

Azerbaijani Shi'i Believers in Moscow

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Today Russia's capital [is home to](#) more than 500.000 Azerbaijanis. Although a significant portion of Azerbaijanis are labor migrants, most of them continue to make their homes in Russia by obtaining Russian citizenship. The 500.000 are, of course, the official figures, but it is likely more Azerbaijanis live in Russia. Moscow still remains one of the main destinations Azerbaijanis immigrate to in search of work.

Religiosity among Azerbaijanis in Moscow has been growing rapidly in recent years. Apart from the several [mosques](#) currently operating in this metropolitan city, there are prayer rooms and Hussainiyas (congregation halls), which are mainly attended by Shi'i Azerbaijanis.

Azerbaijanis mainly conduct their religious ceremonies and prayers in about 10 mosques and Hussainiyas in Moscow. In an interview with Azerbaijani media in 2019, Nizami Baloglanov, Chairman of Ahl al-Beyt Society operating in Moscow, said that every year about [20.000](#) believers participate in the mourning ceremonies for Muharram.

There are also many Sunni Azerbaijani believers in Moscow. However, because they, unlike Shi'i Azerbaijanis, worship in mosques across Moscow, in the initial years, there was no need for them to organize themselves and create a separate place of worship as the Shi'i community has done. Only in recent years have Sunni Azerbaijanis created a number of organizations addressed to their co-nationals.

The first religious activities conducted by Azerbaijanis in Moscow and steps towards their organization

Azerbaijanis began their religious activity in Moscow mainly

in the mid-1990s, that is, a few years after the fall of the USSR. However, in the early years, religious orientation was fragmented. Simply giving religious freedom encouraged Muslims to go to mosques. For example, Haji Natig, who has lived in Moscow for 37 years, says that in the first years when religious freedom was granted, Muslims used to go to the mosque to pray together with Central Asians, but later, after learning about sectarian differences, he and his friends started to come together and pray separately as Shi'is. At that time, Azerbaijanis had neither their own clerics nor religious organizations in Moscow.[\[i\]](#)

The Moscow Ahl al-Bayt Society, the first religious organization of Azerbaijanis in the city, [was founded](#) in 1996. The chairman of the organization is Musa Gurbanov. In that same period, clergyman Nizami Baloghlanov, who relocated from Baku to Moscow, also began religious activities, and in 2001, he founded and headed a religious organization with the similar name Ahl al-Bayt. However, neither man had much of a religious education.

After the Tatars' Inam Mosque was opened in 1999, one of the prayer halls of the mosque was allotted to Azerbaijanis. A controversy about this mosque, begun at the time of construction, continues to this day. Although the mosque was built by Rashid Beyazid, a Tatar resident of Moscow, local Azerbaijanis claim that they helped fund its construction. There have even been allegations that the Azerbaijani late ex-president Ayaz Mutallibov and the former prosecutor of Baku Mammad Guliyev financially supported the construction of the mosque.[\[ii\]](#)

Apart from their activity at the Inam Mosque, during the 2000s, Azerbaijanis performed unofficial activities in the main mosque of the Moscow Muftiate located near Prospekt Mira metro station; more precisely, the Mufti reserved the prayer hall in the basement of the mosque for Azerbaijanis.

In the following years, religious activity in Moscow increased. In the early 2000s, young Azerbaijani clerics who received religious education in Azerbaijan, Iran and Syria began to arrive in Moscow. The new clergy strengthened proselytism among Azerbaijanis in Moscow.

In 2003, Haji Matlab Bagir, who studied in Syria, and in the following years, theologian Rashid Talibov arrived in Moscow and began preaching. Haji Matlab, who soon gained serious influence, became one of the leaders of the religious community. He expanded his activities in Moscow, published a magazine called *Salam*. In 2008 he became involved in the internet media by buying *Interaz* TV channel.

Since 2010, the activity of Muslims in Moscow has become more noticeable. During this period, as a result of the warming of relations between Iran and Russia and the increase in the number of religious people in Moscow, a representation of Iran's supreme religious leader and the Moscow Islamic Center were established. Sabir Akbari of Ardabil was appointed the representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader in Moscow.

It should be noted that in the early 2000s, the office of the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani, who lived in Najaf, Iraq, opened its doors in Moscow. Sheikh Mohammadali Mosuli, Ayatollah Sistani's representative in Moscow, previously worked in Baku, but as a result of the conflict between him on one side and local Azerbaijani authorities as well as Iran's representative in Baku on the other, he left Azerbaijan and [settled in Moscow](#).

In the following years Haji Matlab and Haji Rashid left Moscow for Azerbaijan. A little later, Azerbaijani believers were expelled from the Prospekt Mira Mosque and Inam Mosque, and Azerbaijani Shiites began to gather mainly in three Hussainiyas located in Moscow's different districts.

This was followed by the establishment of several new religious institutions for Azerbaijanis in Moscow. [These](#)

[included](#) the Moscow representation of *Jamia-tul-Mustafa* (al-Mustafa University) operating in Iran, the representation of Ayatollah Sistani currently headed by Sheikh Mohammadali Mosuli's son Mehdi, and the Georgian Azerbaijanis' Hussainiya, which has already ceased to exist due to financial limitations.

At present, in addition to three main Hussainiyas belonging to Azerbaijani Shi'is and the five officially registered societies in Moscow, religious teaching and worship services are carried out in separate districts of the city and around them, mostly in homes or small offices.

Among them, the largest place of worship is the Moscow Islamic Center, which was established by the Iranian government in 2012. Since 2014, it [has been operating](#) in a building located in Moscow's Altufyevskoe district.

Since 2013, the center [had been headed](#) by cleric Hojjat al-Islam Sabir Akbari Jiddi, an Iranian citizen. In 2023, he was replaced by Hojjat al-Islam Bakhtavar. These people are also considered to be representatives of the Iranian Supreme Leader in Moscow.

The center is mainly visited by Azerbaijanis. Some Russians who converted to Islam also visit this center. Two-three thousand people gather there for Friday prayers. But more believers gather for Eid prayers, special days and Muharram gatherings. Clergy popular among Azerbaijanis, and sometimes well-known preachers invited from Iran, give speeches in the center. The Moscow Islamic Center is the most popular of the Shi'i places of worship in the city.

Another large, popular and officially registered place of worship is the Fatima al-Zahra Hussainiya, also known as the Moscow Shi'i Religious Organization, headed by theologian Famil Jafarov. It is a two-story building consisting of a common place of worship and classrooms. Quranic recitation, history of Islam, Aqeedah (Islamic Theology) and Ahkam

(Islamic Rulings) lessons are taught in this Hussainiya; Friday prayers are held and daily gatherings organized throughout the months of Muharram and Ramadan. About 200 people attend Friday prayers, and 500-600 people attend Eid prayers.

Famil Jafarov was born on 20 February 1968 in the village of Digah, Lankaran District. In 1993, he graduated from the Azerbaijani Polytechnic Institute (now Technical University). In the same year, he moved to Moscow, and in 1995, as a Russian citizen, he went to Iran and began studying in the city of Qom. In 2004, he finished his studies and returned to Moscow. In 2004, he founded an organization called the Islamic Theological Center. In November 2007, he registered a Shi'i religious organization, the Moscow Shi'i Religious Organization, at the Russian Ministry of Justice. Within three years of January 2005, under his editorship, a newspaper, *Iman*, was published in Azerbaijani and Russian languages. Currently, the newspaper is mainly available on the Internet and social networks.

Jafarov says that from time to time he expressed his attitude on religious issues and the arrests of Shi'i clergy in Azerbaijan, but his comments were twisted in Azerbaijan and used by the state propaganda against him. The main attacks against him started in 2011, when clergy in Azerbaijan protested the arrest of Haji Zulfugar Mikayilzade at an event organized in Moscow. However, according to him, his speech was taken out of context and portrayed as anti-state. However, he did not do anything against the state, on the contrary his Fatimiya Hussainiya celebrated Azerbaijan's national days and regularly commemorated tragic events of 20 January 1990, the Khojaly tragedy of 1992 as well as martyrs of Karabakh and the days of occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia. However, he continued criticizing the arrest of religious people in Azerbaijan. He considers it his duty as a Shi'i cleric.[\[iii\]](#)

According to Jafarov, members of the community used to assemble in the mosques located at Otradnoye district of Moscow and Prospekt Mira. However, in 2016-2018, after being expelled from both mosques, Azerbaijanis mobilized wealthy community members and bought the current building, turning it into a worship and educational center.[\[iv\]](#)

Another worship center Azerbaijanis have instituted in Moscow is the Imam Sajjad (a.s.) Hussainiya. Haji Yasin Aliyev is head of this organization, which was officially created and registered in 2016 and imam (prayer leader) of the Hussainiya. This is the newest religious organization operating in Moscow.

Another Shi'i religious organization operating in Moscow is the abovementioned Ahl al-Bayt Russian Islamic Society led by Nizami Baloglanov. It first opened in 1996 and was officially registered in 2002. Baloglanov is recognized as a respected elder of Azerbaijani religious figures in Moscow. Since the group has no place of worship at the moment, Baloglanov mostly attends gatherings and gives speeches at the Moscow Islamic Center and other Hussainiyas. Previously, he served at the Inam mosque near Prospekt Mira and Otradnoye metro station. However, in 2016, after the confrontation between Salafis and Shi'is during the Muharram ceremonies in Juma Mosque, located on Prospekt Mira, Azerbaijanis [were expelled](#) from both Juma and Inam in the same year by order of Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin of Russia. According to Baloglanov, his society has had no place of worship since then, and even though they addressed a [letter](#) to the President of Russia as well as to the Chairman of the Caucasus Muslim Board Sheikh al-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, they received no response. For this reason, he currently has no fixed address or house of worship, so for community prayers he goes to different homes, participates in cafe gatherings, and attends Hussainiyas on significant days. Baloglanov said that in 2019 as the chairman of the oldest Shi'i organization of Azerbaijanis in Moscow, he was awarded the Medal for Religious Solidarity for his efforts toward unity among Muslims in Russia. He claimed The Ahl al-Bayt organization is

the only Azerbaijani Shi'i organization among the 35 religious communities that are members of the Moscow Muslim Board.[\[v\]](#)

Religious figures who recently moved from Azerbaijan to Moscow serve in the locations for prayer mentioned above alongside with those Azerbaijanis have lived in the city for a long time and Iranian clerics. One of those recently arrived men is Haji Zulfugar Mikayilzade, who has a history of multiple arrests in Azerbaijan. He decided to move to Moscow shortly after he was released in 2020 on amnesty. He justified his decision to move with the fact that after his release from prison, he no longer had the opportunity to work as a Shi'i cleric in Azerbaijan. He also complains that he had no opportunity in Baku to make speeches consistent with his beliefs. In particular, he notes that his speeches about an Iranian religious leader were used against him in Baku. He mentions that Ayatollah Khamenei is a mujtahid and a spiritual leader, an opinion not well accepted by official Baku. However, Haji Zulfugar says that the tension in Azerbaijan-Iran relations is artificial and that relations will soon improve. However, even if the situation changes, he has not considered returning to Baku. He intends to stay in Moscow if possible. He further says conditions for Azerbaijanis in Russia are normal, that there are opportunities to live and perform religious duties here, adding that the people here are interested in religion. At present, he gives lessons and delivers sermons at the Hussainiyas for Azerbaijanis in Moscow. According to him, Moscow authorities do not create problems, but since he does not have citizenship, he faces certain restrictions in his activities.[\[vi\]](#)

It should be noted that Sunni Azerbaijanis in Moscow do not feel a strong need to organize themselves and create places of worship along national lines because they could easily pray in any mosque in Moscow and mingle with local Sunni religious communities. Several Azerbaijani Sunni organizations have appeared in Moscow only in recent years. Examples include religious societies such as Medina and Kovsar. However, these

societies are not entirely made up of Azerbaijanis; Sunni believers of other nationalities are also welcome in these organizations. Recent years have seen a growing number of Turkish companies and businessmen in Moscow accompanied by the emergence of prayer halls in large companies as well as of Turkish-centric jamaats (congregations). Some of the Azerbaijanis who are close to the jamaats or work for these companies have joined their congregations.

Conclusion

In recent years, religion has become particularly visible as one of the main unifying elements among Azerbaijani migrants. The comparatively better financial opportunities of Moscow migrants, as well as the absence of serious restrictions in the regulation of religious life compared with Azerbaijan, have created more favorable conditions for religious activity among Azerbaijanis in Russia. For this reason, since the early 2000s, there has been a rapid increase in religiosity among Azerbaijanis living in the Russian capital.

My interlocutors attribute the absence of serious state pressure on the religious activities of Shi'i Azerbaijanis currently active in Russia to the warm relations between Iran and Russia. However, Azerbaijani believers also note the warm relations between Moscow and Baku. The believers, including religious leaders in Moscow who are dissatisfied with the Azerbaijani authorities, know very well that Baku has the power to extradite those who make harsh statements against the Azerbaijani authorities. Nevertheless, they still claim that there is more freedom for religious activity in Moscow than in Azerbaijan and that financial opportunities are much greater; and therefore, religious communities grow and interact more easily.

However, unlike in Azerbaijan, there is no single large religious community or single center in Moscow for Azerbaijani Muslims: believers are scattered and divided for various

reasons. The lack of religious figures with unifying authority and the absence of a relatively large mosque to act as a common center, have contributed to this fragmentation as well.

Notes and references:

[\[i\]](#) Interview with Haji Natig, May 2023

[\[ii\]](#) Interview with local believers, May 2023

[\[iii\]](#) Interview with Famil Jafarov, May 2023

[\[iv\]](#) Ibid

[\[v\]](#) Interview with Nizami Baloghlanov, May 2023

[\[vi\]](#) Interview with Haji Zulfugar, May 2023