

# Muslim Believers in Azerbaijani Prisons

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Among the political prisoners of Azerbaijan, religious believers have for a long time been the majority. According to the latest list of the Working Group on Political Prisoners, 49 out of the 70 current political prisoners were arrested because of their religious beliefs.<sup>[i]</sup> When this list is updated in the autumn, this figure is expected to increase due to the arrests of many believers during the 2018 Ganja incidents.<sup>[ii]</sup> Imprisoned believers, however, are not limited to prisoners of conscience. Among them are religious citizens imprisoned for other crimes, members of various terrorist and radical groups, and most importantly, new believers who have started to regularly follow religious practices during their imprisonment. Unfortunately, quite a few of these new believers also join radical groups.

The worsening of this problem has attracted the government's attention, and as a result, the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), together with the Penitentiary Service, decided to implement a series of measures against radicalism among believers. According to its 2016 report, the SCWRA organized 30 such educational events.<sup>[iii]</sup>

The effectiveness of this work, however, is dubious. These events look rather like the formal and unsuccessful atheism lessons of the *Knowledge Society* during Soviet times. Until the *Knowledge Society*<sup>[iv]</sup> was dissolved,<sup>[v]</sup> the SCWRA collaborated with it.<sup>[vi]</sup> Taking into consideration the advice of experts, the SCWRA involved prominent religious figures such as Haji Shahin Hasanli in this process, which led to increased interest among believers in such educational events.

However, according to our interlocutors among former political prisoners, Salafis and politically active influential Shi'i clerics in prison are critical of these formal meetings. Some believers refuse to go to such meetings even though they know that they will be punished with solitary confinement.<sup>[vii]</sup> Most importantly, sometimes the officials of the Penitentiary Service do not treat such educational activities as their priority and try to fill the meeting halls with those prisoners who are in collaboration with them. As a result, the process becomes formal and inefficient.

All this led Baku Research Institute (BRI) to prepare this article, which is based on the impressions and evaluations of former secular political prisoners, and should be seen as a preliminary step rather than a comprehensive investigation.<sup>[viii]</sup> Nevertheless, we believe that this article can be an indispensable source of information about the problem for future researchers.

### **Attitude to Religion in Prisons**

From the memories of former political prisoners, it appears that religion has a special place in prison. A religious affiliation allows prisoners to receive various forms of support. Some ordinary felons also find it helpful to join religious groups for protection. For example, the memories of former political prisoner Rashadat Akhundov about one incident involving Zaur Gurbanli, another former political prisoner, suggest that since believers are accepted as "good guys" among criminal circles, stealing from them is considered wrong.<sup>[ix]</sup>

Being an atheist, on the contrary, at best is perceived as a deficiency in need of correction. Nevertheless, although most non-religious prisoners are sympathetic to, or cautious in their treatment of, believers (mainly Shi'is), approximately 5-10% of prisoners are rather skeptical and have a negative attitude towards them. Minor verbal quarrels sometimes occur

between religious and non-religious groups. Both sides, however, try to avoid major conflicts.

## **Reasons Behind the Success**

The government policy against religious radicalism has not had any serious results and the main reason behind this ineffectiveness is the official authorities themselves. Contrary to the shared beliefs of the officials, when imprisoned believers who are considered radical face physical and emotional violence as well as inhumane treatment, they become more radical. In particular, believers who joined ISIS and fought in Syria and Iraq, along with ISIS sympathizers, face harsh treatment from the prison administration directly or indirectly from the first day of their imprisonment. Those who are believed to be more dangerous are considered "potential escapees" by the instructions of the State Security Service (SSS) and are required to report for special registration every hour. Sometimes visiting relatives of imprisoned religious radicals are interrogated or even detained. [\[x\]](#)

Generally speaking, the Salafis' active propaganda is not ignored by the prison administration. Frequently such proselytizers are punished. Those who later join Salafi extremist groups are also subjected to physical and psychological pressure by the prison officials. Due to the general dissatisfaction of prisoners with the government as well as the prison administration, a significant proportion of them have sympathy towards those who are persecuted in prisons.

As the prison regime toughens, the possibility of radicalization among non-religious prisoners also increases. It is no coincidence that those prisoners who are temporarily sent to the Gobustan Closed Prison usually return to their medium security detention facilities as members of radical Salafi groups. As a result, the general opinion among

prisoners is that the government indirectly creates favorable conditions for the alleged radicals to advocate their faith.<sup>[xi]</sup> For example, according to some prisoners who returned to medium security detention facilities from the Gobustan Closed Prison, there is a rumor that the administration of the Gobustan Closed Prison places Salafis in the same cells with ordinary felons. Then the proportion of prisoners in the cells is in favor of radical believers, for example, each cell might have two Salafis and one non-religious prisoner. As a result, many non-religious prisoners accept Salafism thanks to the propaganda of their cellmates.

There are some objective reasons behind the success of proselytization among non-religious prisoners by organized religious groups. For example, one of the main reasons is related to the social and financial circumstances of prisoners. Compared to many other prisoners, organized believers receive financial support more regularly from outside, thus, their financial situation is much better than most non-religious prisoners. This can be said of both Salafi and Shi'i believers. Because of the financial support provided by believers to non-religious convicts, many prisoners become closer to them. Believers also give financial support to poor prisoners, who cannot receive money from their families, which also increases the believers' popularity and respect among the other prisoners. This behavior of the believers creates a sharp contrast to the inadequate and often unjust acts of the prison officials. Nevertheless, it is also known that not all converts continue their religious commitment or their relationship with these religious groups after they are released.

Nevertheless, the number of convicts who become religious in prison is quite high. In fact, although the financial support is not so large, community spirit and its moral support have a great impact on people as it makes them feel relatively secure. One reason non-religious convicts become close to

believers is apparently the despair of prisoners and their lack of confidence in the present socio-political situation in the country, which leads them to seek justice elsewhere, such as from a deity, and to accept the believers' invitation as a solution. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that poorly educated prisoners sometimes fall under the influence of believers who often have strong rhetorical skills and the ability to persuade.

Based on their conversations with young people who became religious in prison, our interviewees got the impression that the secular general education system in Azerbaijan is experiencing a period of serious decline. Nevertheless, the main factors behind this increasing religiosity, as well as radicalization among convicts, are poor prison conditions, inhumane treatment and torture conducted by prison officials, and a weakening of trust in the integrity and fairness of the government due to extensive corruption of the prisons and the courts.

### **Who are the Believers?**

Only a small group of religious prisoners have been imprisoned for their involvement with radical religious movements. The majority are religious people who have been imprisoned for other crimes and quite a few of them have joined various religious groups while in prison. For instance, approximately 30-35% of the 1,100 prisoners in Penitentiary #13 joined such groups.<sup>[xii]</sup> The situation was similar in Penitentiary #2.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

### **Salafis<sup>[xiv]</sup>**

Most of the Salafis have been imprisoned for radical religious activity. While many of them have been arrested for their involvement with ISIS, the second largest group of Salafis are those who have been arrested because of their religious propaganda in the northern regions of Azerbaijan. There are conflicts between different Salafi groups in prison. Even many

radicals who have been arrested because of their relations with ISIS do not have a good relationship with one another. There is a relatively small number of Salafis arrested upon their return from fighting in Syria who claim that they came back because the fighting in Syria was not in line with their beliefs.

The majority of Salafis who became religious in prison do not have a positive attitude towards ISIS. Individuals from the Sunni regions of Azerbaijan and those who became religious in prison form separate groups rather than joining the groups of Salafis who have been arrested primarily for religious extremist activities. Members of other Sunni denominations generally stay away from Salafis.

In general, many prisoners are initially very cautious in their treatment of Salafis due to the latter's radical behavior and extreme speeches as well as their intolerance of secularism and opposing views. However, as time goes by, quite a few of them approach Salafis and join their ranks.

According to former political prisoner Tofiq Yagublu, radical religious groups actively engage in propaganda against the reading of non-religious literature in libraries and even vandalize such books, rendering them useless, when they see them in the hands of their new group members. [\[xv\]](#)

Radical Salafis express more unconventional opinions by saying that they do not recognize the secular state, its laws and attributes, and that their goal is to establish an Islamic Caliphate. Shii's, on the other hand, do not have a unanimous approach on this issue. While some say that they are for the establishment of an Iranian-type theocratic state, others say they support a secular state which includes Shi'i religious norms. However, virtually all Shi'i believers are sympathetic to the Islamic Republic of Iran. [\[xvi\]](#)

***Shi'is*** [\[xvii\]](#)

The largest group in prisons, as in the country as a whole, is Shi'is. There is also a large group of Shi's who became religious in prison. Unlike Sunnis, Shi'is use prison mosques more regularly and hold religious gatherings there. The Shi'i clerics who studied abroad are the most respected among the Shi'i believers. The prison administrations are also mostly sympathetic and lenient towards Shi'i believers. Nevertheless, those Shi'i believers who are sympathetic to famous Shi'i political prisoners such as Tale Baghirzadeh and Abgul Suleymanov, both officially considered radicals, are immediately noticed, and psychologically or physically pressured by the authorities.

Moreover, if other Shi'is openly express their social or political opinions, they immediately face pressure from prison officials. A young Shi'i cleric, who complained in the prison mosque about the high prices in prison of goods such as tea, was beaten by the deputy chief and held for 15 days in solitary confinement. Because of such treatment, Shi'i believers are not usually inclined to speak about such things. Many prisoners attend the Quran reading courses and other religious lessons organized by Shi'i clerics. Unlike Salafi and other Sunnis, the Shi'i believers tend to participate in educational meetings organized by the authorities, if clerics that they know and respect are invited. According to Ilkin Rustamzadeh, sometimes at these meetings interesting discussions occur. For example, at one meeting in which Haji Shahin Hasanli participated, a respected Shia convict asked the cleric to support the battle against corruption in the penitentiary system.

According to the former political prisoners, it seems that as a result of government policy, Ayatollah al-Uzma Sistani's books on *fiqh* are widely distributed among Shi'i believers in prisons. Probably, many followers (*muqallids*) of other *mujtahids*, especially Ali Khamenei, introduce themselves as followers of Sistani in order to avoid potential problems. Nevertheless, the number of genuine followers of Sistani is

not small. There are also some dogmatic debates over the issue of *Wilayati Faqih* between the followers of Sistani and Khamenei. However, Shi'i believers tend to react jointly against critical views of other prisoners against Shi'i *mujtahids*. Although they show sympathy for arrested Shi'i clerics, they do not publicly reveal it because, as noted above, prison administrations treat the believers who do harshly.

### **Sunni-Shia Relations**

Penitentiary #13 has a mosque for around 400 people and Sunni-Shi'i believers enter the mosque separately for collective, Friday, and Eid prayers. Other than growing a beard, the believers are provided with the opportunity to carry out their religious practices, including fasting.

There is serious competition between Shi'i and Salafi believers over attracting more prisoners to their ranks. It must be admitted that Salafis are more active in proselytization, and those who join them usually soon also become proselytizers themselves. According to our interlocutors, an increasing tension between Salafis and Shi'is could be observed when they were watching TV news reports about military operations in Syria and Iraq in 2015. When ISIS gained new territories, Salafis – and when it lost them, Shi'is – loudly uttered, "Allahu Akbar." A former political prisoner Tofiq Yagublu said that once there was a serious confrontation between Salafi and Shi'i groups in which the government had to send troops to the prison to suppress it.<sup>[xviii]</sup> However, it is clear from the observations of the political prisoners that usually the majority of prisoners tend to avoid conflicts because the consequences of a conflict can be severe. If conflict occurs, it means that there is a serious reason.

Many Shi'i worshipers are invited to cooperate with the prison administrations to put pressure on Salafis and imprisoned ISIS



members. From our interviews with a few former political prisoners, it appears that the prison administrations usually use the Salafi-Shi'i antagonism for their own purposes. On the other hand, it seems that since the prison officials are unable to prevent religious propaganda, they prefer Shi'i proselytizers over Salafi ones. In some cases, as a result of religious propaganda, Shi'is and Salafis also convert each other's adherents.

Although our interviewees did not specifically point out the existence of this issue in prison, the government skillfully uses Salafi propaganda against Shi'is outside of prison. It seems that the exploitation of the potential of Salafi-Shi'i antagonism is the most effective method used by the authorities in the religious sphere.

## **Discussion**

From the statements of the secular political prisoners we interviewed, it appears that the religious situation in prison is a reflection of the general situation in Azerbaijan on a small scale and under more difficult conditions. The arrests of political prisoners who have intellectual capabilities and adequate education, while it sounds strange, gave them an opportunity to independently evaluate the religious situation in prisons. Undoubtedly, most secular political prisoners were able to obtain their first direct and substantial information about the place of Islam and believers in society during their imprisonment. While the situation in prison approximately coincides with the situation in the country as a whole, it was as if the secular political prisoners had encountered a somewhat different religious situation. Outside of prisons they could have witnessed the religious realities of the country only by chance due to rare and irregular contacts with believers' communities, but here they were in direct, regular communication with believers and it left a deeper impression.

The main conclusion of the article is that the government's

educational lectures aiming to combat radicalism in prisons has a minimal effect. Similar lectures held across the country, outside the prisons are also ineffective. Unfortunately, such formal, ineffective, or even somewhat counterproductive methods are being expanded; in other words, the state budget is being spent inefficiently. The only thing that prevents the escalation of this problem is the use of arbitrary power by the authoritarian state. However, it would be an illusion to think that this policy can bring about an effective solution. As we know from the experience of the Soviet past, such approaches conserve rather than solve the problem, which can erupt again if the authoritarian state is weakened somehow.

Preventing the spread of radicalism in prisons is possible by eliminating the main causes that stimulate it and by making efforts in that direction. These causes are the poor conditions and corruption in prisons, the abuse of prisoners by prison officials, and the scale of the injustice in the judicial system. In general, the most effective results in combating radicalism in the country can be achieved through increasing the well-being of the population and substantial improvements in the implementation of the rule of law.

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<sup>[iii]</sup><https://report.az/din/dini-qurumlarla-i-s-uzre-dovlet-komite-sinde-oten-ilin-yekunlari/>

<sup>[iv]</sup> After the Soviet era, a namesake organization was established based on the *Knowledge Society*.

<sup>[v]</sup> <https://president.az/articles/31521>

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<http://www.scwra.gov.az/az/view/news/5167/kurdemirde-dini-radi-kalizmle-mubarizede-birge-fealiyyetin-teshkili-ve-ehemiyyeti-movzusunda-konfrans-kechirilib>

<sup>[vii]</sup> From our interview with former political prisoner Rasul Jafarov

<sup>[viii]</sup> We thank all former political prisoners that agreed for an interview by BRI. We especially want to express our gratitude to Ilkin Rustamzadeh and Anar Mammadli for their written contributions, and Giyas Ibrahim and Rashadat Akhundov for their valuable input in the review process.

<sup>[ix]</sup> From our interview with former political prisoner Zaur Gurbanli and Rashadat Akhundov

<sup>[x]</sup> From the notes of former political prisoner Ilkin Rustamzadeh for BRI.

<sup>[xi]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[xii]</sup> From the notes of former political prisoner Anar Mammadli for BRI.

<sup>[xiii]</sup> From our interviews with a few former political prisoners.

<sup>[xiv]</sup> For more about Salafism in Azerbaijan, see <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/a-brief-history-of-salafism->

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[xv]

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[xvi] From the notes of former political prisoner Anar Mammadli and Ilkin Rustamzadeh for BRI.

[xvii] For more about Shias in Azerbaijan, see [https://brill.com/view/journals/jre/14/3-4/article-p392\\_9.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/jre/14/3-4/article-p392_9.xml)

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