have proved helpful to Islamic mobilization. As mentioned earlier, as he was about to be arrested in December 2003, the Imam of the Juma mosque, Ilgar

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<sup>496</sup> The International Election Observation Mission, Presidential Election, Republic of Azerbaijan – 15 October 2003. *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*.

<sup>497</sup> The Republic of Azerbaijan. Presidential Elections 15 October 2003. *OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report*.

<sup>498</sup> Rasizade, Alec (2004) Azerbaijan after Heydar Aliev. *Nationalities Papers* 32 (1): 137–164, p. 137.

<sup>499</sup> See for example Cornell (2006) and Alman Mir, Ismail (2005) Is the West Losing Azerbaijan? *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 2 (223). This fear was also repeatedly expressed to me in my conversations with researchers in the region.

Ibrahimoglu, was first physically protected and later on verbally supported by the Norwegian ambassador, who pointed out that the arrest was a violation of Ibrahimoglu's human rights. Moreover, the Juma Imam was, according to himself, visited in prison by all international ambassadors in Baku. This show of international support probably had some moderating effect, for his imprisonment only lasted three months. Of course, the authorities were not happy that these foreign dignitaries supported Ibrahimoglu's case. One representative at the SCWRA was especially vocal in this respect, blaming "the West" in general and the Americans in particular for the mounting popularity of radical Islam in Azerbaijan:

Thank the Americans for the fact that Islamic radicalism is spreading here [in Azerbaijan]. If there was no 'West' then we would not have radicalism here. Honestly. The American Embassy is supporting radical Shi'ite groups in Azerbaijan that have tight links with Iran. How can you explain this?<sup>500</sup>

The influence of international actors seems to have been limited, though, as the Juma mosque, despite repeated complaints from members of the international community, remains closed. Furthermore, the widely protested fact that Ibrahimoglu is obviously not permitted to leave the country (he was meant to take part in a number of international conferences in the years following his arrest), demonstrates that the government does not feel the need to comply with these demands.<sup>501</sup>

### The 9/11 effect: Azerbaijani Muslims as part of the *umma*

The September 11 attacks on the USA and the following so-called 'war on terror' has also been an extrinsic factor of some influence in the mobilization of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan. As far as the state is concerned, the war has provided secular and religious authorities with a motive to strengthen their control over the activities of Islamic communities, as this is now done as part of the fight against international terrorism.<sup>502</sup> Also on the activists' side, the members are well aware of what is going on in the world and to some extent this awareness has contributed to a feeling of being part of a globally oppressed Muslim community.

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<sup>500</sup> Representative of the SCWRA, Baku, April 22 2004.

<sup>501</sup> U.S. Department of State (2003).

<sup>502</sup> Valiyev (2006).

Even though he did not say that this was now the case, the Imam of the Abu Bakr mosque saw a risk in the looming dissemination of these ideas:

Radical groups exist because of Iraq, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Palestine and other places, but it is a psychological influence. You turn on the TV, on the news you see only Muslims dying, Muslims being beaten. This could make a person develop a negative opinion about Christians and Jews. And from here radicalism starts. There are people, radicals, who are using this opportunity to gather people around them. They say: ‘look — everyone beats on us! Today it is over there, tomorrow they will come here [Azerbaijan]’.<sup>503</sup>

Both in the Juma and the Abu Bakr mosques community members expressed various, mainly negative, opinions about American foreign policy after 9/11. In Abu Bakr I met with conspiracy theories about what “really happened” similar to those often heard in other Muslim countries. One man in Abu Bakr for example argued:

No Jews died in the Twin Towers. This is strange. Could it be so that they who did this did it to provide America with a reason to attack on Afghanistan and Iraq? [I believe so] because there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. At the same time I do not know who Osama [bin Laden] is. They say he is a terrorist, but he is trained by America.<sup>504</sup>

In general, sympathies expressed with the rest of the Muslim world seemed in the main rhetorical. Despite occasional suggestions from state representatives to this end, there is no indication that the activities of the Juma and Abu Bakr communities are related to a “global *Jihad* movement”, or have any direct international connections for that matter.<sup>505</sup> From the movements’ frames discussed in earlier chapters it can be concluded that their chief “concern” is the situation in Azerbaijan: a solution to internal social ills and political dishonesty remains the paramount objective. Similarly, the movements’ collective identities discussed earlier are based on a ‘we and they’ division where ‘they’ are authorities or other domestic religious groups. That in spite of these facts the movements are perceived by others as representing foreign interests is however important for both, the treatment they receive and the mobilization process.

## Threat images of foreign religious radicalism

As mentioned initially, it might not necessarily have been any physical external support from foreign actors to the studied movements. Still, the con-

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<sup>503</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 20 2004.

<sup>504</sup> Man 4, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>505</sup> See also Valiyev (2006) for support of this conclusion.

viction, or perception, in Azerbaijan of radical Muslim groups from Chechnya, different Arab countries, the Islamic republic of Iran and Turkey influencing developments in the political and religious sphere have proved significant for the mobilization of Islamic activism. The widespread perception that all these countries in one way or another take an interest in shaping the religious movements of Azerbaijan by pumping in resources and knowledge, and that some of these countries encourage an Islam that is more dangerous than others, has contributed to shaping the rather one-sided public image of Islamic activism as something imported and hazardous. As for the state's policies, it is quite clear that the "threat from radical influences" has motivated stricter controls of religious activities and guidance. Moreover, policy-making in this regard has also facilitated state actions against selected groups rather than others. The principal source of this radical religious influence is considered to be the representatives of various religious schools which arrived in post-independence Azerbaijan from other Muslim countries.<sup>506</sup> The remainder of this chapter will discuss what in this connection is considered of greatest import, paying close attention to the impact of foreign religious currents on the mobilization of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan.

### Exported Wahhabism: the Arab and Chechen connection

In the years following the Karabakh war a number of humanitarian organizations from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were active in Azerbaijan. Besides their distribution of food and medical aid among refugees and IDPs, they were suspected of promoting so-called Wahhabism as well, the reason behind the authorities asking them to discontinue their activities.<sup>507</sup> Likewise, the Kuwaiti Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage that financed the construction of the Abu Bakr mosque and renovated another 62 mosques in Azerbaijan had to stop their work in 2001 after accusations of supporting al-Qaeda.<sup>508</sup> The fact that the construction of Abu Bakr mosque was financed by money from this organization is not disputed, but according to the Imam the community has received no further funding from foreign sources. Instead the upkeep of the mosque, e.g. roof repairs, has been possible thanks to contributions from community members.<sup>509</sup>

The fear of imported radical Sunnism does not only concern Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Rebels from Chechnya are similarly believed to have been spreading their ideology among Azerbaijani believers, in the Abu Bakr mosque in particular. As mentioned earlier a number of Azerbaijanis who planned to fight in Chechnya were sentenced in 2001. They were all visitors

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<sup>506</sup> Stepanova, Ekaterina (2000) *International Terrorism in the Southern Tier: Perceived or Real Threat to Russia's Security? PONARS Policy Memo 167*. Moscow: Carnegie.

<sup>507</sup> International Crisis Group (2008).

<sup>508</sup> International Crisis Group (2008).

<sup>509</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Abu Bakr Mosque, April 20 2004.

of the Abu Bakr mosque where Chechen rebels are supposed to have convinced them to support their struggle.<sup>510</sup> The Imam of Abu Bakr argued in connection with this that he could not control who came to his mosque, but that he himself actively worked against radicalism. This he also repeated in my interviews with him:

If radicals are coming here, they cannot do anything. Because when they are coming, we [the religious leaders] get to hear about it. And if anyone is expressing those kinds of ideas, I get to hear about that immediately. In my lectures — or speeches, we can call them, the kind I give during Friday namaz — I talk about these [radical] opinions, that they are not right, and I prove this with the Qur'an and the texts of the Prophet. /.../Because of this, if you look here we do not have very many radicals. There are very few.<sup>511</sup>

Furthermore, the Imam insists that his community has no special connection to the Chechen war:

About what is happening in Chechnya — we [the community] are not acknowledging that. We are not saying that the Russians are right in what they do, no. Russians are also wrong in what they do. But, we say that the Muslims are not acting right there either. For example, to blow everything up, that is not right. That is not Islam. Islam does not say to do that.<sup>512</sup>

It seems like the Imams message did get across to the authorities as he and his mosque was found without guilt were acquitted in the case and the mosque could therefore stay open. According to a representative of the SCWRA it was decided that, just as the Imam said, the community itself had done nothing wrong:

/.../in principal our position was such that the mosque does not have to be closed. If a person who took part in the killing of the landlord lives in my house, in my backyard, we [the neighbors] are not all guilty because he lives with us. The mosque is the house of God and to close the mosque because some people that come there have stupid attitudes is not fair.<sup>513</sup>

## Creating the Islamic republic of Azerbaijan? The influence of Iran

Even though the threat from so-called Wahhabism is often invoked, what alarms Azerbaijanis the most in respect of religion is connected to Iran and Iranian influence in one way or another. The perception is that religious traditions in Azerbaijan are much softer than in Iran and because of this the

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<sup>510</sup> U.S. Department of State (2003) and Valiyev (2005a).

<sup>511</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 4 2004.

<sup>512</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 4 2004.

<sup>513</sup> Representative of SCWRA, Baku, April 22 2004.

country is very vulnerable to the influx of aggressive Iranian revolutionaries. The threat posed by Iranian clergy who would like to turn Azerbaijan into an Islamic state is used to justify state registration of religious organizations, to control the import of religious literature and to keep religious figures away from the political arena. One representative of the SCWRA argues:

Azerbaijan does not want to turn into Iran. Now you can walk here in your own clothes and do what you want. Have you been to Iran? If you go there, you will see the difference. And then you will understand why we have this law [that religious figures may not be politically active] and why this fallen Imam [of the Juma mosque] is not let into politics.<sup>514</sup>

The relationship between Azerbaijan and neighboring Iran is complicated. On the one hand it is indisputable that there is great cultural, linguistic and ethnic overlapping between the two countries. The border drawing after the Russo-Iranian wars of 1804–12 and 1824–28 divided the territory where Azerbaijanis lived between Russia and Persia with the effect that the majority of the ethnic Azeris ended up living on the Persian side. Still today there are more ethnic Azeris living in what is frequently referred to as “Southern Azerbaijan” (that is northern Iran) than in Azerbaijan proper and most Azerbaijanis express solidarity with their ethnic cousins on the other side of the border.<sup>515</sup> After independence many Azerbaijani towns have developed close economic, cultural and human relationships with Iranian cities on the other side of the river Araz.<sup>516</sup>

On the other hand the two countries unresolved conflict over Caspian Sea borders and Iran’s relationship with Azerbaijan’s archenemy, Armenia, clouds the bond between the two countries. Iran being Armenia’s biggest trading partner after Russia makes it in Azerbaijanis’ eyes a friend of the enemy, and those associated with Iran are deemed traitors.<sup>517</sup> Moreover, years of anti-Iranian propaganda by the Soviet media helps explain the extant animosity.<sup>518</sup> In this context, Hunter refers to a number of myths in circulation among the public when she writes that “historic falsification has left a legacy which has distorted both the views of many Azerbaijanis of Iran and the true nature of their cultural, ethnic and historic connections”.<sup>519</sup>

The above quote by the SCWRA representative serves as an index of the extent to which antagonistic attitudes towards Iran make life particularly

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<sup>514</sup> Representative of the SCWRA, Baku, April 22 2004.

<sup>515</sup> See for example: Swietochowski (2004) or Atabaki, Touraj (2000) *Azerbaijan— Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris. Generally I refer to Azeris as an ethnic group and Azerbaijanis as the inhabitants of Azerbaijan.

<sup>516</sup> Balci (2004).

<sup>517</sup> Pannier, Bruce (1998) Turkey and Iran in Former Soviet Central Asia and Azerbaijan: The Battle for Influence That Never Happened. *Perspectives on Central Asia* 2 (13).

<sup>518</sup> Motika (2001).

<sup>519</sup> Hunter, Shireen T. (1998) Iran and Transcaucasus in the Post-Soviet era. In Menashri, David (ed.) *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*. London, Portland: Frank Cass, pp. 106–107.



harsh for religious communities that, in reality or in theory, have links to Iran.<sup>520</sup> It equally indicates that since the Imam of the Juma mosque received his religious education in Iran, government representatives and, at times, other religious communities, categorize him as highly suspect. Views of him and his community as “Shi’a radicals with the only goal to come to power” were often expressed during my interviews with visitors of the Abu Bakr mosque. “Religion and state are separated, but there are those religious leaders that are engaged in politics. They studied in Iran. They want to start a revolution”<sup>521</sup>, one member of the Abu Bakr community told me, obviously referring to the Juma Imam. A representative of the SCWRA expressed similar views, but was still relieved that the members of the Juma community were still not too many:

Ilgar [Ibrahimoglu] studied in Iran and has the authority of that group [the Juma community], but they are not so many. /.../ to that mosque come only those who support Ilgar. /.../ these are radicals, fanatics that very much want to seize power with any available means.<sup>522</sup>

Nonetheless, a closer look appears to reveal little risk for an Iranian style revolution in Azerbaijan under existing conditions. As pointed out by Hunter, the presence of the large Azerbaijani minority in northern Iran and the risk that any wrong move could ignite an Azerbaijani solidarity movement that could compromise its territorial integrity makes it is very unlikely that the republic of Iran will prioritize religious solidarity and try to export their revolutionary ideology.<sup>523</sup> As for the cases of this study, neither in Abu Bakr nor Juma is the need for an Islamic government explicitly expressed. At the Abu Bakr mosque the community is in principle not against the creation of an Islamic state, yet it clearly see that the Azerbaijani society is not yet ready for such a drastic measure. It is instead the importance of taking religion into account in the policy process which is expressed and requested.

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<sup>520</sup> I am referring to the Juma Mosque community here in particular but there are other cases such as, for example, The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan where accusations of the leaders spying for Iran led to repeated prison sentences for them.

<sup>521</sup> Man 8, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>522</sup> Representative of SCWRA, Baku, April 2004.

<sup>523</sup> Hunter (1998) pp. 115. There are those who think otherwise. See for example: Mohadesin, Mohammad (2001) *Islamic Fundamentalism: The New Global Threat*. Second edition. Washington DC: Seven locks press, who argues that the Iranian Mullahs aim to create a “Union of Islamic republics” including Central Asia and the Caucasus republics.

According to one man:

Time is needed for the creation of an Islamic state. You have to integrate religion and politics and people should live according to Islam. /.../ it is a transition process. Soon will people 'find Islam'. In the future most will have found it. The ones that come here [to the mosque] stay. Islam is food for the soul.<sup>524</sup>

In the Juma community the Imam expresses the need for the people to choose the role of religion in public life themselves, arguing that the state's urge to control religion does more harm than good in this respect:

People must choose through a referendum if Islam should be the state religion or not. If people want to have an Islamic state it should be done. Why can Italy have Catholicism as state religion, but we cannot have Islam? Why are they [the authorities] making it complicated? What are they afraid of? If you make the situation too complex you create a basis for radicals.<sup>525</sup>

No matter how unlikely the turning of Azerbaijan into an Iranian-type Islamic republic is, the thought continues to distress the population. Not only state representatives fear the Iranian influence, but also the Abu Bakr Imam now and then blames the hardships the mosque has faced on the Iranians. Since it is a Sunni community in a country where Shi'a Islam is preponderant (like in Iran), the Imam believes his mosque to be a natural target for Iranian activists who want to limit the influence of Sunni Islam in the country:

The political reason [for our problems] is that Iran does not like that many in Azerbaijan today are Sunni Muslims. /.../ Iran considers this their base camp. If they can't influence a country politically, their people and their students can enter through religion. So, the most important fact is that Iran is not happy about this [the increasing popularity of Sunni Islam] and does not want it. Of course, there is Iranian influence in many mosques in Azerbaijan. Even many villages around Baku, like Nardaran and Mekhtagasa, are under Iranian influence.<sup>526</sup>

This is supported by another Abu Bakr visitor that also links Iran to Armenia:

There are organs, not only local, but also international from Armenia and Iran that do not want this country to develop. They want to destabilize the situation. How can they do this? Through promoting different religious directions, different versions of Islam et cetera.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>524</sup> Man 3, Abu Bakr, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>525</sup> Group discussion, men, Juma Mosque community, Baku, 2005.

<sup>526</sup> Sulemanov, Gahmet, Imam Abu Bakr Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 20 2004.

<sup>527</sup> Man 3, Abu Bakr, Baku, Azerbaijan, September 2005.

This last quote points to another pervasive image, namely that the stability of the country is threatened by the very fragile relationship between the many religions and sects present in Azerbaijan, such as Sunnis, Shi'as, different Christian groups, Jews etc. The need for the state to control religious activities is therefore deemed crucial; it ensures the right balance between different religious groups.<sup>528</sup> This perceived need for balance in religious relations can also be singled out as the main reason for welcoming Turkish religious influence, in contrast to the suspicion shown religious ideas originating in Chechnya, Saudi Arabia or Iran. As will be discussed below, the low-key, almost non-religious approach of the Sunni Turkish movements, make them perceived as a preferred alternative, and a way to counterbalance the influence of what is seen as radical Sunni and Shi'ite movements.

### Turkish Islamic movements: the preferred choice

Among the missionaries arriving in Azerbaijan after independence were also activists from Turkey. The Turkish Board for Religious Affairs under the Prime Minister (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) became very active in Azerbaijan. In 1992 it helped to establish the Department of Theology at the Baku State University in collaboration with the Azerbaijani Ministry of Education. It financed the construction of several mosques and hundreds of Azerbaijani students were given grants to study in Turkey.<sup>529</sup> The center for the pro-Turkish religious communities became the "Shahidlar Mosque"<sup>530</sup> and the mosque at the Department of Theology. In these mosques prayers were conducted by Turkish religious facilitators and in the case of the Shahidlar mosque by the Attaché for Religious Affairs at the Turkish embassy as well.<sup>531</sup>

In parallel, various groups belonging to the *nurcu* movement (founded by Said Nursi 1870–1960) have also been active in Azerbaijan. One *nurcu* group that has been particularly influential in Azerbaijan is the *fetuhllahci*, or the messengers of Fethullah Gülen.<sup>532</sup> Through intimate cooperation with different Turkish business in the region, representatives of this movement

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<sup>528</sup> Teacher, Baku, September 2005.

<sup>529</sup> Balci (2004).

<sup>530</sup> It is not exactly clear to me if this is the actual name of the Mosque or if this is what it is called because of its location next to the Shahidlar Khyabani (Martyr's Alley). This Alley is a space dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives during the war with Armenia and those who were killed on 20 January 1990 when Soviet tanks and troops took to the streets of Baku (often called "Black January").

<sup>531</sup> Goyushkov and Askerov (2004).

<sup>532</sup> According to Balci other *nurcu* groups are present, "especially in the north of the country where the population is more Sunnites than Shi'ite". Balci, Bayram (2008) Education, Nationalism, and Hidden Da'wa: Turkish Missionary Movements in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In Hackett, Rosalind, *Proselytization Revisited: Rights Talk, Free Markets and Culture Wars*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, p. 380.

have been running high schools and other secular education centers in Azerbaijan since independence. Despite the fact that religious *nurcu* and *fethullahci* literature is not used at the schools, it is easily available in bookshops and in the stands around certain mosques.<sup>533</sup> According to Balci, who studied the Fetullah Gülen movement in Central Asia and the Caucasus, its apparent secular goals notwithstanding, the movement has quietly been spreading a Turkish brand of Sunni Islam through the educational system as well as via the newspaper, TV channel and radio station that they operate in Azerbaijan. He writes that:

/.../although they do not provide religious courses as such, Islamic and especially Sunni oriented behavioral education and morals are encouraged in the classroom and in the boarding houses where teachers from Turkey speak freely of their spiritual guide, Fethullah Gülen.<sup>534</sup>

One representative of the SCWRA refers to Turkish religious groups in Azerbaijan as secret radicals. They are, he says, “pro-Turkish groups like the *nurcu* that in principle are not against engaging in politics but still have a too weak popular base to do this”.<sup>535</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that foreign missionaries according to the law are prohibited from working in Azerbaijan has not stopped Turkish activities from flourishing, which shows that Turks are not perceived by the Azerbaijani government as threatening as the other foreign Muslim groups discussed above. Many analysts further believe that the Turkish groups have been given space to try and reduce the religious influence of other Islamic communities in Azerbaijan, perceived as more radical.<sup>536</sup> According to Balci, the *fethullahci* movement is seen as non-threatening because of its strategic decision not to openly practice and spread its religion, considering the post-Soviet states strong emphasis on secularism in legislation and institutions:

Gülen strongly encourages his disciples to put into practice *temsil*, meaning that teachers lead by example, never uttering the word ‘Islam’ or any other word likely to upset the paranoid local authorities, and possibly jeopardize the activities of the *cemaat* in Central Asia. This representation—*temsil*—of the model Islamic life is expected from them at all times, and in all places.<sup>537</sup>

As a result, Balci says, the *fethullahci* have in Azerbaijan relied on a common Turkic legacy and ethnic discourse as a means to implement their ac-

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<sup>533</sup> Balci (2008).

<sup>534</sup> Balci (2004) p. 213.

<sup>535</sup> Representative SCWRA, Baku, April 22 2004.

<sup>536</sup> See for example Gasimzada, Nariman (2004) Islam and Secular State Relations in Azerbaijan and Central Asia Countries: Shaping and Searching for New Ideas and Models. *Working Paper 40 Project on Religion, Political Economy and Society*: Weatherhead School for International Affairs, Harvard University 2004.

<sup>537</sup> Balci (2008) p. 378.

tivities. Given the widespread appreciation of the idea of Turkism both on the part of the state as well as in civil society, Turkish groups have been rather successful and able to count on state support. As a country Turkey also has a lot that Azerbaijan desires. It is a member of NATO, is negotiating EU membership and is a close ally of the United States. All in all this makes Turkish politics, culture and religion attractive to policymakers in Azerbaijan and the Turks are often referred to by Azerbaijanis as “our big brothers” Additionally, due to Atatürk’s secular reforms Turkish Islam is also gauged as more tolerant than for example Iranian and Saudi Arabian Islam.<sup>538</sup> This tolerance is underlined for example by the fact that the *fethullahci* encourages local religious traditions such as the pilgrimages to *pirs*, while this is rejected by other Sunni groups (such as the Abu Bakr religious community).<sup>539</sup> As discussed in previous chapters, the image of official secularism and the attitude to public religion in Turkey resembles a great deal what the national government perceives as the ideal situation in Azerbaijan, something that is also likely to have contributed to the acceptance of Turkish Islam.

## Conclusion

Officially the strict control of religious associations and activities in Azerbaijan is made legitimate by the need to protect Azerbaijani society from foreign radical ideas that threaten to disrupt the strict secularist approach of the independent state. Although much of the rhetoric in this matter seems to be exaggerated, foreign influence on the mobilization of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan does occur. In some cases it is possible to point to direct support from international actors, such as the funding of mosque constructions by Turkish or Kuwaiti supporters. Moreover, extensive oil resources and the humanitarian crisis that followed the Nagorno-Karabakh war has resulted in quite a large international presence in Azerbaijan. These representatives of the so-called international community have contributed to making the state’s conflict with both the Juma mosque and the Abu Bakr mosque known internationally, which might have had a moderating effect on the actions taken by the authorities against the communities. The case of the Juma mosque seems to have received most international attention because of the community’s outspoken fight for “Western values” such as human rights and religious freedom. Still, to a certain extent it seems possible that the meagre support lent by the international community after the turbulent 2003 and 2005 elections intensified the mobilization processes of the religious communities,

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<sup>538</sup> Safizadeh (1998).

<sup>539</sup> Balci (2008).

inasmuch as they received additional visitors in the shape of disillusioned opposition supporters looking for new channels for change.

Grasped as a whole, the extrinsic influence on religious mobilization in Azerbaijan is implicit rather than explicit. Both the activists and the state are influenced by current ideas as to which Muslim countries are behind the export of radical Islam. The apprehension caused by this radical Islam has influenced how the different sides view each other as well as their situation in general. It has contributed to the creation of threat perceptions which further constrict the movements' political opportunities, e.g. by the formulation of laws that limit the avowed foreign influence. Also the so-called "War on Terror" has had an impact on the Islamic mobilization processes in the Azerbaijani context, for it has contributed, firstly, to strengthening the identity of the communities (now gauged as part of the global *umma*) at the same time as it has served to further and, secondly, to legitimize the restrictions on religious activity concocted by the authorities as a part of the worldwide fight against religious terrorism.

The threat perceptions analyzed above can be related to the state's alarm at the potential politicization of religion — thoroughly discussed in earlier chapters. While Chechen, Iranian and Saudi Arabian brands of Islam are judged to be political and dangerous by the authorities, Turkish Islam is considered apolitical and a more appropriate role model for the Azerbaijani context — despite the fact that a majority of the population in Azerbaijan is Shi'a rather than Sunni Muslims. As Turkish religious communities have not faced the same resistance as the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities, no subsequent mobilization on their part has taken place. The ambition to keep religion out of politics is not unique to the Azerbaijani government. Instead the fear of religion's politicization is seemingly prevalent throughout the post-Soviet Muslim world. As in Azerbaijan, one gets the impression that in many other similar contexts an analogous situation generates conflicts between the state and certain Muslim communities considered too close to the political arena. This provides an opportunity to put the findings from the Azerbaijani context in a regional perspective. The final chapter before the conclusion therefore is a comparative exercise where I highlight some aspects of the mobilization of Islamic activism in North Caucasus and Central Asia. Similarities and differences between these and the Azerbaijani cases will be taken up.

## 12. Islamic Activism in Different Post-Soviet Contexts: A Comparative Outlook

In the beginning of the 1990s Islamic political organizations and movements appeared in many post-Soviet countries, individually as well as in a few cases as part and parcel of regional movements. In order to view the mobilization process in Azerbaijan from another angle, I shall have recourse to a comparative perspective in which regional mobilization processes are looked into. I will focus on the activities of the Islamic movement known as Adolat and of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, both in Uzbekistan, the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan and on different Islamic groups in the republics of the North Caucasus (Russia). As I have not been able to study the actors in these cases in as much detail as those in Azerbaijan, the comparison will be restricted to similarities and differences in the national political contexts and how these have influenced the mobilization processes. Furthermore, as in the Azerbaijani cases, mobilization of Islamic movements in North Caucasus and Central Asia is very often discussed in the light of “foreign radical influence” on religion. In this chapter, therefore, I have thought it fit to take into account extrinsic aspects of mobilization in order to see common tendencies across the board.

The cases for comparison have been selected from contexts that are close geographically and that share historical trajectories with Azerbaijan. Both the Caucasus and Central Asia are in the words of Buzan and Wæver part of the post-Soviet regional security complex. This complex comprises former Soviet Union states and is characterized by being a Russian sphere of interest. The social and economic development of the states in these regions has in many cases been intimately linked because at one point or another they have all formed part of one and the same country, Russia or USSR, having St. Petersburg or Moscow as their capital and power center. The term “near abroad” often used by Russian politicians about the other erstwhile Soviet republics in the years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union shows the intricacy in their relationship. Even though their interaction could no longer be seen as domestic they were, properly speaking, hardly considered foreign affairs.<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Buzan, Barry and Wæver, Ole (2003) *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Given this regional intertwining it is interesting to note that the mobilization of Islamic movements in these other post-Soviet contexts deviates from what can be ascertained in the Azerbaijani case, for at some point or another mobilization took on a violent character. This chapter will address this discrepancy as it zooms in on differences in national contexts and on the interaction between state repression and movement. It will begin with a description of the three contexts selected for comparison: Uzbekistan, the Russian North Caucasus region and finally Tajikistan.



Illustration 12 Map of the Caucasus and Central Asia. © U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 2000.

## Islamic activism in Central Asia and North Caucasus: an overview

### Uzbekistan: Adolat and beyond

In the end of 1991 brigades of volunteers were organized to patrol the city of Namangan in the Uzbek Ferghana valley. They called themselves Adolat (Justice) and declared their final goal to be the establishment of a “just Islamic state”, based on the Iranian model. Albeit their *shari’a* based methods were controversial and included public humiliation of criminals through tying them to poles to be spit upon by passersby or letting them ride a mule



through town, they nevertheless proved effective; food prices dropped and criminality and prostitution declined in the areas patrolled. Initially the central government seems to have accepted the developments in Namangan, but soon mass arrests of Adolat leaders were carried out and those who did not make it out of the country received long prison sentences.<sup>541</sup>

Despite the neutralization of this movement some of the leaders continued their activities as representatives of the so-called Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group held responsible for a number of car bombs in the center of Tashkent in 1999, most likely aimed at killing the president Islam Karimov, who managed to escape unscathed. The movement received major attention when in 1999 and 2000 the southern parts of the Ferghana valley were invaded by a group of armed men pledging allegiance to the IMU. A number of villages were occupied and the inhabitants as well as others who were in the area (including a number of foreign mountain climbers and geologists) were taken hostage. The Kyrgyz and the Uzbek armies finally managed to stop the attack, but the IMU is believed to have retired to their bases in Tajikistan without major losses, keeping a low profile.<sup>542</sup> Nevertheless government officials in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have afterwards blamed several incidents on the IMU, claiming the group has been increasingly active after the suppression of the uprising in Andijan (in the Uzbek Ferghana Valley) in May 2005.<sup>543</sup>

In 2004 explosions once again shook the capital of Uzbekistan. First, two female suicide bombers hit the entrance to the major marketplace in Tashkent, the Chorsu bazaar. While the trials for these incidents were taking place three additional blasts occurred, near the American and the Israeli embassies as well as next to the general prosecutor's office.<sup>544</sup> Even if an unknown group calling itself the Islamic *Jihad* took responsibility in an announcement published on an Arabic website<sup>545</sup>, the authorities were convinced that IMU alone, or possibly in collaboration with the group Hizb-ut-Tahrir, lay behind the attacks. Hizb-ut-Tahrir (The Liberation Party) is an international group with the goal to reinstate the Muslim Caliphate (the first Islamic realm after the death of Prophet Mohammed). The party's headquarters are in the United Kingdom, yet it has branches in most Arab as well as

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<sup>541</sup> Zelkina, Anna (1999) Islam and Security in the New States of Central Asia: How Genuine is the Islamic Threat? *Religion, State and Society* 27 (314): 355-372. The popularity of Adolat's reforms was also stated to me during an interview with a human rights activist in Namangan in September 2005.

<sup>542</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly V. (2003) Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post Soviet Studies, Working Paper Series*.

<sup>543</sup> RFE/RL *Central Asia Report* (2006) 6 (5).

<sup>544</sup> Suicide Bombers Hit Uzbek Capital, Leaving At Least Five Dead. *Eurasia Insight, Eurasianet* 7/30/04.

<sup>545</sup> [www.geocities.com/stopStateterror/baenot2.html](http://www.geocities.com/stopStateterror/baenot2.html).

many Western European countries.<sup>546</sup> In Uzbekistan the signature of Hizb-ut-Tahrir has become the distribution of leaflets, translated into Russian or Uzbek and containing quotations from the Qur'an, which call for observance of the basic tenets of Islam or furnish analyses of world events affecting Muslims. Country-specific leaflets denounce mass arrest of independent Muslims in Uzbekistan as well as present anti-Karimov, anti-US, anti-Russian, and anti-Israeli views.<sup>547</sup> Although Hizb-ut-Tahrir renounces the use of violence, the Uzbek government looks upon this group as its "most serious problem as far as the threat from radical Islam is concerned", which has made suspected Hizb-ut-Tahrir members the main target of the authorities' aggressive campaign against extremism.<sup>548</sup>

### North Caucasus: political turmoil and Islamist rhetoric

By the end of the Soviet era national movements in some republics of Russian North Caucasus had begun to oppose local ruling elites and Moscow.<sup>549</sup> Indeed, at the time of this study the area was considered the most instable in the Russian federation. Violent organized crime is a major problem in most republics: bomb attacks on public buildings and law enforcement agencies as well as kidnappings and assassinations of political figures are common. Increasingly this political turmoil has linked with the growth of Islamic movements in the area. One reason for this is the new rhetoric of the Russian authorities associating the insurgency in the Caucasus to the "Global Jihadi Movement".<sup>550</sup> Often this connection is also made by local Islamic communities, claiming responsibility for acts of violence in the name of *jihad*. Some examples are high profile attacks in the mid-2000s on a school in Beslan (North Ossetia), when armed terrorists took hundreds of school children and adults hostage and in the town of Nalchik (Kabardino-Balkaria), where a number of buildings belonging to Russian security forces were targeted and many people killed. Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basaev was believed to have been the architect of the Beslan attack, something he later confirmed in a letter published on the Internet. Responsibility for the Nalchik events was claimed both by a local group<sup>551</sup> as well as by Basaev, this latter explaining

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<sup>546</sup> More information about the group is available on the webpage: [www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org](http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org).

<sup>547</sup> International Crisis Group (2003b) *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Reacting to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, *ICG Asia Report* 58.

<sup>548</sup> Minavarov, Shoazim Sh. Chairman Committee of Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers, Tashkent, Uzbekistan April 13 2004.

<sup>549</sup> Here defined as the republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Adygea, Kalmykia and the regions of Krasnodar Krai and Stavropol Krai.

<sup>550</sup> Wilhelmsen, Julie (2006) *The Shifting Pattern of Russian Rhetoric on Chechnya*, *Paper for Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) convention 2006* [unpublished].

<sup>551</sup> Department of Strategic Information, Kavkaz Center (2005) *Units of the Caucasus Front enter Nalchik*. *Kavkazcenter* 2005/10/13.

that it was a part of the larger “*jihad* against Russian occupants”.<sup>552</sup> That there is a link between these events and the Chechen conflict<sup>553</sup> is revealed by the fact that many of these announcements are published on line at Kavkazcenter, a webpage administrated by the so-called “Chechen Independent International Islamic Internet agency”.<sup>554</sup> Nonetheless, it should be noted that even though Islamist rhetoric has come to play a role in the Chechen conflict, most external analysts classify the war as ethno-national rather than religious, and the participants as separatists rather than international terrorists.<sup>555</sup>

### Tajikistan: “Islamism” and war

1990 a group of intellectuals in Astrakhan, Russia founded the all union Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). Their goal was to spread Islam and to work for spiritual rebirth, without separatist ambitions but inside the framework of the existing Soviet Union.<sup>556</sup> Tajikistan was the country where the party became most popular and influential.<sup>557</sup>

In 1991 the election of former communist leader Rakhmon Nabiyev as president of Tajikistan was met with demonstrations and other expressions of disapproval. After these were crushed, in many cases brutally, clashes during the spring of 1992 soon escalated to a full scale civil war between Nabiyev’s regime and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a coalition consisting of IRP, Rastochez (Resurrection), Democratic party of Tajikistan and Lali Badakhshan (The Pearl of Badakhshan), a group defending the interests of the autonomous region Gorno-Badakhshan. The coalition of religious and secular opposition forces surprised some, but they were united by a strong wish to replace Russian and Soviet domination with national and cultural independence. In some ways religion became the ideological cornerstone in this synthesis, and in the words of Roy: “in Tajikistan as elsewhere in the Middle East Islamism turned into islamism.”<sup>558</sup>

The worst fighting ended already in 1993, but the war was officially not over until spring 1997 when a more durable peace agreement was signed, giving the opposition 30 percent of the political posts while a coalition gov-

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<sup>552</sup> Abu-Idris, Abdallah Shamil Military Amir (2005) Shamil 217 Basayev: 'Nalchik attacked by 217 Mujahideen' *Kavkazcenter* 2005/10/17.

<sup>553</sup> Due to the vast amount of scholarly as well as popular literature that describes, discusses and analyses various aspects of the Chechen conflict I chose not to go into any further detail of it here.

<sup>554</sup> Kavkazcenter — <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/about/>.

<sup>555</sup> Wilhelmsen, Julie (2005) Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Islamisation of the Chechen Separatist Movement. *Europe-Asia Studies* 57 (1): 35-39.

<sup>556</sup> Mikulskii, D.V (1992) *Ideologicheskaya Konseptsiya Islamiskoy Partii Vozroshdeniya (Programma i Politicheskie Ustanovki)*. Moscow: Gorbachev-fond.

<sup>557</sup> Ponomarev, Vitaliy (2001) Islam in the System of Government Policy of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. *Russia and the Muslim World* 10 (112).

<sup>558</sup> Roy (2000) p. 157.

ernment was formed.<sup>559</sup> IRP's entering into the political arena made Tajikistan the only Central Asian country allowing political participation of religious parties. The Islamic profile of the party has however been eroded in order to avoid accusations of extremism; its leaders could today rather be referred to as moderate or even secular Islamists.<sup>560</sup> This "loyalty" has cost the party credibility with those who demand greater pressure for change. According to the agreement rebels were to be incorporated into the army under UN supervision, but several IRP commanders refused and later joined either the IMU or single rebel groups in the country and just across the border in Afghanistan.<sup>561</sup>

The oppositional force of the IRP scared the authorities in the other Central Asian countries, for in their victory they saw a confirmation of the political strength of Islam. Especially in Uzbekistan, the president considers the war in Tajikistan a consequence of flourishing Islamic radicalism and uses this as a way to legitimize his tough political measures.

## Political repression, inclusion and assimilation

### Keeping religion out of politics

When looking at the political contexts of the above summarized cases of Islamic activism, similarities to the Azerbaijani case do appear. Even though the atheism of the Soviet Union has been put to rest, a Soviet-like apprehension of mixing religion and politics is prevalent among officialdom, members of which by and large belonged to the now defunct communist party apparatus. Nowhere has this been more noticeable than in Uzbekistan, where the acts of terror mentioned above have brought home to president Karimov the real threat radical Islamists posed for his regime.

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<sup>559</sup> International Crisis Group (2001) Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace, *ICG Asia Report* 30. For more on the civil war in Tajikistan see for example Jawad, Nassim & Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh (1995) *Tajikistan: A Forgotten Civil War*. London: Minority Rights Group.

<sup>560</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly V. (2005) *Radical Islam in Central Asia. Between Pen and Rifle*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc; International Crisis Group (2003a) Central Asia: Islam and the State. *ICG Asia Report* 59.

<sup>561</sup> International Crisis Group (2001); Rashid (2002); Naumkin (2005) p. 243.

In his book *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* he emphasizes that he thinks religion should be kept away from the political arena:

We will never allow religious slogans to be put on the banner for the struggle for power — a pretext for intervention in politics, economy and legislation — because in this we see a serious potential threat to the stability and security of our state.<sup>562</sup>



*Illustration 13* President Islam Karimov’s Writing on the Wall. The vast amount of presidential sayings and portraits of the President on display in the Khast-Imom complex, headquarters of Official Islam in Tashkent, indicates that despite the alleged incompatibility between the religion and politics there is in any case a certain connection between secular and religious authorities. Photo: Sofie Bedford.

With the possible exception of Tajikistan the necessity of keeping religion out of the political arena is strictly enforced by the authorities in all these cases. The Tajikistan case stands out because Islamic activists were one of many groups engaged in a civil war which opened up the possibility of government participation, something unheard of in the rest of the former USSR. Initially, religious parties were banned in Tajikistan like in most other former Soviet republics, but as part of the 1997 peace agreement, the government formally accepted the presence of an Islamic party and amended the constitution to allow political parties with a religious foundation. This made IPR the only legalized Islamic party in Central Asia to participate in elec-

<sup>562</sup> Karimov, Islam (1998) *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: St Martins Press, p. 22

tions. Nevertheless, the party has continued to face difficulties in some regions where it was denied registration for years.<sup>563</sup> In addition, just as in Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, political activism by religious leaders is still prohibited in Tajikistan.<sup>564</sup> The peace accords assigned 30 per cent of positions in the executive branch at all levels to the UTO, the umbrella group led by the IRP. In reality, however, the IRP received positions mostly at lower ranks and well below this limit. Since then, President Rakhmonov has also steadily decreased its representation, so much so that by 2003 only a handful of IRP members and opposition figures had government positions.<sup>565</sup> A new “secular” approach and a dearth of changes hankered after have been costly for IRP, resulting in a loss of influence and a dissatisfied public. Instead Hizb-ut-Tahrir’s popularity in Tajikistan is increasing, perhaps on the basis of its emphasis on the poor living conditions of the faithful, in spite of the fact that IRP sits in the governing coalition.<sup>566</sup>

### Control, repression and fear

All across the former Soviet Union the same need to control religion, as in Azerbaijan, seems to be the norm. This takes the shape of legislative restrictions on religious education, religious organization and import of religious literature. Similar government organs designed to handle these questions exist in all countries. To some extent the restrictions in the Azerbaijani context appear more moderate than those in Uzbekistan and parts of North Caucasus.

The conditions for believers as well as the status of Islam in Uzbekistan were severely damaged by a number of new laws in 1998 which, for example, explicitly bans anyone but the official clergy from wearing “religious attire” and worshipping in public places.<sup>567</sup> The more restrictive environment has also manifested itself through the harsh repression of those that, according to the state, practice religion “illegally”. According to an extensive 2004 Human Rights Watch report many religious and political prisoners were held in state prisons under severe conditions.<sup>568</sup> Those arrested on religion-related charges face a worse treatment than other prisoners. According to the report they are often kept isolated for days and even months in the basement of police stations where they may be subject to torture until they confess membership in radical religious organizations.<sup>569</sup>

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<sup>563</sup> International Crisis Group (2003a).

<sup>564</sup> Khalid (2007).

<sup>565</sup> International Crisis Group (2003a).

<sup>566</sup> International Crisis Group (2003a).

<sup>567</sup> Human Rights Watch (2004) *Creating Enemies of the State. Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>568</sup> Human Rights Watch (2004).

<sup>569</sup> Human Rights Watch (2004), see also Khalid (2007).

Several groups have been especially targeted, say, Imams who do not follow state instructions and suspected members of the IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Friends and family members of the suspects along with many others, like believers who are considered to study or practice religion in an “illegal” way, are also becoming targets of repression.<sup>570</sup> “I don’t want to be an Imam anymore — I am afraid” one Uzbek Imam told me in September 2005. “If they [the authorities] suspect anyone in the area of membership [in Hizb-ut-Tahrir] it’s the Imam that gets in trouble. In one area where they recently caught some young people accused of membership they also put the Imam in jail”, he continues.<sup>571</sup> His story is very similar to others in Uzbekistan describing problems related to real or fictive affiliations to radical groups in general and Hizb-ut-Tahrir in particular. More and more people stop displaying any sign of their faithfulness in public lest they be taken for extremists.<sup>572</sup>

There are however considerable differences in how people understand the religious situation in the country. The head Imam of Tashkent city at the time of this study, Anvar Tursunov Kari, described the religious situation in the country as “good” and predicted a very positive religious development. In his opinion those who talk about a harsh climate for religious believers in Uzbekistan are wrong:

I would like to say that mass media, especially in the West, is portraying Uzbekistan as a violator of Muslims’ rights, the right of believers. This is not true. There is no basis in these statements. Islam is developing and has its role in society.

Anyone — foreigner, student, journalist — can come to our country and visit madrasas and mosques and there they can convince themselves that this is true.<sup>573</sup>

In some ways this analysis is probably correct as most of the repression is directed at those who are allegedly operating outside the framework of Official Islam that Tursunov represents. Hence whatever repression is spoken about might not be visually noticeable in the “official mosques”. However, due to the official labeling of Islam as now good now bad, there is always a risk of being assigned to the “wrong” camp.

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<sup>570</sup> Khalid (2007).

<sup>571</sup> Imam, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, September 2005.

<sup>572</sup> Khalid (2007).

<sup>573</sup> Tursunov Kari, Anvar, Head Imam of Tashkent city, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, September 2005.

Louw, who has done extensive field work in the country describes this sensitive situation:

People in Uzbekistan never knows what makes them suspect in the eyes of authorities or neighbors, and can never be sure that authorities or neighbors will not make use of the general paranoia surrounding Islam in order to blacken the names of those they wish to injure for one reason or another. All they know they are being watched closely.<sup>574</sup>

### Creating enemies of the state

This repressive climate has led human rights organizations active in Uzbekistan, as well as other observers, to express concern about the long-term consequences of government campaigns, said to encourage rather than discourage religious activists. Awareness of this situation is illustrated by the title of the report by Human Rights Watch mentioned above, *Creating Enemies of the State. Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan*.<sup>575</sup> Not unlike Uzbekistan, much of the literature on the North Caucasus region points to the Russians' repressive policy on dissenting views in general, and believers and those who oppose official Islam in particular, as the root of the later outburst of violence in North Caucasus outside Chechnya.<sup>576</sup> One example is the Kabardino-Balkaria republic that until recently had been considered one of the calmer in the region. According to Yarlykapov, the attack on the capital Nalchik in October 2005 can be interpreted as a direct result of the authorities' oppressive policy towards the republic's Islamic community — a sanctioned clampdown left them no other choice.<sup>577</sup> In the 1990s all Islamic organizations in Kabardino-Balkaria were put under strict government control and in 2000 all activities conducted at Islamic centers, with the exception of computer courses, were discontinued. Collective religious activities were allowed only under the auspices of The Muslim Board of Kabardino-Balkaria.<sup>578</sup> All mosques, except one, have been closed, and wearing religious attire or praying in public are considered good enough reasons for getting arrested. Some young Muslims detained by the police have allegedly had crosses shaved into their scalps.<sup>579</sup> Staff at schools and institutes in

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<sup>574</sup> Louw (2007) p. 41.

<sup>575</sup> Human Rights Watch (2004); See also Rashid (2002) for this Theory.

<sup>576</sup> See for example: Cornell, Svante E. (2005b) North Caucasus: Spiraling out of Control? *Terrorism Monitor* 3 (7): 1–3.

<sup>577</sup> Yarlykapov Akhmed quoted in Grigorev, Aleksandr (2005) Napadenie na Nalchik Sprovosirovali Repressivnie Deystviya Vlastey Kabardino-Balkarii, Schitayut Eksperti, *Kavkazkiy uzel* 24/10/2005.

<sup>578</sup> Filatov, Sergei and Lunkin, Roman (2002) Severni Kavkaz: Gorskie Narodi v Poiskakh Religioznoy Identichnosti. In Filatov, Sergei (ed.) *Religia i obshchestvo. Ocherki Religioznoy Zhizni Sovremennoy Rossii*. St Peterburg: Letni Zad.

<sup>579</sup> McGregor, Andrew (2005) The Jamaat Movement in Kabardino-Balkaria, *Terrorism Monitor* 3 (7).



Kabardino-Balkaria is instructed by the MVD to collect the names of those who believe and pray. The persons on the list are considered potential supporters of “extremist movements” and are summoned to the police, where they are questioned, photographed and fingerprinted.<sup>580</sup>

The state’s repression of Muslims in Kabardino-Balkaria seems to be the rule rather than the exception the North Caucasus. Most literature paints a bleak picture of this area, as one where the brutal suppression of Muslims by an increasing number of Russian soldiers, police and secret service is commonplace. Just as in Uzbekistan, incidents of torture, arbitrary arrests and disappearances or kidnappings of Muslims are frequent all over the region.<sup>581</sup> As well, who is targeted seems to be an arbitrary decision. Simple things as going to a mosque too often, praying differently from the others or not smoking or drinking alcohol might arouse suspicion of being a “Wahhabi”, in itself reason enough to get arrested.<sup>582</sup>

Having the analytical framework as point of departure one could argue that even though the Islamic activist in Azerbaijan does encounter reactive repression, this appears in general as much “softer” than the reactive repression faced by activists in Uzbekistan and North Caucasus. Instead of *just* black PR and random arrests, activists in these countries are threatened by mass arrests, torture and sudden disappearances. It would also appear that while repression in Azerbaijan is selective, targeting those active in certain controversial mosques, repression in these two other cases is indiscriminate and could affect anyone reckoned “suspiciously religious”. In these cases it also looks as if the hard and indiscriminate repression has produced a radicalization of collective action. Ultra repressive methods used by the state in the North Caucasus force activists and suspected activists underground because they are no longer able to use regular channels for their discontent. Some argue that this is conducive to radicalization, not only of those who were already prone to violence but of moderates and innocent bystanders as well (e.g the Nalchik case). The same kind of development appears to be underway in Uzbekistan as well. There are signs, for example, that Uzbekistan’s Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which in the past endorsed only non-violent means of opposition, may be on the verge of radicalizing. The dissemination of leaflets and literature calling for war and martyrdom in the struggle for Islam is an indication index of this.<sup>583</sup> It would appear however that reactive repression does not constitute a major factor in this regard, given that this has been

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<sup>580</sup> Dishekova, Madina (2006) Kabardino-Balkarian Interior Ministry Admitted that Lists of Extremists are being put Together in the Republican Educational Institutions. *Caucasus Times* March 10.

<sup>581</sup> McGregor (2005).

<sup>582</sup> Smirnov, Andrei (2007) The Kremlin Intensifies Reprisals against Muslims in the North Caucasus, *Chechnya Weekly* 8 (38).

<sup>583</sup> Kimmage, Daniel (2004) Terror in Uzbekistan, *RFE/RL Central Asia Report* 4 (31).

the case in Azerbaijan as well. Repression across the board seems to carry features of both reactive and pre-emptive nature.

### The post-Soviet context: The legacy of Official Islam

It appears as if the leaders in all above cases, as well as in Azerbaijan, carry a Soviet style simplistic vision of Islam: *good* Islam lacks political ambitions and is moreover grasped as a part of national culture ultimately controlled by the government. According to this worldview all other shapes of Islam are considered too independent and a “can of worms”. The continued presence of religious authorities in the shape of so-called muftiats illustrates this attitude. Again, Tajikistan is the case that somewhat stands out. In difference to other countries in the region since independence, Tajikistan has no official Muslim establishment (like the Muslim Boards in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan). Nevertheless, the Islamic Center of Tajikistan led by the Council of Ulama fills basically the same function. All Islamic organizations should be subordinate to this center which is also responsible for the attestation of Imams. Just as in the other cases, in theory the center is not part of the government, but in reality it is very close to state structures.<sup>584</sup>



*Illustration 14* State-endorsed Islam. Two boys study the Qur’an under the supervision of President Islam Karimov’s portrait in a madrasa in Uzbekistan’s Ferghana Valley. Photo: Sofie Bedford.

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<sup>584</sup> Khalid (2007).

While in Azerbaijan it is mainly the head of the board, *Sheikh-ul-Islam*, that actively expresses his allegiance to the state, the intimate connection between the secular and the religious authorities is more obvious in Uzbekistan where the Muslim Board's responsibilities include writing the content of Friday sermons for all mosques.<sup>585</sup> This content is often non-religious and believed by many mosque visitors to be directly approved by secular authorities. Independence and the religious freedom it brought to Uzbekistan are popular topics, as is the threat from Hizb-ut-Tahrir.<sup>586</sup> That Hizb-ut-Tahrir equals trouble is not only emphasized in the sermons, but every week the head Imam of Tashkent also gathers all the city's Imams to provide them with a list of young men suspected of connections to radical groups. The Imams are told to look out for and to "be careful" with these.<sup>587</sup>

### The Wahhabi curse

In the North Caucasus the position of the Muslim Boards as state allies is even more obvious, as they together share the burden of the "War on Terror". It is clear that these official religious structures have had considerable impact on the conflict between the Wahhabis and secular authorities, since the latter have come to rely increasingly on the assistance of the "official religion" in their crusade against radicals. Official backing has allowed the religious authorities to conduct a propaganda campaign against their political and religious opponents, and the Wahhabis in particular. Having the structures of the state at their disposal, including the official mass media, police and intelligence services, the North Caucasian muftiats have had the opportunity to secure their religious supremacy. Following the creation of a "Law on Wahhabism" in the republic of Dagestan, with the express purpose of "stopping Wahhabi and other extremist activities on the territory of the Republic of Dagestan", the Dagestani Muslim Board played a key role in identifying the "criminals". The law has been criticized by human rights groups and others for not specifying and giving any legal criteria for what is considered either "Wahhabi activity" or "extremist organizations", making it extremely difficult for those responsible for the implementation of this law (police and bureaucrats). As they themselves could not see the difference between a Wahhabi and an "ordinary" believer, the expertise of the religious authorities was sought out.<sup>588</sup> The consequences of this course of action proved devastating, inasmuch as official religious leaders turned on the

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<sup>585</sup> Representative of Uzbekistan Muslim Board, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, April 2004. Even though this system is supposed to be in place in Azerbaijan as well my impression was that the Board's authority guided few Imams in this respect.

<sup>586</sup> Imam, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, September 2005.

<sup>587</sup> Imam, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, September 2005.

<sup>588</sup> Yarlykapov, Ahmet (2004) Strasti po Zakonu o Saprete Vakhkhabizma. *Islam.ru* 2004/11/17.

clergy belonging to the opposition by having their names written down on the list of “Wahhabis”, dooming them to various forms of harassment or imprisonment.<sup>589</sup>

This fear of “Wahhabism” is another factor connecting these different contexts. In Uzbekistan and North Caucasus the expression is used to designate “bad Islam” and its practitioners in general. In Azerbaijan where there is a wider range of opposition it has, as discussed earlier, mainly been used to describe the supporters of the Abu Bakr mosque, although with analogous connotations — terror, extremism, radicalism and, most importantly, opposition to the current political system. In any case, the frequent use of this term by these so-called religious authorities, resulting in the exclusion of believers besmirched by one damning label or other, has had a major impact in the processes of religious mobilization all over the region.

As mentioned initially, there is still a strict division between official and unofficial Islam in these contexts. The muftiats, just as their Soviet predecessors, are a way to promote the “official version of Islam”. Because their rhetoric is virtually inseparable from official government statements, the clergy heading these Boards, apart from their sullied reputation, are by and large viewed by the public as representatives of the state. Suspicions that the muftiats use, among other things, their monopoly on organizing the pilgrimage to Mecca for “unlawful enrichment” are legion, at least in Azerbaijan and parts of North Caucasus.<sup>590</sup>

Tajikistan is so far the only country in the region where official and unofficial Islam has joined to create one united political force. *Qazi Akbar Tura-jonzoda*, elected to head the Council of Ulama after independence, was educated within the official religious establishment but is nevertheless considered a very learned man, enjoying great respect among the faithful. Initially he was against the creation of an Islamic party, yet when after independence he discovered that the state once again tried to control religious practices he decided to join forces with the IRP.<sup>591</sup> However, this was not a permanent merge as in Tajikistan’s rural areas IPR soon became a direct rival of the Council of Ulama.<sup>592</sup>

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<sup>589</sup>Pro Vahhabitov i ne Tolko. Intervyu s Igorem Dobaevim. *Religare* 23 December 2004; Belenkaya, Marianna (2005) Chto Stoit za Religioznim Ekstremizmom v Rossiskikh Regionakh? *RIA Novosti* 29/12/2005.

<sup>590</sup> Yemelianova, Galina M. (2001) Sufism and Politics in the North Caucasus. *Nationalities Papers*. 29 (4): 661–688; Roschin, Mikhail (2005) The History of Islam in Kabardino-Balkaria, *Chechnya Weekly* 6 (46).

<sup>591</sup> Dudoignon, Stéphane A. (1998) *Communal Solidarity and Social Conflicts in late 20th Century Central Asia: The Case of the Tajik Civil War*. Tokyo: Islamic Area Studies Project.

<sup>592</sup> Dudoignon (1998).

## Common threat perceptions in the post-Soviet sphere

### Foreign radical influence: Dollar-Islam, al-Qaeda and the Taliban

There are certain similarities between Azerbaijan and other post-Soviet contexts as far as extrinsic influence and religious mobilization are concerned. After independence from the Soviet Union (or to some extent even before that) there was a deeply felt consternation with regard to radical Islam spreading in the region. This imminent diffusion was supposedly linked to intense activities on the part of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries (in the Azerbaijani case from Iran as well) and to an influx of “bad religion” in this Muslim region, earlier closed to the outside world.

A quote from the rector of Tashkent Islamic University at the time of the study, Zukhriddin Khusnidivov, former Presidential Advisor on Religious Issues articulates this view:

You sit in a very stuffy room and open the window to get some air. That was the situation in the years following the fall of SSSR. But we then did not only get in fresh air but also dust [religious extremists].<sup>593</sup>

In North Caucasus it is widely believed throughout the region that Islamic groups receive significant financial support from abroad and that this has contributed to their popularity. For this reason, Yarlykapov writes, the people of Dagestan launched the expression “dollar-Islam” (*dollaroviy Islam*) with respect to Islamic activism in the area.<sup>594</sup> According to Wilhelmsen, Chechen warlords and leaders have been known to accept assets offered by Islamic organizations and networks in the Middle East and Asia and naturally the Islamic line these contacts espoused had an impact on those seeking assistance and support, which, according to her explains how so called “Wahhabism” could spread despite being a non-traditional branch of Islam in Chechnya.<sup>595</sup>

As for Tajikistan it is the Afghan connection that is often brought up when discussing international influence on religious mobilization. Various warlords as well as the Taliban and Osama bin Laden are all said to have aided the Tajik opposition with supplies and arms, and Afghan mujahideen to have fought alongside with them.<sup>596</sup> But, noted by Atkin, much has been

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<sup>593</sup> Khusnidivov, Zukhriddin, Rector Tashkent Islamic University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, September 2005.

<sup>594</sup> Yarlykapov, Akhmed (1999) Islamic Fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus: Towards a Formulation of the Problem. *Caucasian Regional Studies* 4 (1).

<sup>595</sup> Wilhelmsen (2005).

<sup>596</sup> Akiner, Shirin (2001) *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?* London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

assumed, but not much confirmed in this regard.<sup>597</sup> What is more or less agreed on is that out of thousands of Tajiks who took fright at the new conservative government and fled the country in December 1992 and 1993, took frightful at the new conservative government, many found themselves under the influence of former Afghan fighters and Islamists from neighboring countries.<sup>598</sup> It is believed that this encounter by the refugees with a new and different kind of Islamic activism might have had a radicalizing effect on some of them.<sup>599</sup>

In the case of Uzbekistan in general and the IMU in particular it has been very popular among analysts and researchers to connect them to various Jihadist groups, al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>600</sup> Rashid is pointing to IMU building up a wide, diverse network of fundraising and weapons supply, “ranging from Islamic groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan to sponsors in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia”. He also talks about a “far-reaching deal with the Taliban” according to which the IMU is obliged to provide intelligence and troops from Central Asia.<sup>601</sup> The IMU’s connection to the Taliban is further stressed by accounts on how one of IMU’s founders was wounded and killed fighting for the Taliban in Mazar-e-Sharif in November 2001.<sup>602</sup> But, as Weitz points out, there is good reason to exercise caution when looking at these analyses — “acquiring information on the IMU’s organization, operation and training is difficult because few IMU guerrillas have been captured alive, and forced confessions of alleged IMU operatives or defectors are obviously suspect”.<sup>603</sup> Also Ro’i notes the difficulties to assess the scale of extrinsic influence on the development of Islamic activism in the post-Soviet area:

Indications that IMU and other radical Muslim organizations and groups in the North Caucasus and Central Asia have ties to narcotics trade, which has flourished in the Russian federation and Central Asia since the break up of the USSR, have not been proved beyond doubt. Allusions to such connections clearly serve to win favor at home and abroad for the regimes’ endeavors to repress Islamic ‘extremists’.<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> Atkin (1995).

<sup>598</sup> Djalili, Mohammad-Reza and Grare, Frédéric (1998) *Regional Ambitions and Interests in Tajikistan: The role of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran*. In Djalili, Mohammad-Reza, Grare, Frédéric Grare and Akiner, Shirin (ed.) *Tajikistan the Trials of Independence*. Richmond: Curzon Press.

<sup>599</sup> Akbarzadeh, Shahram (1996) Why did Nationalism Fail in Tajikistan? *Europe-Asia studies* 48 (7): 1105-1129.

<sup>600</sup> See for example Naumkin (2003).

<sup>601</sup> Rashid (2002) p. 174 and others.

<sup>602</sup> McCauley, Martin (2002) *Afghanistan and Central Asia: a Modern History*. Harlow: Longman.

<sup>603</sup> Weitz, Richard (2004) Storm clouds over Central Asia: revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27: 465–490, p 469.

<sup>604</sup> Ro’i, Yaacov (2001) *Islam in the CIS: A Threat to Stability?* London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 79.

## Anti-fundamentalism and 9/11

In general it seems that religious mobilization in Central Asia and North Caucasus is mainly a result of internal issues and that the existence of external factors, despite its scale, is of secondary significance in this context.<sup>605</sup> All over the region the idea of such a threat from imported “bad” religion has nevertheless been enough to justify a ban on foreign missionary activity and a serious clampdown on religious organizations. This course of action is however not unique to former territories of the Soviet Union. As noted by Juergensmeyer, “in many parts of the world, not only ‘fundamentalism’ but the fear of it has become a problem; in some cases this fear has led to a violation of human rights”.<sup>606</sup> This is when and if governments “take extraordinary, possibly undemocratic, measures to prevent groups regarded as fundamentalist from accruing greater political power”.<sup>607</sup> Such conduct, he notes, has rarely ever been successful, since it tends to make religious resistance more doggedly instead.<sup>608</sup> Juergensmeyer refers to this phenomenon as “fundaphobia” or anti-fundamentalism (the hatred some secularists harbor against the explosiveness of religion) and actually gives the example of Tajikistan, where former communist leaders attacked IRP on the basis that “Islamic fundamentalism is a plague that easily spreads”.<sup>609</sup>

Even though the anti-fundamentalism attendant on early independence in the former Soviet Union has calmed down gradually, the events of 9/11 2001 made the interaction between religion – especially Islam – and politics a renewed “hot topic” everywhere in the world. So also in the former Soviet sphere, where leaders once again saw the threat coming from international religious radicals as imminent, hence giving the struggle against international terrorism top priority. The threat posed by international terrorism is usually described as constant instability, embodied by Arab and other Muslim mercenaries in and around Chechnya, threatening to spread to the rest of the region at any time.<sup>610</sup> By suppressing movements with alleged connections to al-Qaeda and/or other radical groups, Muslim-dominated regional states could show their support for USA and the war on terrorism.<sup>611</sup> This has also been the case in Azerbaijan where over the years the government reportedly has prevented a number of terror attacks and arrested several mem-

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<sup>605</sup> Falkowski, Maciej (2004) North Caucasus: the Russian Gordian knot. *CES Studies Series* 16.

<sup>606</sup> Juergensmeyer, Mark (1995) Antifundamentalism. In Marty, Martin E. and Appelby, R. Scott, *Fundamentalism Comprehended*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago press, p. 353.

<sup>607</sup> Juergensmeyer (1995) p. 361.

<sup>608</sup> Juergensmeyer (1995) p. 361.

<sup>609</sup> Juergensmeyer (1995) p. 353.

<sup>610</sup> Stepanova (2000).

<sup>611</sup> Khalid (2007); Karatnycky, Adrian (2002) The 2001 Freedom House Survey. Muslim Countries and the Democracy Gap. In *Freedom in the World 2002*. Washington: Freedom House.

bers of terrorist organizations, some with supposed al-Qaeda connections despite the fact that the circumstances surrounding these activities, and relevant information thereof, make it hard to ascertain what actually happened.<sup>612</sup>

In Tajikistan critics assert that President Rakhmonov is using the international anti-terrorism coalition's presence in Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia to consolidate his power and marginalize the government's formal coalition partner, the IRP. According to this critique he has tried to discredit the IRP by hinting at links to terrorist or extremist groups, despite the party denying any such connections and openly stating its opposition to terrorism in the press.<sup>613</sup> In Russia, during his time as president, Vladimir Putin was prone to use the issue of terrorism (pointing to the shared aims of Moscow and Washington) to get US support for Russian policies in Chechnya and the rest of North Caucasus.<sup>614</sup>

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that the mobilization of Islamic movements as well as the features of repression faced by them vary in the cases discussed here. Nevertheless, the perception of religion as something that needs to be controlled and contained, inherited from the Soviets, is noticeable in institutions, legislation and policy-making in all contexts studied. In all cases this policy has led to a conflictual relationship between state structures and Islamic groups whose wish is to manifest their independence from the state. By default this conflict has also come to involve the Muslim Boards that represent a Soviet-style approved Islam. In some cases, particularly in the North Caucasus, these regime friendly religious authorities have come to play an important role in the mistreatment of believers by state authorities, further alienating "independent believers".

What the cases of Islamic activism discussed in this chapter have in common is the propensity, at some point or another, to show signs of more or less radical or even militant behavior. Islamic activism in Uzbekistan has been connected to car bombings, military campaigns and suicide bombings. In North Caucasus the radical behavior of Islamic activists is escalating as more and more republics have been haunted by violent clashes between police and activists, explosions, and killings of public figures. In Tajikistan, in contrast, the actions of the IRP have seemingly "de-radicalized". Since the end of the bloody civil war, in which it took a very active part, it has been pursuing its goals on the political arena instead of in the battlefield. That

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<sup>612</sup> International Crisis Group (2008).

<sup>613</sup> International Crisis Group (2001).

<sup>614</sup> Trenin, Dimitri (2005) Russia and Anti-Terrorism. *Institute for Security Studies of the European Union* 22.03.2005.



being said, various sources insist that some of its former members continue to carry out more or less militant activity. As has been stated earlier in this thesis, previous research has shown how difficult it is to pinpoint exactly the way in which repression shapes mobilization. Of course, neither can the cases studied here furnish us with exact knowledge. In general, the mere fact that the movements' mobilization has been met by the authorities with repressive rather than facilitative measures has contributed to its intensification sharpening animosities and bringing about a state of despair sure to heighten militancy. Yet the cases of Uzbekistan and North Caucasus quite clearly indicate that *hard*, indiscriminate government repression encourages movement radicalism. A mainly *soft* repression, as in the Azerbaijani cases, leaves more room for other types of contention. Even though Tajikistan to some extent also shows signs of structural repression of religious activists, in terms of certain legislative and institutional control, this seems to be the only case where activists have become a formal part of the political process, thereby giving up the militant approach.

Finally, this chapter addressed the potential impact of extrinsic factors in Islamic mobilization, granted that this is something often put forward as a momentous, if not the weightiest, feature of Islamic activism in this region. External influence is assumed to be direct, say, in the shape of money, manpower or weapons from different international actors supporting the same global cause. Despite the presence and possible influence of extrinsic factors (such as "dollar-Islam and the alleged connections to al-Qaeda discussed above), it however seems to me that the mobilization of Islamic activism in the post-Soviet context is above all country-specific in character. There are few indications that when mobilization occurs it does so as part of a global movement of Islamic activism. Although the mobilization of oppositional forces in North Caucasus republics like Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria shows signs of being at least partly related to the conflict in Chechnya, it would appear that this connection is largely predicated on shared grievances in the field of national self-determination rather than in the realm of religion. In the case of IRP in Tajikistan, the party was created as a branch of the all-union IRP but it soon decided to go its own way. To some extent the Islamic party Hizb-ut-Tahrir is an exception, for it is active all over the territory of the former Soviet Union. It is also possible to see its work as part of a worldwide Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement, even though this is debatable inasmuch as most of its leaflets target national policies or regional political leaders. At the same time, as in the Azerbaijani context, the governments of all regional states are convinced of the involvement of dangerous foreign religious forces in the mobilization processes of local organizations, an important factor with respect to how each state chooses to handle the situation. One external event that has had at least indirect influence on the mobilization of Islamic activism in the region is the aftermath of the September 11 2001 "War on Terror" that followed. As has been noted in other research

as well, secular and religious authorities, falling back on the alleged threat posed by the influence of foreign religious ideas on domestic mobilization, have been able to present their crackdown on Islamic communities as part and parcel of the crusade against terrorism. They have been able to justify the use of harsher methods and the targeting of a wider range of people. This has in some cases contributed to an escalating mobilization and a radicalization of the activists involved in the movement, especially in cases where repression has been particularly hard.

## 13. Conclusions

Even if Gorbachev did not mean Perestroika to lift restrictions against religious practices, all the Soviet republics saw a sudden explosion of interest in religion and re-establishing old religious tradition. Even though Azerbaijan experienced this “religious boom” as well, the country has nevertheless continued to be described by observers as a secular Islamic state where religion does not influence either politics or social practices. This situation however appears to have changed as a conflict surfaced in the late 1990s between the state and certain Muslim communities questioning the former’s attempt to renew control over religious expression. To shed light on this new turn of events this thesis has analyzed the mobilization of the most well known of these Muslim communities, namely the Shi’ite Juma mosque community and the Sunni Abu Bakr mosque community. Based on the premise that the mobilization of Muslim movements is similar to that of other social movements, this thesis has used an analytical framework which borrows concepts current in social movement theory. In the introductory chapter a number of empirical and theoretical claims of relevance to this dissertation were outlined. In this concluding chapter the said claims will be discussed in light of the findings of this study.

### Islamic mobilization in Azerbaijan

The central aim was to shed light on how the mobilization of Islamic movements has taken place in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The question asked in accordance to this was: “What conditions shaped the mobilization of Islamic movements which have taken place in Azerbaijan after the country’s independence?”

The query was approached by focusing on a number of aspects pertinent to mobilization — organizational strength, shared cognition, political context and extrinsic influences — as well as via a comparison of the results obtained from my study of the two mosques. Special consideration was also paid to the effects of Soviet atheist policy in the post-Soviet context. Furthermore, the influence of the interaction between repressive state strategies and the two different movement types represented by Abu Bakr and Juma was analyzed. In the final chapter of the thesis Islamic mobilization in Azerbaijan was also discussed in comparison with Islamic mobilization processes

in three other areas sharing a post-Soviet context: North Caucasus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. All this generated some interesting insight into the conditions surrounding the mobilization processes.

### A break with the past as well as from the present

To begin, this study found that it is not possible to speak about Islamic activism in Azerbaijan as one single unit. Despite the fact that they acted in the same political context, faced the same closed institutional settings and, at least initially, the same level of unofficial pressure, the mobilization of the two groups studied have resulted in two very different types of movements. I believe this difference does not simply follow from the one being a Shi'ite and the other a Sunni community, but is conditional upon the different types of frames applied to consolidate their collective identities. Whereas the identity of the Juma mosque community seem to be mainly based of their image of themselves as the safeguard of democracy and religious freedom in Azerbaijan, Abu Bakr is a religiously conservative group arguing for fundamental changes in the moral values of Azerbaijani people as a means to improve social conditions, much in the same way as other neo-fundamentalist groups throughout the Arab world. Ideational differences aside, these two communities do have much in common. Both communities seem to be more popular than any other Muslim community in the country and most of their members are under forty years old. One main attraction of these mosques is that they symbolize something new in the Azerbaijani society. This novelty is partly in the field of religion, and it is here that these mosques, by setting themselves apart from other outmoded state-controlled mosques, have become an eye-catching alternative.

It seems much of this is related to the Soviet legacy impinging on religious practice. In general, Soviet contempt for religion and attempts by communist authorities to repress it has had great consequences for the religious situation in the post-Soviet sphere. Seventy years of anti-religious propaganda and atheist education left many Muslims uninterested in religion and uninformed about the rules and values of Islam. In many cases the public, especially the older generations, is still influenced by a Soviet mindset appraising religious expression as something dangerous, and moreover are used to Islam being a part of the cultural heritage rather than a religious belief. Furthermore, in the Soviet system going to the mosque was reserved for old folk who "knew no better" and it was unthinkable that the young, enlightened and modern generations should, or should want to, pray. This image has stuck, which means that many young people face great difficulties at home trying to defend their faith and their right to visit a certain mosque. As a result the mosque becomes the place where they can feel at home, where people understand them and where they do not have to defend their values and choices. In this respect membership in both movements seems to

fulfill other needs than purely religious. The mosque is more than just a place to pray and be close to Allah. In a sense it becomes a “free space”, an alternative home as well as a place to meet new friends. Additionally, as expressed by the visitors, it is a place where high quality religious education can be obtained in contrast to other traditional mosques where the level of religious knowledge is perceived as mediocre.

At the same time the mosque communities can be said to represent something new in society at a time when many young people have been disillusioned by the failed promises of independence. One thing that appears important in this context is the absence of corruption in these mosques. The way this was emphasized by community members demonstrates that they are tired of the way that bribing has become a necessity in almost all aspects of society in Azerbaijan (education, work, traffic, healthcare etc.). Community members complained about how hard it was for them as “true Muslims” not to engage in corruption in their daily life. Also in this respect the community became a “safe haven”. While this fresh approach is seen as something positive among youth seeking alternative ways to understand their situation and express themselves, it is considered negative by the authorities, fearful as they are of the mobilization power these new movements might possess, especially since the concatenation of religion and politics is seen as potentially dangerous to the secularism of the country.

### The religion and politics controversy

One of the keys to understanding the conflict that has developed between the authorities and Islamic activism in the post-Soviet states is the widespread understanding that the combination of religion and politics, for a secular society, is something dangerous and capable of having catastrophic effects if left unchecked. Even though this attitude is not unique to the former Soviet sphere, it was perhaps easier and more natural for post-Soviet states, given lingering Soviet attitudes, to turn this idea into a cornerstone of national policy. Many Soviet leaders continued on as leaders of the independent states, bringing with them their atheist ideals and communist experience. In the same spirit the new states kept many of the official and unofficial government organs to deal with religion in place, possibly under new names, but still with the same purpose — to ensure that all religious activity took place under state control. As a result the concept of “Official Islam” appears to have been rather important for the mobilization of Islamic activism in the Azerbaijani as well as in the other post-Soviet contexts analyzed in the comparative sections. During Soviet times Muslim communities were subordinated to the religious authorities of the Muslim board, meant to liaise with secular authorities and control all religious activity from above. In those cases where it could be suspected that the movement in question harbored any political ambitions, they were labeled oppositional and dealt with ac-

cordingly. The notion that state-controlled religion is apolitical and good while independent religion is political and crafty lives on in the studied Azerbaijani cases.

Even though initially both the activities of the Juma and Abu Bakr communities frightened the state in this respect, the authorities more or less “backed off” from confrontation with the latter as it decided to do what was officially demanded of them and time and time again denied any political ambitions. The state’s conflict with the Juma mosque community, contrariwise, escalated as their attitude towards the state and religious authorities became increasingly confrontational and their activities ever more openly political. This would generate a set of quite “strange bedfellows” in the sense that the state is now tolerating the mobilization of the religiously conservative Abu Bakr community (withdrawn from the public eye) while alienating the religious group with a liberal-democratic worldview that, according to its own account, is working towards the development of a secular civil society in Azerbaijan.

## Mobilization in non-democratic contexts

This study also aimed to elaborate on the circumstances surrounding movement mobilization in non-democratic contexts by asking the question: “Under what conditions may movement mobilization in non-democratic contexts occur?”

Initially it was stated that a main difference between a “Western” and a “post-Soviet” setting was the lack of political opportunities in the latter. The state’s tendency to view all types of opposition as untrustworthy results in lack of opportunities and spaces for the movements to express themselves and almost always end up making critics oppositional in the eyes of the establishment. This is why certain features of state repression and their influence on the mobilization process was one important focus of this thesis. Some findings and observations can be recalled in this respect.

### Soft repression and its implications

Azerbaijan is no exception to the rule of repressive state behavior. As has been discussed above the inherent fear of religion and opposition makes other state strategies improbable. However, in relation to some of the other post-Soviet states there is still a certain level of openness in Azerbaijani society and this openness allows the movements and the state to interact. Even though repression is the norm, the type of repression Azerbaijani groups face is in general softer than the repression in the other cases studied (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the North Caucasus).

Soft repression, as defined by Ferree, relates only to informal restrictions inflicted on social movements by the larger society, yet findings from the Azerbaijani cases indicate that state repression can also be soft. In Azerbaijani repression rarely includes the use of direct force or threat of state violence, with some exceptions. Instead repression is to a certain extent built into the political system in terms of the restrictions and regulations on religion and opposition described above. While this type of soft repression could be considered *formal* there is also a certain amount of *informal* soft repression, comparable to Ferree's meso-level stigma, as expressed by name calling — aiming to discredit a whole group on the basis of its affiliation with a certain movement. Through this type of soft repression the state sets out who its opponents are and unwittingly contributes to the mobilization of the opposition by enhancing the feeling of *we* and *they* for a movement and its participants. In other words, repression helps to effect the consolidation of the movement and forces the community to take action in one way or another so as to establish its position in society. However, soft repression is characterized by the fact that it still leaves some room for maneuvering, that is, for choosing a non-violent course of response. This seems to be the main difference between the Azerbaijani context and other post-Soviet cases where hard state repression eliminates alternatives.

### Repression as a catalyst to soft and hard mobilization

Comparatively speaking, the Azerbaijani political context was related to North Caucasus, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, areas where Islamic movements did face virulent repression such as the use of direct force against challengers as well as mass arrests or kidnappings. The rather brief analysis seemed in any case to show that much of the violence produced by the movements themselves was a response to a context where hard repression finished off all other options. The choice then becomes either not acting at all or taking radical action! When hard repression is targeting all members of a movement indiscriminately (radical and moderate) as well as those outside a movement (innocent bystanders, non-active sympathizers, and members of the public) the likelihood of violent behavior grows. If you are, so to speak, punished for a crime you are not guilty of, next time you might as well commit the crime. In this way the strategy of the authorities in North Caucasus and Uzbekistan, namely to label all “suspicious” religious behavior “Wahhabism”, thereby legitimizing the harsh repression of all believers, can be said to fuel hatred and violence. Even if the current regime in Tajikistan (the only former Soviet country that has an Islamic party in government) appears to act a little less aggressive towards the faithful, violent repression of Islamic activism occurred both before and during the civil war. This discussion could also provide some more general insights about the state as an actor and the role played by the state in the mobilization of social movements. The role of the

state, in terms of the political opportunities the state presents to challengers, is often acknowledged in social movement literature. In general this is done without particular emphasis and rather as one more aspect, among others, of the development of a social movement. It seems however that the role of the state in the mobilization process must receive greater emphasis in a non-democratic context, inasmuch as most authoritarian regimes which try to prevent opposition are in fact, in many cases, themselves the catalyst to mobilization.

## A multifaceted picture of Islamic activism

### The ghost of a Global *Jihad* and Wahhabism

A final purpose of this thesis was to enhance the understanding of what Islamic activism is all about in order to contribute to a more nuanced view of the phenomenon. Even though the mobilization of Islamic movements I have studied do share many similarities, the differences I have shown between the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities alert us to the danger in assuming that all Islamic activism can be understood from one and only one all-encompassing viewpoint. The comparative (regional) approach also emphasized the need to take multiple aspects of the context into account when analyzing Islamic mobilization.

When reading some, although by no means all, previous research in the field it is easy to get the impression that a great deal of Islamic activism is generated by the movements' wish to support a "Global *Jihad*" against the West. Because of this I find it of the utmost importance to point out that in the cases I have studied here, both individually (Azerbaijan) and comparatively (other regional post-Soviet Muslim states), the disappointment with how post-independence leaders have handled the political, economical, social and moral situation in the own countries is at the root of virtually all strife. Nevertheless, to a certain extent the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror have contributed to spread ideas of Muslim solidarity and "a war between civilizations" among the Muslims in Azerbaijan. The "9/11 effect" on state strategies is far more evident than its impact on the activities of the various movements studied, since many authoritarian regimes, including the ones analyzed in this study, were quick to jump on the bandwagon, initiating or intensifying the suppression of secular and religious opposition.

In general, extrinsic influences have been shown to be important for the mobilization of Islamic activism, mainly in relation to the formulation of national religious policy, in itself a response by the authorities to what they experience as domestic meddling by radical foreign actors. National policy towards the different movements, as a result of the way governments per-



ceive foreign threats, has become more restrictive and the attitudes of the authorities towards Islamic activism in general more ruthless. In all of the contexts studied, a fear of imported religious radicalism is clearly noticeable among the authorities. It is perhaps instructive, then, to remind the reader of how the expression “Wahhabi” became the symbol of this fear and a catch-all-phrase to describe unwanted religious activity originating abroad. As its usage became widespread among policy makers and other authorities, it also came to serve as a “weapon” to denigrate all Islamic activists seen as oppositional, whether they had connections to foreign religious activists or not.

In Azerbaijan, where the suspicion that a certain movement is affiliated with other countries strongly influences the people’s perceptions of that particular movement, fear and hearsay have also influenced the attitudes of movements towards each other. These attitudes have contributed to a confrontational situation and, as far as I am concerned, have definitely been one more factor impinging on the mobilization process. Again, regardless of whether or not the community in question was in fact affiliated with the particular country.

To conclude, the mobilization of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan is more dependent on the national than the international context in which it takes place. The post-Soviet Azerbaijani republic, in a sort of transition, still suffers from social, economical as well as political problems. Furthermore, the Soviet past still casts a shadow over social and political developments in Azerbaijan. In this context the popularity of the Juma and Abu Bakr mosque communities appeared threatening to the authorities, and, indeed, repressive actions failed to reduce their popularity or to put an end to their mobilization. On the contrary, the pressure on the mosque communities has brought community members closer together and strengthened their certainty that there is a need for change in Azerbaijan. In the Abu Bakr and Juma mosque communities young people looking for something new have found what they were looking for, and as a result religious opposition has become an interesting social force in Azerbaijan, the “bridgehead of secularism”.

## Epilogue: same, same but different

A few years have passed between the time that the major part of the field work for this thesis was carried out (2004 and 2005) and the finalization of the project (November 2008). In the intervening years we can point at some new interesting developments which however show that the context has not changed much since the time of the study — e.g., the reelection of Ilham Aliyev as president in the October 2008 election, boycotted by all major opposition parties. Then again, some developments may be interpreted cautiously optimistically. In an email sent to me in September 2008, the Imam of the Juma community, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, writes that “the doors to the

mosque have been open for a month, but the community is still prevented from conducting collective prayers inside it". There are also worrying news from Azerbaijan. A grenade attack on the Abu Bakr mosque allegedly carried out by members of a militant Dagestani group in August 2008 left two worshippers dead and more than a dozen wounded, including Imam Sulemanov. This event came as a shock to the Abu Bakr community, but the subsequent decision by the authorities to close down the mosque during the ongoing investigation added insult to injury. It remains shut after more than three months. A temporary ban on praying outside the mosques which was put in place after the explosions has further complicated the situation of these and other believers in the country. At the same time, from what I hear, more and more young people are "finding religion" and are joining a mosque community, so from the looks of it the mobilization of Islamic activism in Azerbaijan is still going strong. The Azerbaijani political situation, with elements of repression, continues to leave a lot to be desired.

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