A Brief History of Salafism in Azerbaijan

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Introduction

According to the "Oxford Islamic Studies Online", Salafism was a reformist, modernist, and intellectual movement established by Sheikh Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his student Muhammad Abduh at the beginning of the twentieth century, which "emphasized restoration of Islamic doctrines to pure form [and] rejection of the authority of later interpretations." Their thought inspired important socio-political movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Jamaat-i Islami of Pakistan.[1]

Both this reformist movement and its leader Jamal al-Din al-Afghani were well known to the leadership of the Azerbaijani nation-building and the modernization movement that began in the second half of the 19th century. There are also claims that Ahmed bey Agayev, one of the most famous figures of the Azeri modernization movement, personally met with Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani.[2]

In general, the problems raised by Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his disciples, including new approaches to various issues such as *ijtihad* (a legal term referring to independent reasoning) and *taqlid* ("imitation," a legal term referring to conformity to Islamic legal precedent) and others, were frequently discussed topics in the Azerbaijani press of that period.[3] This ideology, sometimes referred to as Pan-Islamism, was quite popular in Azerbaijan before Sovietization, and it had a serious influence on the ideological formation of local

political parties such as Musavat and Ittihad. During the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920), the Islamic Ittihad Party became the leading proponent of Pan-Islamic-Ittihad ideas in the region.[4] However, the Sovietization of Azerbaijan cut the country off from ideological developments in the Islamic world.

And from the late twentieth century, the term "Salafi" (predecessor) began to be used to refer to a more conservative religious movement which was created by Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century. Originally founded in the Najd region of Saudi Arabia, this Wahhabi-Salafism resolutely rejects the idea that the term "Salafism" (*al-salafiyyah*) emerged in the nineteenth century to refer to the aforementioned modernist movement and argues that this concept had already existed since the first generations after the Prophet of Islam.

According to the agreement reached between the Saud family and the Abdul-Wahhab family in 1744, Wahhabi-Salafism first became the dominant religious ideology in the Emirate of Diriyah, the first Saudi state, and then in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As an ideological basis, this conservative Salafi movement refers to the views of the thirteenth-century Islamic theologian Ibn Teymiyya.

When independent states were established in the Arab world in the 1940s and 1950s, secular left and nationalist ideas rather than political Islam attracted the ruling elites of those countries. However, many problems, first and foremost a crushing defeat to Israel, led to the bankruptcy of these ideas and the new popularization of political Islam.

Finally, the events of 1979: the intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the siege of Mecca by the Salafis, and lastly, the 1982 Hama Massacre committed by the Syrian military against Sunni insurgents and the local civil population triggered a new

revival of political Islam and Salafism.[5] Therefore, in the 1980s, conservative Salafism began a new and rapid rise in the Muslim world. The beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of that decade led to the arrival of Wahhabi-Salafism in Azerbaijan as well, and in the 1990s, it became the fastest growing and the most noticeable religious movement in Azerbaijan.

This research describes the core processes of Salafism from the beginning of its spread in Azerbaijan in the post-Soviet period to the present day.

The Spread of Wahhabi-Salafism in Azerbaijan and its Rising Era

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

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

In the late 1980s, in Baku, those Arab students who espoused Salafism, who were mostly studying at the Oil Academy (the then Azerbaijan Institute of Oil and Chemistry) and the medical sciences[6], began their religious proselytism after the

Perestroika-era relaxation of anti-religious policies in the USSR. Our interlocutors personally knew some Salafi proselytizers from Sudan, Algeria and Yemen.[7]

However, the most successful of these proselytizers was Salim Zakharna Ghazzawi, who was considered the most influential foreign leader of Salafism in Azerbaijan throughout the 1990s. Although previously these Arab students promoted this movement clandestinely, the collapse of the USSR created more favorable conditions for them and in 1993, Arab Salafi students succeeded in organizing religious courses at the dormitory of the Azerbaijan Institute of Oil and Chemistry. A year earlier, in 1992, Azerbaijani legislature adopted the first liberal law on religious freedom.[8]

While in the early period, in Azerbaijan, Salafism was propagated among students, later (after relative relaxation and freedom of religion) it began to appeal to a wider audience and the first books and brochures were published.

According to our interlocutors, because foreign students in Azerbaijan were taught Russian during the Soviet times, they mainly did their propaganda in this language. Moreover, the first Salafi books in Azerbaijan were mostly in Russian as well.

The authors of this research were unable to identify any significant effects of the handful of Afghan mujahideen, who had come to participate on the Azerbaijani side in the Karabakh War in the early 1990s, in terms of Salafi propaganda. Nevertheless, one of our interlocutors emphasized the leading role of the alleged mujahideen fighter from Afghanistan, Tunisian born Abu Tariq, in Salafi proselytism in Azerbaijan in 1990s. Abu Tariq became one of the most notable activists of the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (*Jamaiat Ihya at-Turath al-Islami*) (RIHS), a Kuwaiti charity organization described in more detail below, and until

recently he resided in Azerbaijan.[9]

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

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

During his official visit to Moscow in 1993, President Heydar Aliyev addressed representatives of the Arab charities, urging them to help internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees suffering from the Karabakh War, and invited them to the country for this purpose. Undoubtedly, this invitation was partly influenced by his intention to restrict the Shia influence of Iran by widening Sunni proselytism. (Before he came to power in Azerbaijan, that is, when he was the leader of the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan in 1992, Aliyev allowed the entrance of the Fethullah Gulen group, which was then supported by the Turkish government, to that region. Later he created suitable conditions for the group to spread its activities all over the country.) In total, 15 Arab organizations allegedly came to Azerbaijan in those years (Appendix 1).[10] Foremost among them was the Kuwait-based **Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS),** which started organizing Salafi proselytism in Azerbaijan in 1993/1994

This is how the researcher of Kuwaiti Salafism Zoltan Pall describes the RIHS: "*the society was founded in 1981 with the support of the Kuwaiti state and wealthy merchants who had adopted the Salafi ideology… Salafis elsewhere did not support any kind of political participation in secular and parliamentary regimes, since they were heavily influenced by*

the Saudi religious line… Most Kuwaiti Salafis, however, took a different stance, due to the revolutionary ideology propagated by their main religious authority, Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq, an Egyptian scholar who settled in Kuwait in the 1960s…Until the second half of the 1990s Abdul Rahman was the sole authoritative figure to whom the majority of the Kuwaiti Salafis turned for guidance…. He did not fit the profile of the typical Salafi religious scholar of the time, which can be characterized by extreme isolationism and a parochial outlook. Abdul Rahman was one of the first Salafis who extensively wrote books and articles about politics and intended to reform Salafi jurisprudence about politics and participation in social protest and using new media."[11]

This profile matches the type of activist Salafism that RIHS initially promoted in Azerbaijan. The Society appointed the abovementioned Salim Zakharna as its main representative in Baku. Activist Salafi MP of the Kuwaiti parliament Waleed al-Tabtabaie attended the opening ceremony of the RIHS office in the Azerbaijani capital. The RIHS translated and published several books authored by Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq in the Azeri language. It is claimed that in the early 2000s, there were 62 mosques, which had either been built or restored under the supervision of this society.[12] However, since 1996, as a result of the obstructive policies initiated by the government of Azerbaijan against mainly Salafi and Shi'i foreign religious proselytizers, activities of the RIHS were gradually restricted. Salim Zakharna, who was its foremost leader in Azerbaijan, was deported from the country in 1998 (some of our interlocutors said that he currently resides in the UAE) and in 2001, after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the organization was closed in Azerbaijan. In January 2002, the UN listed the RIHS as "being associated with Al-Qaeda"[13] and in 2008, this organization, including its Azeri branch, was designated by the US government as a supporter of terrorist organizations.[14]

However, the concerns of the Azerbaijani government about foreign-funded Islamic propaganda, the various obstacles to the activities of foreign religious proselytizers put in place by the government since 1996, and the closure of the majority of Arab-based organizations in the country after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 have not undermined Salafi propaganda in the country at all. Azerbaijani students who were sent to other Muslim countries for Islamic education in early 1990s, began to return and, in fact, succeeded in further popularizing Salafism.

The first few Azerbaijani students were sent for a Salafi education to Sudan by the abovementioned Arab proselytizers and organizations. However, due to poor living conditions and life-threatening risks there, the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia was selected as the main educational institution, and for a long time, the graduates of the Islamic University of Madinah, who along with their Arabic counterparts called themselves *"elm tələbələri"* (students of knowledge), became the leading local Salafi proselytizers. Salafi preacher Gamat Suleymanov became the most prominent member of this community of "Medina students" in Azerbaijan. He started to demonstrate his leadership potential before graduation from the Islamic University of Madinah. Suleymanov gained influence among Azerbaijani Salafis during the summer breaks when he came to his home country to teach religion. In 1997, Suleymanov graduated from the University and came to Baku to work in the newly built Abu Bakr Mosque. He became the most influential leader of Salafism in Azerbaijan from that time until recently.

Along with Suleymanov, other leading clerics of the Salafi community, Alikhan Musayev, Adil Rajabov, Ramil Sultanov, Abdurahim Muradli, and others are also the graduates of the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia. The total number of Azeri alumni and students of Islamic University of Madinah is 86.[15]

Under the leadership of both the Arab proselytizers and afterwards Azerbaijani Medina graduates throughout the 1990s, Salafism became the most dynamic, rapidly growing religious movement in Azerbaijan, especially in major cities like Baku and Sumgayit. We probably would not be mistaken to claim that Abu Bakr Mosque, built by the RIHS and led by Gamat Suleymanov, was the most significant Salafi center of the Caucasus until its closure in 2008. In 2006, in an interview with a local news outlet, Gamat Suleymanov claimed that twelve thousand worshippers attended Abu Bakr Mosque during holiday prayers.[16]

It should be emphasized that since the late 1990s, although local actors outnumbered foreigners in Salafi propaganda, the dynamics of this religious movement continued to be strictly determined by external factors. We can state that all the processes of the Arab world's Salafism resonated in Azerbaijan, shaping the future developments and schisms in the local Salafi community. However, it should be noted that this characteristic can also be attributed to other branches of Islam in Azerbaijan.

An Attempt to Ideological Classification

In his "The Spring of a New Political Salafism?" article, Hassan Mneimneh divides Salafis into four groups. His first group is called *al-salafiyyah al-ilmiyyah* (scholarly Salafism), which is a traditional scholastic Salafism. The second group is *al-salafiyyah al-daawiyyah* (activist Salafism), which is a form of Salafism that engages in social and political life. The third group is *al-salafiyyah al-jihadiyyah* (jihadist Salafism), and finally, the last group is *salafiyyu ahl al-wala* (the ruler's Salafism), which promotes absolute and unconditional obedience and loyalty to governments.[17]

This classifications does not map perfectly onto the situation in Azerbaijan since Azerbaijani Salafism has its roots in

Kuwaiti Salafism and the latter's engagement with politics is special.

In general, Pall divides Kuwaiti Salafis within the RIHS into purists and activists. According to him, "purists are those who believe in the necessity of absolute obedience to the ruler. They focus on the minute details of belief and worship." Yet "mainstream purists think that Muslims can disobey the ruler and side with the opposition if the ruler uses extreme and unjustified violence against his subjects." Pall divides purists into two opposing camps. He writes that some purists are hostile to RIHS and accused the latter "of betraying the principles of Salafism by participating in parliamentary elections and maintaining institutional structure. These individuals are commonly called 'Madkhalis,' a reference to their most important religious authority, the Saudi Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali. Despite the Madkhalis' negative stance toward the political process, one of the cornerstones of their discourse is showing unquestioning loyalty to the ruler." Activists, on the contrary, are "those who possess a broader political outlook. They aim to Islamize society by proselytizing and by transforming state institutions, using violence if necessary"[18]

It is more appropriate to explain the ideological currents and groups of Salafism in Azerbaijan by taking both of these classifications into account.

We also have to add that most Azerbaijani Salafi groups in their public statements emphasize that as a religious authority, they mainly accept and comply with fatwas and speeches of two organizations, namely the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta (*Al-Lajnah ad-Dâ'imah lil-Buhûts al-'Ilmiyyah wal-Iftâ)* and the Council of Senior Scholars (*Majlis Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulama*).

So, first, we would like to start with the fact that the aforementioned Sheikh Salim Zakharna, the pioneer of Salafism

in Azerbaijan as well as the most influential proselytizer in the country in the late 1980s and 1990s, was considered (at least during his Salafi proselytism in Azerbaijan) to be a follower of Muhammad Nasir al-Albani (d. in 1999) who was the pre-eminent representative and, in a sense, the founder of traditional scholastic Salafism.

Our Salafi interlocutors stated that, although initially guided by Salim Zakharna, they became followers of Sheikh Albani. After local students graduated from Medina, some of them began to follow the teachings of other prestigious religious scholars in scholastic Salafism, such as Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz (d. in 1999) and Muhammad ibn al Uthaymeen (d. in 2001) as well. Albani's thoughts and advocacy prevailed for years, that is, approximately until 1996, while the former university students of Arab origin were leading figures in Salafi propaganda in Azerbaijan. Later, with the return of Azerbaijani students from Medina to their home country, references to Ibn Baz and al Uthaymeen began to increase rapidly. And this happened exactly at the same time when the RIHS in Kuwait, according to Zoltan Pall, switched hands from activists to purists and "RIHS also withdrew any material support from activist Salafi groups and endowments abroad and started to support exclusively purist groups and causes."[19] So with the return of "Medina students" of Azerbaijani origin, a gradual ideological shift from the activist to the purist form of Salafi proselytism took place in the country and for the next decade purists overwhelmingly dominated in Salafi proselytism in Azerbaijan.

Mneimneh notes that although scholastic Salafism does not directly interfere with politics, it does not advocate an unconditional loyalty to the government, either. Adherents of scholastic Salafism carefully choose their words when they make statements in support of their governments' policies. For this reason, even though their opponents call scholastic Salafism "sultan's (ruler's) Salafism," some supporters regard

the ambiguous statements of scholastic religious authorities as a silent encouragement of political activity.[20]

It should be noted that initially this ambiguity could also be observed among "Medina students" in Azerbaijan. While in terms of internal affairs, they openly advocated obedience to rulers and Gamat Suleymanov authored a book dedicated to this topic[21], his entourage continued their contacts with the secular opposition at various times as well, and he and his group did not criticize the local democratic opposition in any form. Subsequently, however, "obedience to the ruler" gradually became the most important point in Suleymanov's discourses, which led to the step-by-step transformation of the Salafi group led by Suleymanov into a pure form of *madkhalism*.

A final note on classification: since readers are likely to encounter three additional terms when we discuss the internal conflicts of Salafis in Azerbaijan, we feel obliged to briefly describe them as well. As the theological explanations of these terms are very complicated issues, here we will provide readers with simplified local meanings of these frequently used accusations. In our context, the *Khawarij* refers to those who, according to their accusers, believe that government officials are not Muslims. The *Takfiri* refers to those who allegedly believe that neither government officials, nor the members of society who do not share their views, are Muslims. The exact opposite of these two is called *the Murjiahs (irja)* who, to put it simply, are accused of failing to denounce those who do not comply with religious rules. They allegedly advocate leaving judgment to God on the Day of Resurrection.

Let us repeat that these are very simplistic explanations of the aforementioned terms, which could easily be challenged by religious people, yet they generally reflect the current reality in Azerbaijan. In addition, we should note that all Salafi believers absolutely reject these denunciations aimed

at them by their Salafi rivals and, on the contrary, they consider their views the most accurate interpretation of Salafism.

The Rise of Jihadist Salafism and the First Internal Conflicts

Although jihadist Salafism started its activities in Azerbaijan in the 1990s, its ranks started expanding during the Second Chechen War. This war became the first major publicly debated ideological issue within the Salafi community of Azerbaijan, causing a serious rift within its ranks which was further deepened as a result of internal ideological clashes over the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. These disputes among local Salafis occurred between G. Suleymanov and his followers on the one hand, and the foreign Salafis residing in Azerbaijan on the other. Local Salafi leaders, Gamat Suleymanov and Alikhan Musayev, stood together against jihadists of North Caucasian origin and their local Arab mentors and backers. It was this time that the epithets *Khawarij* (during the Chechen War) and *Takfiri* (during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) started being used in Azerbaijan against those who were calling for jihad. Conversely, the supporters of Suleymanov were accused of *irja*, or being *the Murjiah* by the opposite party.

According to our interlocutors, the first time "takfiri" ideas were voiced by local Salafis in 2001-2002. They were the then recently returned Azeri graduates of Syrian "Al-Fath" madrasah. However, when Suleymanov accused all of the Azeri Salafis studying in Syria of possessing "takfiri" views, this caused serious outrage among some of the members of the local Salafi community.

One of our interlocutors stated that, two different *irja* accusations had been brought against Gamat Suleymanov: "The first one was political and since it was made by *Jihadist*, *Takfiri*, and other radical groups, we can consider it

unjustified. However, the second accusation was absolutely theological in nature."[22] The latter accusation was based on a claim that "although Suleymanov and his followers claim that they accept the authority of Salafi scholars, such as Saleh Ibn Fawzan, from the abovementioned two prestigious Salafi groups, in reality they advocate the ideas of Sheikhs like Ali Hasan al Halabi, Khalid al-Anbari and others accused of *irja* by prominent scholars. Moreover, earlier "Medina students" around Gamat Suleymanov translated and taught the book of Rashid ibn Ahmad Uvayyish al Maqribi, who was accused by Saleh ibn Fawzan of spreading *irja.*[23]" As a counter argument, Suleymanov and his followers argued that the reason behind the accusations against him and his group by some other Salafi groups was Suleymanov's refusal to denounce Sufis and Shi'ites as apostates.[24] So, we assume that some religious rationale in the arguments of the both sides can easily be found. It should be noted that in early stages of Suleymanov's sermons, denunciations of local Shi'i and Sufi traditions were the dominant topics of his discourse

Changing Dynamics

By the early 2000s, other important changes contributed to the divisions within the Salafi community as well. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Islam in Azerbaijan entered into a new stage, i.e. political Islam. This transformation could be easily observed among both Salafis and Shi'ites. The difference was that, while Salafism in the 1990s was growing more rapidly than other religious movements, the transition to political Islam led to a Shi'ite renaissance. Direct intervention in politics, on the contrary, resulted in negative consequences for Salafism. Of course, investigating the causes of this requires special research. Here we can simply share our initial impressions. The main thing is that while political Shi'ism constructed its political struggle on issues such as human rights and liberties (Icherisheher Juma community), mobilization around local social problems

(Nardaran community), open support to various secular opposition groups (Icherisheher Juma community, “Ikmal” Youth Organization), and whatever the rationale behind it, rapprochement with the secular opposition against authoritarianism, the political form of Salafism appeared mainly in the form of jihadism and armed struggle focused on armed conflicts both in Azerbaijan (the Karabakh partisans case) and abroad (Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq). This had a serious impact on deepening the radical, frightening image of Salafism in Azerbaijani society.

Certainly, as stated above, there were some attempts within the Salafi community to change their tactics and build ties with the secular opposition in the 2000s. However, the unequivocal rigidity of the orthodox Saudi Salafi dogmatism did not allow such a transformation or the creation of a community, such as the local Shi’i Juma community of Old City, within Salafism which could join the democratic struggle. Still, it should be noted that quite a few Salafis individually joined the secular opposition parties.

There is a need to emphasize the role of another important change that took place after the second half of the 2000s in Azerbaijan and seriously affected the local Salafi proselytism. As mentioned above, in the 1990s, Arab students, foreign foundations, Azerbaijani students studying abroad, and the Russian South had played a key role in Salafi propaganda in Azerbaijan. Later, however, the internet – especially after the transition from dial-up internet to DSL, and then to more advanced technologies as well as the widespread expansion of mobile internet – significantly increased its role in local Salafi propaganda. In addition, these technological advances in the country coincided with the closure of the main Salafi center – Abu Bakr Mosque – which fueled the role of the internet in Salafi proselytism in Azerbaijan (Appendix 2). The Russian-speaking, Turkish-speaking and Arabic-speaking segments of the internet have played roles in influencing the Salafi movement in Azerbaijan.

Quite interestingly, the Russian-speaking and Turkish-speaking segments have contributed to the expansion of more radical forms of Salafism. For example, we can point out to the role of online Russian-language content in the second revival of Salafism in the Gusar region in more radical, sometimes jihadist forms. Similarly, Turkish-language content paved the way for the radical Islamist Halis Bayancuk, known as Abu Hunzala, who is currently detained in Turkey, to attract quite significant number of supporters in Azerbaijan.[25] Yet, the easy access to Arabic-speaking segment of the network enabled Salafis to establish direct links to traditional Salafi centers, and has led to the formation of a new branch of scholastic Salafism, which arose independently of the "Medina students," as a result of increased proficiency in the Arabic language and in theological matters among ordinary community members. So the widening role of the internet contributed to further schisms within the local Salafi community.

Schisms as a Result of Power Struggle

The conflict between Gamat Suleymanov and Alikhan Musayev, who once cooperated against the radicals, can be explained by many factors, such as the rapidly growing membership of the Salafi community, their leadership claims, their adherence to competing Arab Salafi communities, the emergence of ideological differences, and the fight for control over internal and external financial resources.

Some of our interlocutors argued that the conflict between Rafig Aliyev, then chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), and Sheikh ul-Islam Pashazadeh, the Shi'i head of the Caucasus Muslims Board (CMB), played a significant role in inciting this conflict. In 2001, the Sheikh ul-Islam perceived the establishment of a new regulatory body on religious affairs as a direct challenge to his authority and tried to demonstrate that he had a leading role in this sphere. This rivalry between the two bodies included a clash over the fastest growing religious community

of Azerbaijan at that time. The Sheikh ul-Islam's attempt to bring Gamat Suleymanov under his influence led Rafig Aliyev, who wanted to take the control over the Salafi community, to support Alikhan Musayev as an alternative leader of the community, and this conflict increasingly intensified.

We should note that Alikhan Musayev, who currently is not seen in the media, is a nephew of the infamous religious figure Alasgar Musayev. The latter collaborated with Arab organizations, engaged in Salafi propaganda groups, for a period of time worked for Salim Zakharna, and attended summer camps organized by Arabs. In the middle of the 1990s, Alasgar Musayev's group, which was mainly based in the Amirjan settlement outside Baku, was very popular in the capital.[26] However, Musayev later suspended his relations with the Arabic charities and proclaimed himself a prophet; thereafter, his reputation collapsed and subsequently he was arrested for marrying an underage girl.

Alikhan Musayev is also a close relative of Imam Mubariz Garayev of Lezgin (Ashur) Mosque, which is known or presented as one of the key bases of political Salafism in the country. This mosque was accused by the media of sending mujahideen to Syria, and was closed in 2016 by the state authorities

Alikhan Musayev went to Uzbekistan in the late 1980s to study. His opponents within Salafism claimed that he joined the Hizb ut-Tahrir group while there. Allegedly, Alikhan Musayev studied in the Arab-financed madrassah in Namangan that was opened by a person named Abdul Wali, who was subsequently killed by Uzbek law enforcement. Finally, Alikhan Musayev is one of the first five graduates of the Islamic University of Madinah.[27]

In this respect, Rafig Aliyev's dismissal from the post of chairman of the SCWRA was the defeat of Alikhan Musayev. However, it should be noted that despite the defeat of Alikhan Musayev, the conflict has seriously damaged Gamat Suleymanov's

reputation as well. In order to demonstrate his control over the Salafi community, the Shi'i Sheikh ul-Islam repeatedly demanded that Gamat Suleymanov recognize him as the latter's religious authority. The fact that Suleymanov gave in to these demands cost him serious reputational damage within the Salafi community and the loss of many supporters.

In addition, under pressure from the Sheikh ul-Islam, in 2003, Gamat Suleymanov performed a funeral prayer for the late Heydar Aliyev, the third president of the country, in Abu Bakr Mosque. Suleymanov's decision was sharply criticized by many Salafis and cost serious reputational damage for him within the community.[28] Supporters of Gamat Suleymanov claimed that Alikhan Musayev was behind these attacks despite the fact that he participated in the funeral prayer as well. By encountering this accusations, in one of his interviews Alikhan Musayev claimed it was Gamat Suleymanov who tried to vilify him in the eyes of Azerbaijani government and accused Suleymanov of sending mujahideen to Chechnya in 2003. He also addressed the accusation from Gamat Suleymanov's supporters in 2008 that he had sent mujahideen to Afghanistan as well.[29]

The last major conflict between Alikhan Musayev and Gamat Suleymanov and their supporters took place after the Arab revolutions, especially during the Syrian conflict. In early 2014, some "Medina students," who were loyal to Suleymanov, issued a statement and accused Alikhan Musayev and Mubariz Garayev of supporting Syrian jihadists and dubbed them *Khawarij*.[30] A recording was leaked in which Musayev allegedly expresses his support for Syrian jihadists.[31] And another audio recording surfaced of one of Musayev's speeches, which allowed his opponents to his accuse him of being a *Takfiri* as well.[32] However, in his response, Alikhan Musayev denied these allegations and claimed that Gamat Suleymanov himself was sympathetic to Syrian jihadists.[33] In retaliation, Gamat Suleymanov was also smeared in a video shared on the internet

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The Transformation of Suleymanov and His Followers from Scholasticism to al-Madkhaliyyah

Zoltan Pall states that "after the Arab Spring, purist Salafis lost ground to the reemerging activist Salafis all over the Middle East largely because purist sheikhs had supported the autocratic Arab regimes during the uprisings and issued fatwas against the demonstrators."[35] That was the case in Azerbaijan as well.

In 2008, before the closure of Abu Bakr Mosque, the symbol of purist-scholastic Salafism, self-identified "traditional Salafis" under Gamat Suleymanov had behaved similar to the Saudi scholasticism defined by Mneimneh's classification. However, after the closure of the mosque, particularly following the Arab Spring, they became closer to loyalist Salafism (*al-Madkhaliyyah*, *al-Jamiyyah*, *salafiyya ahl al-wala*). For instance, on the online news portal ("Selefxeber.az") controlled by Suleymanov and his followers, the name of the president began to be accompanied by special prayers usually reserved for Muslim saints, perfectly demonstrating the abovementioned transformation within the Salafi community.

We believe that this transformation damaged the reputation of the branch of Salafism represented by the "Medina students." The students themselves, however, denied that such a transformation had taken place, and their opponents actually agreed with them, claiming that this issue was not related to *al-Madkhaliyyah*. The theological struggle still revolves around the abovementioned epithets, namely, the *Khawarij*, the *Takfiri*, and *the Murjiah*.

Suleymanov and his followers do not agree with the classification of Mneimneh, described above and they continue to denounce their opponents in being *"khawarij", "takfiri"* and

"hizbi".

A group of ordinary community members separate from the "Medina students," however, claimed that as a result of the growing popularity of the Arabic language among ordinary Salafis as well as their direct access to religious sources and sermons via the internet, it became clear that Gamat Suleymanov and his followers recommended, translated, and taught the works of those scholars who had already been accused of *irja* by the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta of Saudi Arabia, and this exposure of the "Medina students" created a basis for accusations of *irja*. As a result, the reputation of some of the "Medina students," who were once considered the symbol of Salafism, particularly Suleymanov himself, gradually eroded within the community.

In any case, regardless of whether there is a relationship, it is clear that after the closure of Abu Bakr Mosque and the Arab Spring, the obedient-loyalist position of Suleymanov and his followers had become more apparent (perhaps it was a tactical position to ensure the re-opening of the mosque), and at that time dissatisfaction among the community members began to increase. The closure of Abu Bakr Mosque, however, did not contribute to the decline of Salafism at all. On the contrary, it contributed to the rise of jihadist-minded groups and most importantly to the spread of Salafism to all over the country.

Activist Salafism or "Political purists"

The transition of the main leaders of scholastic Salafism to the loyalist-obedient position backfired after the Arab Spring. The general contribution of the Arab Spring to the decline of *Madkhalism* and the rise of activist Salafism resulted in greater schism among the "Medina students" and led to the overthrow of Gamat Suleymanov from his position as the leader of the local Salafis. A new group of "Medina students" broke away from Suleymanov and managed more or less to avoid the same decline by gradual transitioning to activist

Salafism. Interestingly, their clout started to grow even further when they became targets of Suleymanov's harsh criticism.

Adil Rajabov, one of the "Medina students" who broke with Suleymanov, became the leader of this activist group, which was dubbed "*hizbçi*" (partisan) by the local *al-Madkhaliyyah* Salafis, i.e. Suleymanov's followers. What Suleymanov has said about Adil Rajabov demonstrates that the schism was understood in theological terms in the context of the loyalist and activist confrontation.[36] However, Gamat Suleymanov persistently distinguishes Adil Rajabov's group from the *Takfiris*, i.e. the radicals.[37]

Taking into account the numerous similarities between Adil Rajabov's group and the purists of the RIHS in Pall's classification, the division between Rajabov and Suleymanov is more in line with division between the purists of the RIHS and the *Madhkalis*. However, it should be said that Suleymanov's followers do not agree with the idea that Salafis affiliated with *Ihya at-Turath* can be divided into purists and activists, referring to all of them as *hizbçi*.

It is necessary to highlight that, in their turn, followers of Adil Rajabov resolutely reject being identified as *hizbçi*. However, Adil Rajabov's relations with Islamic scholars of activist Salafism as well as his continuing contacts with the RIHS create a basis for categorizing the Rajabov group as *activists*, as defined by the Saudi religious establishment. In 2016, a YouTube channel affiliated with Gamat Suleymanov's group shared an audio recording where Arab Salafi Sheikh Abdullah al-Bukhari, a scholar close to Rabi al-Madkhali, accused Adil Rajabov of being a *hizbi* and claimed that Rajabov had joined to the group of Sheikh Abul-Hasan al-Ma'ribi,[38] who had previously been accused of *hizbiyyah* by Rabi al-Madkhali.[39] In addition, Adil Rajabov, in one of his audiotapes, admitted that initially he had recognized war in

Syria as jihad and referred to the opinions of such ulemas as Sheikh Luheidan. He added, however, that when the ulemas called the war a *fitna* (a rebellion against a rightful ruler), he retracted his previous views.[40]

Nevertheless, under the leadership of Adil Rajabov, this activist group has grown stronger and has now surpassed Suleymanov and his followers in terms of their influence and prestige, as all of our interlocutors have confirmed.[41] In addition, we were also told that there had recently been a rapprochement between the followers of Adil Rajabov and Alikhan Musayev.

In short, based on conversations with numerous interlocutors, currently, the Salafis in Azerbaijan can be classified in the following way:

- Followers of Adil Rajabov;
- Followers of Gamat Suleymanov;
- Followers of Alikhan Musayev;
- Various Khawarij, Takfiri, Jihadist groups;
- Community members who left the "Medina students." By borrowing the term from Mneimneh, they can also be classified as modern scholastic Salafis, who regularly watch the decisions of the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta of Saudi Arabia for guidance and strictly follow the rules of orthodox Salafism
- Heterodox Salafi groups

Apart from these groups, there are also many individual orthodox Salafis who simply pray in accordance with the Salafi method without being affiliated with any of the aforementioned groups.

Strata, Methods, Mosques, and Regions

The geographical distribution of Salafism in Azerbaijan as well as the social strata that it encompasses are quite

interesting topics.

Salafism was successfully spread to big cities such as Baku and Sumgayit and nearby suburbs of these cities, such as Gobustan, Jeyranbatan, and Mushfigabad; the northern regions of Azerbaijan where ethnic Sunni minorities are closely concentrated, such as Zagatala, Balakan, Guba, Gusar, and Khachmaz; and in Karabakh War refugee tent camps established by Arab foundations in the Barda, Yevlakh, and Aghjabadi regions. Although Salafism managed to convert some people from a number of traditional Shi'ite regions and even grew strong in places like Terter, in comparison with Sunni regions and the major cities, Salafism is relatively weak in Shi'ite areas.

While the spread of Salafism among Karabakhi IDPs is related exclusively to the charity activities of the Gulf-based foundations, the success of Salafi propaganda among the northern ethnic minorities is also related to factors such as their Sunni background, the import of Russian-language Salafi literature from Dagestan, with which Sunni minorities have strong ties, and the role of the internet in regions such as Gusar, where Russian-language secondary education is widespread.

The interesting thing about Salafi propaganda was its popularity and unprecedented success among the Russian-speaking Azerbaijani residents of Baku. In our opinion, this happened for a number of reasons. In the early 1970s and 1980s, Russian-language education was not only rapidly spread in Baku, but also became popular in the regions. The Russian-speaking Azerbaijanis were regarded as the political and cultural elite of local society. Speaking Azerbaijani in downtown Baku was considered almost a sign of backwardness. Because of the sudden collapse of the USSR, this elite faced serious problems. Russian language was losing its dominant status and knowledge of the Azerbaijani language was becoming a priority in the society. These changes indeed pushed the

Russian-speaking population of the capital, a social stratum that was considered to be the "upper class," to the edge of social life, and they faced a serious identity crisis. Among the Russian-speaking population, who did not speak Azerbaijani fluently enough or did not know it at all, this situation created a serious stigma. In this situation, Salafism became a way to demonstrate belonging to a local identity, by shifting the focus from Turkic nationalism to Islam. Salafism was not related to Shi'i mullahs, which were admonished by local secular intelligentsia as an obstacle to modernization at the turn of the twentieth century. The mullahs' negative image only worsened during the Soviet era and they were dubbed *"bozbash mollası"* (avaricious funeral clerics) and were associated with ignorance even in matters of religion. Moreover, Shi'i Islam was seen as an extension of Iran at a time when that country had a negative reputation among Azeris due to its alleged partnership and friendly relations with Armenia during the Karabakh War. Salafism was not related to Turkey, which was as an alleged promoter of Turkic nationalism and was regarded by Russian speakers as one of the main reasons of their "fall from grace." On the contrary, criticism of both Iranian- and Turkish-oriented versions of Islam i.e. Shi'ism and Sufism respectively, were among the explicit targets of Salafi dawa (proselytism).

Moreover, Salafism, which is elitist in nature,[42] appeased to some extent the egos of many of Russian-speaking Azeri Muslims, who considered themselves elites. For at first glance, Salafism required an intellectual approach to religion. In order to be able to criticize other religious movements, the Salafis must "learn the true Islam," seek to master the Arabic language for direct access to sources, and should study and read for "proofs." Additionally, the first Salafi literature that came to Azerbaijan was also in Russian.

Finally, the Salafi proselytizers (first Arabs, then locals) especially targeted the elite Russian-speaking residents of

Baku. It is only because of this that some young members of families of local high-ranking officials joined the Salafis and supported them financially. Probably relative success of Salafism among local sportsmen can be explained by targeted proselytism as well.

Interestingly, one group that consisted mainly of Russian-speaking Salafis later approached *Qardhawi*-affliated groups, i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2006, the International Center of Islamic Moderatism, "Al-Wasatiyyah", which was established with the support of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs of Kuwait and was under the ideological control of the Muslim Brotherhood, created the "Idrak" (Cognition) social union in Baku. Our interlocutors highlighted the activism of the Russian-speaking Salafis in this union. It is claimed on the Idrak's website that the organization operates on the basis of "moderate principles of Islam" by not interfering in politics and creating the grounds for national, ethnic and religious harmony; it also seeks to prevent Islamophobia and promote tolerance.[43] The organization has partnered with the Azerbaijani authorities in many of its endeavors.

From an interview given by one of the Kuwaiti leaders of Al-Wasatiyyah to a pro-government Azerbaijani website, it is clear that the goals of the organization include the fight against Wahhabi-Salafism.[44] However, it should be noted that after the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Kuwaiti Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs was restrained by the appointment of purist Salafis to important positions within the ministry[45], the financing of the Azeri branch was reduced to a minimum.[46]

The relations of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood with the Azerbaijani government is an interesting topic in itself. Its Asia Muslim Committee opened an office in Baku in the 1990s which still operates in Azerbaijan. The relations of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood with religious authorities in the

Azerbaijani government have been defined by two main factors: 1) they were regarded by Azeri religious authorities as an antidote to rising Salafi popularity in Azerbaijan in the 1990s, and 2) good relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and Shi'is in Iran and the Middle East (at least before the rift over the Syrian war) paved the way for the Shi'i dominated Azerbaijani CMB to forge closer relations with Kuwaiti brotherhood. Other local pro-government Shi'i groups also welcomed this rapprochement.

Quran and Arabic language courses, summer schools, social aid to low-income families, the special arrangement of social assistance, and various small service businesses and shops were the important components of Salafi promotion.

However, the construction of new mosques and the restoration of old mosques, which were neglected during the Soviet era, have played a special role in the spreading of Salafism. For instance, some sources claim that Kuwait-based organizations built or restored 73 mosques in Azerbaijan in the 1990s.[47] In particular, the construction of the aforementioned Abu Bakr Mosque, which was transformed into an informal center of Azerbaijani Salafism in the second half of the 1990s, was financed by the Kuwait-based Revival of Islamic Heritage Society. This mosque, led by Gamat Suleymanov, was closed in 2008 after a terrorist attack.

The terrorist attack in Abu Bakr Mosque took place on August 17, 2008. Two people were killed and 18 others were injured, including Gamat Suleymanov, as a result of the explosion of a grenade thrown during prayer. A few days later, law enforcement officials issued a joint declaration that the main suspects were Azerbaijani citizens Ilgar Mollachiyev and Samir Mehdiyev, jihadist Salafis who were involved in military units in the North Caucasus called "Forest Brothers." Gamat Suleymanov and his followers also confirmed the authenticity of this version. However, the total dependence of the judiciary on the executive branch in Azerbaijan led many

people to doubt the impartiality of the investigation. After a few days, Ilgar Mollachiyev was reportedly killed in Dagestan by Russian special operation forces. Following this incident, the Azerbaijani government closed Abu Bakr Mosque.

After the closure of Abu Bakr Mosque, the majority of Salafis scattered to other Sunni mosques in Baku and on the outskirts of the capital, where preachers were mainly Turks or Azeris who were educated in religious institutions affiliated with Turkey. It was at that time that the Azerbaijani government adopted new laws that prohibit foreign citizens from performing spiritual activities as well as pursuing religious propaganda in the country. The dismissal of Turkish imams, who had been tolerated by the government, created a gap in the management of the mosques built or operated by Turkish-affiliated groups. Following the closure of their main mosques, the Salafis flowed into these Sunni mosques, gradually gaining numerical advantage in all of them. Thus, most worshippers at Ilahiyyat Mosque (the mosque of the Theology Faculty of Baku State University, built with financial assistance of the Turkish state), and at mosques in Garachukhur and in the nearby settlements of Baku and Sumgayit, such as Mushfigabad, Mehdiabad and Jeyranbatan became mostly Salafis, and in some cases they also managed to amend sermons and ceremonies held in these prayer houses to their Salafi views. Salafis also succeeded in converting many members of the local Turkish-influenced Sunni communities attending prayers in these mosques.

It should be noted that the process of closing Salafi mosques did not end with Abu Bakr. It is true that the process slowed down after the closure of Shahidlar (Martyrs) Mosque, which was built by the Turkish government, but a new wave of Salafi mosque closures began after the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Mushfigabad Mosque, which was considered a mosque of Hanafi Sunnis as a result of Turkish proselytism, came under the

control of Salafis through the aforementioned mechanism. In 2014, Mushfigabad Mosque[48] began to appear regularly in pro-government media outlets, who claimed that the mosque had links with religious radicals. In the same period, Alikhan Musayev, who was accused by Gamat Suleymanov of supporting radicals, was trying to influence the local Salafis community by giving lessons at Mushfigabad Mosque.[49] Suleymanov's followers claimed that Alikhan Musayev was sent there by the SCWRA to take control of the mosque. This information was even published by some online media outlets.[50] But in any case, Alikhan Musayev's attempt to strengthen his influence at the mosque failed. Members of the Mushfigabad community did not welcome Musayev. After a while, the community was dissolved[51] under the pressure of the SCWRA, and a Hanafi imam was officially appointed.[52] Nevertheless, Salafis still account for a majority of the worshippers there.

In addition, Lezgin (Ashur) Mosque, located in the center of Baku and often accused of sending jihadists to Iraq and Syria,[53] also faced pressure for several years. Mubariz Garayev, the imam of Lezgin Mosque and a "Medina student" who was imprisoned several times during his tenure,[54] is a relative of Alikhan Musayev. Along with Alikhan Musayev, Mubariz Garayev was also accused of radicalism by Gamat Suleymanov.[55]

In 2013, Adil Rajabov, whose relations with Gamat Suleymanov were not irreparably damaged then, tried to take control of Lezgin Mosque with his followers.[56] For a while he even succeeded. However, shortly thereafter, Adil Rajabov and his followers had to move away from Lezgin Mosque under pressure from Alikhan Musyaev[57] and his followers. It should be noted that Adil Rajabov was also detained several times by law enforcement.[58] Yet, subsequently, after Adil Rajabov, Alikhan

Musayev was also removed from the mosque by more radical Salafis. Finally, in 2016, the government closed the mosque, on a pretext similar to that used to close the nearby Shi'ite Juma Mosque a decade earlier, namely for renovation, and the Salafi community was removed from Lezgin Mosque.[59]

The Gobustan settlement near Baku was considered to be one of the places where Salafi propaganda had been particularly successful. The madrasah established by Uzeyir Simirov had a great impact on this process. Gobustan Settlement Mosque,[60] charged with radicalism by pro-government media outlets, was closed by the government at the end of July 2016.

One of the most interesting events in the wake of the closures of Salafi mosques took place in the Jorat settlement near Sumgayit. Zohrab Shikhaliyev, a local Salafi, opened his home for worshippers. In 2014, the prayer house was raided by police and closed on the grounds that the Salafis kept illegal guns and explosives there. Shikhaliyev was arrested[61] and the other Salafis claimed that they were subjected to physical abuse at the Sumgayit police department.[62] The strange thing about his arrest was that Zohrab Shikhaliyev was known to be a loyalist Salafi.[63] Gamat Suleymanov expressed his dissatisfaction concerning this arrest in the press.[64] After a while, Shikhaliyev was released despite a number of serious accusations and a short term in prison.

Currently, Salafis in Baku and its surroundings usually pray in mosques such as Ilahiyyat, Jeyranbatan, Garachukhur, Mushfigabad and Mehdiabad. Although none of the imams are officially Salafis, the majority of worshippers in most if not all these Sunni mosques are members of various Salafi groups, and overall they constitute the majority in almost all Sunni mosques Baku, Sumgayit and Absheron regions.

There is an anecdotal story about an incident at the newly

built, picturesque Heydar Mosque in Baku (named after the late third president, who was the father of the current head of the state). Salafis started gathering in this mosque for early morning prayers. When the administration of the mosque suddenly realized that Salafis had become the overwhelming majority of worshippers there, they suspended early morning prayers.

We can reasonably assume that the government will continue the process of closing mosques in Baku. In this respect, the most anticipated closure is of Ilahiyyat. Nevertheless, the SCWRA has repeatedly stated that Abu Bakr Mosque will be re-opened for worship.

The closure of Salafi places of worship took place not only in Baku and surrounding areas, but also in the regions. Regional Salafi places of worship began to be closed before the same policy was implemented in the capital.

Since the 1990s, Salafism spread widely in Sumgayit, the second largest city (by population) in the country. Salafism was initially spread there by Arab foundations, which supported refugees and IDPs. One of the first Salafis in Sumgayit, an IDP from the regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh who is currently in Suleymanov's group, said they were first taught about Salafism by an Egyptian teacher in the 1990s.[65] Behind the Narimanov club in Sumgayit the Arabs built a mosque in 1993-1994 which was used to give aid to the refugees. The Arabs distributed donations and taught religion. However, this mosque was closed by the government in 2001, and the Salafis in Sumgayit began to go to Abu Bakr Mosque. Currently, Jeyranbatan Mosque is thought to be the most common place for worship for Sumqayiti Salafis.

Because Ganja, unlike Baku and Sumgayit, is a more traditional city, the Salafis had more difficulties there in converting the local people. First, the attempt by the Salafis to strengthen their position in the central mosque of Ganja met

with serious resistance from the local Shi'ite population. Interestingly, though, the Salafis succeeded in gradually transforming the historical place of worship called "the Albanian church" into a Salafi stronghold. But in 2009, this place of worship was also closed by the government.[66] Currently, Ganja's Salafis attend the city's Qazakhlar Mosque.

One of the regions where Salafi proselytism was particularly successful was Zagatala in the north of the country. Among its many other initiatives in this region, the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society established a madrasa in Tala village in the early 1990s. Mukhakh village, which survived as a stronghold of Sunni Sufi Islam during Soviet atheism, became a hotbed of Salafism in post-Soviet period as well. Adil Rajabov is a native of this village.

A region heavily populated by ethnic minorities where Salafi propaganda is active is Gusar. Even though initially Salafism was spread in Gusar by Arabs, subsequently, due to its geographical closeness, Dagestan and its Russian-language literature became more influential in this region. However, religious radicalization and the government's administrative measures in response to this process led to the weakening of the first wave of the Salafism. Nevertheless, the events in Syria and Iraq have clearly highlighted the fact that a new internet-based and more conservative Salafism has been revived in Gusar.

Another interesting case in terms of successful Salafi proselytism was the Tartar region in one of the heartlands of local Shi'ism, namely Karabakh. It is believed that Salafism in Tartar was strengthened mainly due to the active proselytism of local Azerbaijanis who participated in the Chechen war. The region had its own jihadist group, which was dubbed "Karabakh Partisans" by law enforcement bodies, and some of its members were arrested.

Salafis compactly settled in communities surrounding their

mosques and built their own infrastructures of small shops and services to adjust the daily life of those neighborhoods to their religious views, as was the case in Jeyranbatan, Garachukhur, Mushfigabad, and other areas. Attempts to transform the neighborhood around Abu Bakr Mosque in Baku caused serious debate in the media and led the government to intervene with various official and informal resources to prevent the process.

An attempt to estimate the number of Salafis in Azerbaijan

It is difficult to know or even guess the number of Salafis in the country as there is no reliable data. There are only claims and approximate figures. For example, four years ago, Azerbaijani researcher Aydin Alizadeh claimed that 70,000 Salafis live in Azerbaijan.[67] However, two years later, the deputy chairman of the SCWRA stated that "there is a decline in the number of [Salafis]."[68] Yet, the committee official did not mention any number. In an article published in the United States, Kamal Gasimov, who is studying for a PhD at the University of Michigan, claimed that the number of Salafis in Azerbaijan was under 50,000.[69] The Salafi community activists whom we interviewed said that this figure is not less than 80,000, and they disagree with the claim of the SCWRA official concerning the decrease of the Salafis in Azerbaijan.

Mubariz Gurbanli, the current head of SCWRA, says that approximately five percent of the population of Azerbaijan attend mosques for Friday and holiday prayers and the rest perform religious duties at home.[70] In general, statistics provided by the Azerbaijani government are not reliable and even self-contradictory[71] since the numbers are altered in accordance with the political situation. However, if we take into consideration the facts that 1) the vast majority of the Salafis live in Baku and Sumgayit; 2) there is no significant gap between active Sunni and Shi'ite worshippers in these cities; and 3) the Salafi worshippers make up the majority in

Sunni mosques, despite the fact that many Salafi males refrain from going to mosques because of the possible pressure, we can conclude that overall number of Salafis in neighboring Baku, Sumgayit and Absheron regions reach several tens of thousands. If we add the Salafis in the regions, in some of which there are relatively big communities with a few thousand active members, we think that the number 80-100 thousand is not an exaggeration at all (Appendix 3).

Conclusion

In the late 1980s, Salafism in Azerbaijan began to spread through the teaching of Arab students, and then through the proselytism of Arabic organizations as well as influences from Russia. However, by the end of the 1990s, the Azerbaijani Salafis educated abroad took the lead in Salafi promotion and managed to be so successful that this version of Islam flourished and clearly became the fastest growing religion in the country in the 1990s and 2000s.

The emergence of jihadist Salafism since the late 1990s led to the first public conflict and fragmentation within the local community. Subsequently, due to many other causes, schisms and conflicts within the Salafi community deepened and the previously unified Salafi community was divided into various groups.

With the deportation of foreign proselytizers since 1996, the Azerbaijani government tried to prevent Salafi proselytism through increasingly harsh methods. Abu Bakr Mosque, the center of Salafism in Baku, was closed after the terrorist attack in 2008, and some other mosques and communities shared the same fate. However, it seems that hawkish style of the Azerbaijani government in its fight against Salafism has proven to be unproductive. The closure of the main mosque led to the weakening of moderate scholastic Salafism and the spread of political Salafism across the country. The radicalization of many members of the community was to some

extent the result of the oppressive policies of the government as well. The rising role of the internet combined with the government's unwise efforts to diminish the role in Salafi proselytism of the once strong Abu Bakr community contributed to this consequence as well. As a result, when violent jihadism in Iraq and Syria took hold, as the government admitted, thousands of Azeris, migrated to war zones. This showed that fertile ground for jihadi recruitment had formed in Azerbaijan. Jihadists easily turned the oppressive environment in Azerbaijan to their advantage. Brainwashed by jihadists through the internet and promised that they would be able to live freely according to their beliefs, many Salafi families migrated to ISIS-held areas. Stories of captured, killed, or executed Azerbaijani women poured in after the defeat of the ISIS. We will extensively discuss this topic in our next study on jihadist Salafism in Azerbaijan.

In the early 2000s, Shi'ism, which openly began its political opposition to the government by various civil methods, entered a renaissance period. Salafism, on the contrary, trapped between radicalization and obedience, lost its attractiveness and stagnated due to rejection of both options by wider public. And the processes after Arab spring, which led to the emergence of Adil Rajabov's group as the strongest creed within local Salafism, can be explained as an indication of activist Salafism's search for a way out of this trap.

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Appendix 1

Apart from the SRIH, dozens of other organizations of Arab origin came to the country. The most influential organizations in terms of spreading religion among them were the followings:

Al-Haramain Foundation – established in Pakistan in 1988, this charity organization moved to Saudi Arabia in 1992 to continue its activities. Under the US pressure, the Riyadh-based organization was officially abolished by the Saudi King in

2004. The activities of the organization in Azerbaijan were suspended by the state in January, 2000. One of the leaders of this organization in Azerbaijan was a Jordanian named Muhammed Ali, who was a prominent propagandist in Dagestan and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s. There was also a special Caucasian branch operated within al-Haramain.

International Islamic Relief Organization– acting on the basis of the official agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Azerbaijan.[i] The organization had played a significant role in the construction of refugee camps and humanitarian aid during the Karabakh War. This humanitarian organization, of which employees were Salafism and Brotherhood oriented people, helped many young Azeris to study in Saudi Arabia and return to Azerbaijan. One of its employees "was arrested on terrorism charges in Canada in 1999 after having flown there from Baku."[ii] The office of the organization operated in Azerbaijan until 2010.[iii] The last head of the Baku office Saad al Ahmari was deported from Azerbaijan after having troubles with state authorities.

World Assembly of Muslim Youth – established in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 1972, the organization operates in 56 countries. The organization, of which goals are humanitarian aid, education, the promotion of the Holy Quran and the promotion of Islam to non-Muslims, has a close relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia[iv] as well as the government affiliated religious-political organizations. The organization was accused of supporting terrorist organizations by some Western countries. According to our sources, the organization still maintains inoperative office in Baku.

Asia Muslim Committee, Kuwait – humanitarian organization under the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs of Kuwait.[v] This organization is mainly under the control of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) and it continues its activities in Azerbaijan.

Qatar Charity – humanitarian organization of Qatar state. In 2002, the Society, which was helping the construction of mosques, Islamic centers, science and healthcare facilities in Azerbaijan, was suspended by the decision of the Ministry of Justice of Azerbaijan on the grounds that it promotes radical sectarianism, religious hatred and fanaticism through cooperation with terrorist organizations. Another Qatari fund **Eid Charity** founded in 1995 was active in Azerbaijan as well and left the country in early 2000s.

"**Dar al Ber Society**" – this charity society was established in 1979 by the order of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor of the United Arab Emirates. The official head of the organization was Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the vice president and the prime minister of the United Arab Emirates as well as the mayor of the City of Dubai. Since 1994, the organization had operated in Azerbaijan both as Salafist proselytist and a charity society. In 2014, the government of Azerbaijan suddenly put pressure on the society and closed it.[vi]

At the same period of time, that is, in the 1990s, few organizations from Egypt and Sudan, along with other groups from the Gulf States, carried out Salafi propaganda in Baku.

[i]https://azertag.az/xeber/BEYNALXALQ_XEYRIYYA_TASKILATININ_NUMAYANDALARI_BAKIDA-797483 , accessed 20 June 2018

[ii] International Crisis Group (ICG), *Azerbaijan*: *Independent Islam and the State*, *25 March 2008, Europe Report N°191,* https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/191-azerbaijan-independent-islam-and-the-state.pdf , accessed 20 June 2018

[iii] http://qmkdk.gov.az/images/all/file/TESHKILATLAR%20Siyahi%202010.pdf , accessed 20 June 2018

[iv] http://qmkdk.gov.az/images/all/file/TESHKILATLAR%20Siyahi%2020

10.pdf , accessed 20 June 2018

[v] http://newtimes.az/en/diplomatik/4958/ , accessed 20 June 2018

[vi] http://musavat.com/news/g%C3%BCnd%C9%99m/Bak%C4%B1dak%C4%B1-v%C9%99hhabi-fondunda-q%C9%99fil-yoxlama-v%C9%99-h%C9%99bsl%C9%99r_210795.html?fb_locale=ru_RU , accessed 20 June 2018

Appendix 2 – Some of the Salafi Online Media

Adil Rajabov's followers

ixlasla.com

Azərbaycan dilində elm tələbələrinin xütbə və dərsləri [lessons and sermons of the "students

of knowledge" in Azerbaijani]

http://ixlasla.com/

ixlasla.com (YouTube channel)

https://www.youtube.com/user/ixlasla

Fəqih.com

http://www.feqih.com/

Azərislam.com

http://www.azerislam.com/

Tovhid.info

http://tovhid.info/

Feqihtube (YouTube channel)

https://www.youtube.com/user/feqihtube?sub_confirmation=1

Sən Xatırlat (YouTube channel)

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0Ekc_EF2ksm_1DOj4K9rxw

Muslih Tv

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZ44ZEvZFm49jWCZibQ-P4w

Gamat Suleymanov's followers

Abu Bakr mosque

https://abubakr-mescidi.com/

Abu Bakr mosque (YouTube channel)

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr5T4t-3PetpQ1BJ-VqNJsw

Sələfin Fəhmi ilə (YouTube channel)

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UClSqdMbs6itErCvTZ-IFhog/featured

Salaf Xabar [Salafi News]

Azərbaycan İslami Araşdırmalar və Xəbər Portalı [Azerbaijan Islamic Studies and News

Portal]

http://selefxeber.az/ and https://www.youtube.com/user/selefxeber

as-Sahih.com

əhli Sünnə vəl-Camaat

http://as-sahih.com

As-Sahih Dini paylaşımlar kanalı (Telegram) [As-Sahih Religious Channel]

https://t.me/AsSahih

As-Sahih

Sələfi elm tələbələrin dərsləri [Salafi "students of knowledge" lessons] (YouTube channel)

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFcni7NGJS9aitV7_ftsoXA

Yaşar Süleymanlının youtube kanalı [Yashar Suleymanli's, brother of Gamat Suleymanov,

YouTube channel]

https://www.youtube.com/user/yasharsuleymanli

Alikhan Musayev's followers

Burhan.az

https://www.youtube.com/user/burhanaznet/feed

Fecr TV

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiOEY2q1Aj7POtZ9BTlP2ew

Others

Fatvalar.com

http://fatvalar.com/

Fatvalar.com (YouTube channel)

https://www.youtube.com/user/fatvalar

Appendix 3

The number of Salafis in each region is approximately calculated based on the statements of our Salafis as well as the non-Salafis interlocutors

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