Why was Ashura observed over two days in Azerbaijan this year?

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The first major public excitement around Ashura in Azerbaijan since the 1930s happened 10 years ago, in 2015. That year, massive processions were organized in Baku, its suburbs, and cities such as Lankaran, Ganja, and Barda, drawing thousands of religious participants. However, in 2015, law enforcement agencies, claiming to be combating terrorism and extremism, carried out an operation in Nardaran – a village near Baku considered a major Shia religious center – which resulted in several deaths. Against this backdrop, a number of well-known Shia clerics in other parts of the country were also arrested.

In subsequent years, laws were tightened and a special law On Combating Religious Extremism was passed, introducing strict restrictions on Muharram commemorations. Displaying religious slogans and symbols in public places outside of houses of worship was banned, as was placing religious flags outside of mosques, religious centers, and administrative premises. New laws also limited children's participation in religious ceremonies. Schools started enforcing various formal and informal bans on students attending Ashura and Muharram gatherings in mosques. Even small details like displaying religious slogans on private vehicles were prohibited under these restrictions. Penalties for violations were also stiffened, with various punishments introduced for individuals and legal entities who broke these rules. As a result, Ashura and Muharram commemorations in Azerbaijan became confined to mosque courtyards only. Holding mourning gatherings, processions, or displaying religious symbols in public spaces was effectively prevented.

Other changes in religious policy gave the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) increased authority, including control over clerical appointments. This has led to the removal or attempted removal of some prominent Shia clerics from their mosque positions. Additionally, in recent years, against the backdrop of increasingly strained relations with Iran, many Shia believers have been arrested on various charges.

It is worth noting that these restrictions in Azerbaijan come even as in neighboring post-Soviet republics – such as Georgia or Russia's Republic of Dagestan – the Muharram and Ashura ceremonies, processions, and gatherings of local Azerbaijanis have been expanding. However, despite discontent among believers about the Azerbaijani government's strict policies, these restrictions have not produced open or large-scale protests. And participation in Ashura gatherings has been steadily declining in recent years.

In this context, this year the government went even further and introduced a new innovation. On June 23, 2025, as usual, the Council of Qadis of the Caucasus Muslims Board (CMB) – the highest centralized body of Muslim religious communities in Azerbaijan – issued its fatwa (a legal opinion authored by a religious authority) on Muharram ceremonies. According to the fatwa, based on official calculations from the Shamakhi Astrophysical Observatory in Azerbaijan, the year 1446 of the Hijri lunar calendar would end, and the new year 1447 would begin on June 26, 2025. This meant that the 10th of Muharram which is the Day of Ashura commemorations, would fall on July 5, 2025.

However, the CMB's fatwa did not match the approach of major Shia religious centers in the Middle East. In fact, for nearly 20 years there have been recurring disputes in Azerbaijan over the religious calendar. These disputes typically flare up during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha. Differences exist in the Islamic world (and among madhhabs (school of

thought within Islamic jurisprudence)) over whether the appearance of the new moon anywhere on the planet marks the new month, or whether the crescent must be seen in a specific location. Another debate is whether physically sighting the crescent is required or astronomical calculations suffice. As a result of these differences, it has become routine for Eid prayers to be held on different days during Ramadan. Among Shias, these calendar disputes are generally accepted, as even the scholarly centers of Najaf and Qom sometimes disagree.

In Azerbaijan, though, discontent usually arises because the secular government demands that the CMB schedule Eid prayers according to its secular calendar. This government interference is resented by believers. As a compromise, Shia worshippers typically observe Eid prayers on two days: one on the state-sanctioned day announced by the CMB, and another on the day set by foreign religious authorities (which can fall a day before or after the official date). In practice, worshippers flock individually to mosques on the second day, and clerics hold an additional communal prayer to accommodate them. However, in some mosques this has now been prohibited. Because of such alternative prayer gatherings outside the CMB's schedule, some clerics have been removed: for example, in 2022, Mir Seymur Aliyev (Neftchala, 2022), and in 2023, Haji Azer Qafarov (Khirdalan City Friday Mosque), Haji Sahib Mammadov (Corat Mosque), Samir Agayev (Qasimbay Mosque in Baku), and Adigozal Bashirov (Imishli City Friday Mosque).

Until now, Ashura was different from Ramadan or Eid-al Adha in that there had been no disagreement about when to observe it. The CMB's fatwa this year, setting a date that did not match the major Shia centers worldwide, created unease among believers even before the ceremonies. Muharram holds particular importance for Azerbaijani Shias. For instance, the Soviet government began its anti-Muharram campaigns several years before its campaigns against Ramadan and Eid-al-Adha, yet it achieved much poorer results: People remained loyal to Muharram and Ashura in various forms until the USSR's

collapse.

So, this year's CMB fatwa immediately provoked debate on social media, with supporters and opponents emerging. Some insisted on observing Ashura on July 5 (the CMB's date), while others condemned this and demanded it be held on July 6. On July 4, at the Sahib az-Zaman Mosque in Baku's 8th Kilometer district, Imam Haji Habil Isgandarli addressed the issue in his sermon: "The world's Shia centers – Najaf, Karbala, Mashhad, Qom – and all Shias around the world mark Ashura on the 6th. But we are told to hold it tomorrow. We can hold it tomorrow or the day after. Tomorrow is an administrative order. The day after is a matter of faith, of God's command." His remarks spread widely on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, causing a big stir. Shortly afterward, news emerged that Isgandarli had been taken in by the police. He was released after the section of his sermon posted to TikTok was deleted, but reports said that, at the SCWRA's request, the 68-year-old cleric – who had received his religious education under the Soviet Union in Bukhara, Uzbekistan – resigned from his position as mosque imam.

On July 5, Ashura ceremonies were held in nearly all mosques in Baku. However, the already declining turnout of recent years was even more pronounced, with the event conducted in a subdued, unenthusiastic manner under tight law enforcement supervision. Yet the next day, July 6, there was an unexpectedly large turnout at many mosques. While many mosques were deliberately kept closed under the watch of police and SCWRA staff (for example, Hazrat Ali Mosque in Binagadi district, Imamzadeh in Ganja, and the Imam Hussein Mosque in Baku), faced with the size of the crowds, authorities decided to open some mosques. At the famous Bibiheybat Mosque, law enforcement initially tried to prevent the gathering but later allowed it. A similar situation occurred at the Bina Mosque, where the large crowd led police to permit the ceremony. At the same time, some clerics faced police pressure for facilitating Ashura observances on the 6th. For example, the

imam of the Novkhani Mosque, Alesker Mikayilov, was detained by police but released that evening. Conversely, in places like Sumqayit, Keshla, Bina, and Qobu, mosque imams tried to keep mosques closed, saying there would be no Ashura ceremony, which led to confrontations with local residents. In Keshla and Qobu, the imams were driven out by local people.

The events surrounding the 2025 Ashura ceremonies represent the culmination of a decade of gradually increasing restrictions. While dissent and relative tension remained limited, it was nonetheless noticeable. A few personal observations about these events can be shared. First, the government’s ever-deepening interference in religious affairs is having a counterproductive effect, increasing public dissatisfaction. Second, there appears to be no effective or coherent government strategy for “soft power,” persuasion, dialogue, or cooperation in religious matters. Finally, the newly appointed clerics selected through new official procedures set by SCWRA seem to have little real influence over the religious population. As a result, religious activity is increasingly characterized by the heavy-handed activities of security and law enforcement agencies.