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## **SOCIO-POLITICAL PERCEPTION OF SHĪʿA ISLAM IN AZERBAIJAN: THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL FACTORS\***

**Abstract:** *The aim of the article is to reveal the changes in socio-political perception of Shīʿa Islam in Azerbaijan by the ruling secular and religious elites, on the one hand, and some circles of the society, on the other hand, as well as to highlight the impact of external factor on the process. The analysis of state-religious relations, the gradual reinforcing of legal regulation of religious activities, and the role of "official Shīʿa Islam" in the state-building process are the objectives of the article.*

*The article argues that the political elite of Azerbaijan, with the support of the religious establishment, institutionally employed the notion of "secularized Shīʿa Islam" as a part of the official interpretation of "Azerbaijani Islam" in shaping national identity, presenting "official Islam" as a key component of the history and culture of the state. The government's autocratic efforts in preventing foreign religious, particularly Iranian influence are intended to preserve Aliyevs' authoritarian regime. However, the government failed to completely eradicate the religious and political influence of Iran in Azerbaijan. The state's efforts to institutionalize "Azerbaijani Islam" or "traditional Islam" and neutralize Iranian religious influence remain one of the most painful issues of the authoritarian Azerbaijani regime. There are many circles in Azerbaijani society that adhere to the underground interpretation of Iranian Shiite Islam. Accordingly, there are different approaches to Shīʿa Islam that are incompatible with each other. A special contribution of the article is conceptualizing the state's antagonistic approach towards Shīʿa religious and civil activism in the country in the most compelling way.*

**Keywords:** *Azerbaijan, Shīʿa Islam, "official Islam", Iran, religion, religious identity, religious servant, law, repression, restriction.*

### **Introduction**

Azerbaijan is a secular state with a predominantly Shīʿa population. Azerbaijan has the second largest Shīʿa population in the world, after Iran (Constantin-Bercean 2017, 139). There are different statistics and data about Sunni Islam and Shīʿa Islam<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State report based on Azerbaijan State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO) 2011 data (the most recent available), 96 percent of the population is

Islam is considered an important segment of Azerbaijani culture and identity and helps link Azerbaijan with the Islamic world. Anyway, the state's approach to Islam is characterized by double standards because the authorities maintain total control over religion's field and over all religious functions. Despite legal constraints, the state has made visible efforts to strengthen the dominance of "Azerbaijani Islam" or "Traditional Islam". Since Heydar Aliyev's rule, traditional Islam has been legitimized and regulated within official ideological rhetoric through references to national traditions, religion, and values (Gasimov 2020, 15). One of the most serious problems facing the Republic of Azerbaijan since independence has been the reformulation of the Azerbaijani identity. The involvement of Turkic, Iranian, and Caucasian identities and various religious elements in the Azerbaijani reality further complicated the process of state building in Azerbaijan. Heydar Aliyev managed to lay the foundation for a new project of Azerbaijani national identity and "Azerbaijani Islam" (Vardanyan 2012, 57–58), which involved getting rid of foreign influences. That approach remained agenda-driven during Ilham Aliyev's presidency. Tougher measures were taken to counter external religious influences, especially Iranian ones (Valiyev 2017, 86–87). The religious component remains one of the most sensitive issues in current Azerbaijan-Iran relations (Jödicke 2017). Azerbaijan's political and cultural orientation towards Turkey, the popularity of Turkish culture in Azerbaijan, and wariness and distrust of Iran led to strong opposition to the political and conservative approaches of Shī'a Islam, which led to the parallel recognition and expansion of Sunni Islam in its Turkish interpretation in Azerbaijan (Pashayan and Navasardyan (b) 2021, 131).

The research is conducted using content and discourse analysis methods. For this analysis, the authors used data from government documents, international reports, scientific and newspaper articles, and social media. The authors mainly focused on the key issues of the topic within the developments before and after the 2020 Artsakh War.

The theoretical context of this study is based on A. Sarkissian's "Varieties of Religious Suppression: Why Governments Restrict Religion" work (Sarkissian 2015). It claims that non-democratic authorities utilize legal prohibitions on religion as a maneuver to stifle independent civic action. The author refers to religious groups in civil societies that are subject to state pressure by authoritarian leaders if their own power and legitimacy are threatened. K. Gasymov adds that limitations on religion

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Muslim; approximately 65 percent is Shia and 35 percent is Sunni (U.S. Department of State, 2022). According to Pew Research Center (2011) statistics of Azerbaijan ranks among the four countries of the world, except for Iran, Bahrain, and Iraq, where the Shī'a make up the majority of the population and about 70 percent of its Muslim population is Shī'a and the rest is Sunni. According to some unofficial studies, Muslims are divided between majority Shia (65–70%) and minority Sunni (30–35%) lines (Galib Bashirov 2018, 33) or have approached the 50-50 percent threshold (Sofie Bedford 2016, 144).

led to the government's involvement in the area of religion. As a result, religion has become bureaucratized, with the state having full control over religious matters, regulating how the government interacts with believers, and defining what constitutes a "national religion." On the other side, religious leaders who submit to the state end up working for the government or in the bureaucracy. Thus, bureaucracy appears to political leaders as a public good or a neutral administrative process aimed at delivering services to citizens (Gasymov 2020).

### **Shī'a Islam in the process of nation-building**

As it is mentioned above, the Republic of Azerbaijan is a state with a predominantly Shī'a identity. Sunnis are mostly native to the north, but during the period of independence, influenced by both internal and external factors, Sunni Islam spread through various currents to Baku and various regions of the country (Country of Origin Information Report Azerbaijan 2021, 32–33). After gaining independence, the Azerbaijani society had the opportunity to get acquainted with Iranian, Turkish, and "Arabic Islam", the rhetoric of foreign preachers, and compare them with the Azerbaijani narrative. There was a certain disappointment in Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, president of the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), and in "official Islam", which has the Soviet seal on it.

The authorities in Azerbaijan promptly revised their religious policy. Despite the state's secular nature and the supremacy of Turkic ethnicity in identity, Islam was regarded as an essential component of Azerbaijan's identity and culture. The most important step, as it was mentioned, taken by Heydar Aliyev was the "Azerbaijanization" of Islam, the purpose of which was to preserve it from external influences. For this purpose, the state has made a number of amendments to the law "On freedom of religion". The Azerbaijani authorities incorporated secular Shī'a Islam in shaping national identity and explained the role of religion in the national context. Gradually, "official Islam" became a tool for the authorities to advance their religious policies. Instead, the authorities were trying to strengthen the legitimacy of Pashazadeh - Azerbaijani's top Shī'a Muslim leader of Talysh origin. Clerics operating within the framework of "official Islam" began to be invited to state radio and TV programs. However, in 2006–2008, the Azerbaijani authorities shut down many television programs related to Islam (Darieva 2019). Heydar Aliyev started visiting Shiite mosques during the Islamic holidays, praying with the clerics and meeting with community members in the courtyard of the mosque. Tezepir was one of his favorite mosques. Islamic expressions began to find a place in the speeches of state dignitaries. A new culture of pilgrimage to Mecca was formed. Under Heydar Aliyev's rule, the construction of mosques was gaining momentum, and old mosques

with significant Shī'a influence were being restored (Pashayan 2014, 44). Significant steps have been taken to revive the system of religious education in Azerbaijan. The Faculty of Sharia at Baku University and the Islamic University began functioning. The state has begun to invest in the renovation and construction of mosques, most of which are Shiite. After independence, many mosques were built or reconstructed at the expense of foreign funds, but after the establishment of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the state took over these expenditures, thus demonstrating its commitment to religious issues (Pashayan 2014, Ibid). It should be noted that President A. Mutalibov immediately after independence restored Islamic holidays to the state calendar. The state returned the Waqf property to the administration of CMB.

Until 2000, the authorities of Azerbaijan managed to neutralize external religious infiltration and take the religious sphere under the control of the state. Ilham Aliyev remained faithful to his father's precepts in the religious policy of the state. Photos of Aliyev praying at the mosque were occasionally published in Azerbaijani media. Ilham Aliyev and his family made a pilgrimage to Mecca three times. In terms of national security, Aliyev continued the process of cleansing the religious field from the impact of foreign Islam.

### **Amendments to the Law "On Freedom of Religion": Restrictions in Legal Packaging**

In order to limit foreign religious penetration into Azerbaijan in the period 1992–2011, the authorities made 14 amendments to the law "On Freedom of Religion". After passing through the various stages of religious awakening and transition, Islam in Azerbaijan was subjected to strict state control. Since 2009, the government of Azerbaijan has adopted a number of laws limiting the activity of Islamic organizations and political parties, thus identifying mechanisms of state control. Opportunities for religious preaching were limited, and religious servants were banned from running in national elections. The law on political parties prohibits clerics from establishing religious-political organizations and participating in party activities (Ter-Matevosyan and Minasyan 2017, 825). With the establishment of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO) in 2001, all religious organizations came under its authority. With the amendment of the Law "On Freedom of Religion" in 2009, religious propaganda in Azerbaijan became possible only with the permission of a committee. The amendments tightened the procedure for the registration of religious organizations and granted additional powers to the CMB (ibid, 821-822). Additional changes to the Criminal and Administrative Codes made in 2009 and later amended in 2013 made it illegal to publish, distribute, or

import religious literature without the authorities' permission (ibid, 827).

After a long propaganda campaign in 2021, justifying the need for protection against COVID-19, the authorities put forward the need to amend the law "On freedom of religion" (Trend.az 2021). On July 16, 2021, Aliyev signed a decree on 14 amendments to the law (Official webpage of the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021. SNG.today 2021).

One of the main changes concerns the appointment of clerics, which is delegated to the SCWRO and falls outside the remit of the CMB (Ulkyar 2022). Among other things, the new amendments prohibit the religious coercion of children and prohibit religious leaders from engaging in any religious activity if they are not employed by the state. According to the amendments, the right to confer religious titles is reserved only for state religious centers approved by the government. Religious communities must have the consent of the state when opening religious schools; believers must inform the government when going to places of worship abroad; and in the absence of a state-appointed religious leader, religious communities must cease their activities. Any religious ceremony is permitted only in places of worship or sanctuaries designated by the state, and permission from the State Committee on Religious Affairs is required for the organization of mass religious events. Only citizens of Azerbaijan have the right to conduct any religious ritual, and it is prohibited to invite preachers from abroad. Citizens who have received religious education abroad have no right to perform religious rituals unless they have received special permission from the CMA. Fines for violations of the law include up to a year of imprisonment or fines of 1,000 to 5,000 manats (from US\$590 to US\$2,900). The certification of clergy chosen by the CMB every five years is one of the law's new requirements, and it is carried out with the help of representatives of SCWRO (the U.S. Department of State 2022).

On February 15, 2022, the Parliament of Azerbaijan adopted a decision on the introduction of additional amendments to the law. The change is related to the new appointment of imams and servants of religion as well as the registration of new religious communities. The SCWRO is fully responsible for this. Thus, the CMB will only endorse the decisions of the Committee. The authorities argued that in this way they were "protecting" Pashazade from making the wrong choice because imams must possess "impeccable behavior, deep knowledge, and protect the state," so they must be elected by the state. This decision provoked strong criticism and is contrary to the principle of separation of religion and politics stipulated by the Azerbaijani constitution (Ulkyar 2022). In that way, the state machinery tried to cleanse the religious field of uncontrollable clergy, especially the Iranian one. As a result, every year, several international human rights organizations address the worst abuses and violations of human rights on religious grounds in Azerbaijan (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom).

## **Shī'a Islam as an opposition ideology: the role of Iran**

Since independence, Iran has always sought to gain religious superiority in Azerbaijan, where it has historical, cultural, religious, and ethnic relations. For this purpose, Iran used different religious channels to export the Iranian interpretation of Shiism. Initially, Iran succeeded and got significant influence on the Tats (Caucasian Persians) of Nardaran, the Talysh people of Iranian origin in the southern region, and among other Shī'a religious and civil groups and figures. In the mid-1990s, more than twenty Iranian madrassas were operating in Azerbaijan. Iranian clerics and missionaries appeared in great numbers all over Azerbaijan and set about helping to restore religious life in the country. Various Iranian charitable and cultural organizations were operating (Constantin-Bercean 2017, 141) in Azerbaijan. Iran was supporting the renovation of Shī'a mosques (Jödicke 2017). However, according to the Azerbaijani authorities, Iran backed the "Islamic Party of Azerbaijan", protests and clashes over the school hijab ban (in the period of 2010–2013), and other unrests, particularly in Nardaran (Bashirov 2020).

Nevertheless, Iran is considered an unreliable partner for Azerbaijan because of its close cooperation with Armenia and its balanced approach to the Karabakh conflict, which Baku perceives negatively. Besides this, the Turkey-Iran regional rivalry and Israel's and the USA's antagonistic position towards Tehran forced Azerbaijan to take an anti-Iranian stance. It was also added the Azerbaijani regime's fears about the Iranian version of Shī'a Islam. The authorities have consistently persecuted pro-Iranian circles under the pretext of combating extremism or terrorism. Gradually, Aliyev's propaganda formed the public narrative of the "Iranian threat" as a challenge to the secularity of the Azerbaijani state, especially in terms of threats from the Iranian interpretation of Shiism. It contributed significantly to alienating Iran from the public life of Azerbaijan and diverting the model of national development towards "Turkification". It is interesting to note that after independence, a significant number of Shī'a origin young people have adopted Sunnism in Azerbaijan. In 2013, the Azerbaijani press spread the information that authorities unofficially encouraged the transition from Shī'a to Sunni Islam. In addition to Sumgait, the center of Sunni conservatism, similar cases were reported in other Azerbaijani cities: Baku, Ganja, Kuba, and Zakatala (Pashayan and Navasardyan 2021 (b), 107).

The state apparatus harassed and took arbitrary actions against pro-Iranian public, political, and religious figures and activists, portraying them as agents of Iran. Police and security forces periodically raided Nardaran (Bashirov 2018, 35), the stronghold of conservative Shiism in Azerbaijan. The policy of restraining the Iranian interpretation of Shī'a Islam is being implemented in two directions: legislative and monitoring. Despite state repression, especially in Nardaran and beyond, Iranian

religious influence continues to be the most important factor in social and religious life underground (Ismayilov 2019).

Since 2015, the key members of the "Muslim Union" movement (MUM) have been convicted in connection with the Nardaran. Tale Bagerzade, the leader of the movement and a young Shiite charismatic cleric, continues to be imprisoned (Isayev 2022). In the Nowruz pardon of March 18, 2021, one Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA) member was released. However, party chairman Movsum Samadov, who had been sentenced to 12 years in prison in 2011, remained in prison. On February 29, 2020, the state security service arrested the acting party chairman, Ilham Aliyev. On May 6, 2021, Turan reported that a court in Baku had sentenced him to 16 years in prison under Article 274 (high treason). His brother-in-law, Mehman Rzayev, was sentenced to 14 years in prison. Both men were accused by the authorities of spying for Iran (Country of Origin Information Report Azerbaijan 2021, 46; 69). On November 16, 2020, a court in Baku sentenced journalist Polad Aslanov to 16 years in prison under Article 274 (treason) on the accusation that he sold state secrets to Iran. Aslanov was editor-in-chief of the news websites xeberman.com and press-az.com. Among other subjects, he had written in his articles about employees of the state security service who took bribes at the border from pilgrims who wanted to visit holy places in Iran (ibid, 65). In October 2021, the State Security Ministry secret police arrested Shī'a Muslim Imam Sardar Babayev on treason charges, or, in other words, as an Iranian spy. Meanwhile, Imam Babayev has already served a three-year jail term for leading mosque prayers after gaining Islamic education outside Azerbaijan. In Arif Yunusov's words, "...he is the last respectable Shī'a theologian qualified to issue fatwas" (Forum 18, 2021).

Thus, the stereotypes of "Iranian treats" formed by the state about Iranian religious infiltrations and Iranian interference in the domestic political agenda were mainly intended to legitimize the repression of the regime against both religious and secular opposition. The retreat of Shī'a Islam and the concurrent spread of Sunni Islam, particularly "Turkish Islam", were facilitated by the Pan-Turkish propaganda carried out by the Azerbaijani authorities for years (Bedford 2016).

### **Islam and the youth of Azerbaijan**

The growth in the number of places of worship and the alteration in public perception of religion, as supported by the survey results, show that interest in Islam, Islamic practice, and Islamic education was increased and that the aspects of religiosity have broadened in the post-independent period (Mamadli 2018). It is important to understand the attitudes and role of young people towards religion in our days. Religious youth organizations are not officially functioning in Azerbaijan, but

there were organizations in which young people constituted a significant number, such as the "Muslim Unity Movement" in Nardaran, etc. According to "Caucasian Barometer 2013" research, age is not a key factor in the spread of religiosity in Azerbaijan. Only 9% of interviewees aged 18–35 said they were highly religious (ibid). According to the survey on "Social Capital, Mass Media, and Gender in Azerbaijan", about 45% of respondents aged 18–35 stated that they either did not participate in religious ceremonies at all or participated very little (Ibid). "It can be seen that the average indicator of religiosity among young people in Azerbaijan is either the same as with other age groups or even lower, which does not correspond to the average statistical indicators of developed countries" (ibid). There is another important fact, which is interesting. Since individuals who got their Islamic religious education abroad are not permitted to serve, as well as ongoing repressions the number of people who want to receive Islamic education has been significantly reduced.

Young people who exhibit the slightest religious activity may be presented by the state as extremists or agents of Iran and imprisoned. There is also a social explanation for young people's tendency to become less involved in the religious process. Religious activities do not provide people with social well-being or career opportunities. From this point of view, it is also interesting that the participation of many young people from Azerbaijan in the Syrian war was in some cases determined by social factors rather than religious ones because the fighters were promised a substantial salary (Sputniknews.ru 2016).

On the other side, there is little chance of involving young people in religious education. In recent years, the state has done some work in the field of Islamic education. Since independence, religious schools (madrassas) have been opened in Azerbaijan mainly by foreign power centers, including Iran. Later, until 2000, madrassas that had been opened with foreign funds were closed. Baku Islamic University<sup>1</sup>, which started functioning in 1992 as a university under the CMB and has four branches, trains personnel in the field of religion. However, currently it has only one branch in Zakatala. Qualified specialists find it difficult to find a job after graduation. There are currently 10 madrassas in different regions of Azerbaijan. The girls' "Shabnam" madrassa in Baku, "Alibad" madrassa in Zakatala, Sheki madrassa, madrassas of Heydar, Zakatala, Ganja, Lenkoran, Guba, Nardaran, and Bibibei bet were registered in 2017 by the State Committee for Work with Religious

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<sup>1</sup> During its existence, Baku Islamic University, where only Hanafi Fiqh is taught, has graduated 3,550 students; 431 students were sent to study abroad; and 319 students are studying (as of January 2018). The theological faculty at Baku State University, which was created with funding from the Foundation for Religious Affairs of Turkey, has so far produced 758 graduates (Goyushov, Altay, and Elchin Askerov. Islam and Islamic education in Soviet and independent Azerbaijan, in: Kemper, M., Motika, R., & Reichmuth, S. 2015. Islamic education in the Soviet Union and its successor states. London: Routledge).



Organizations (Azərbaycan Respublikası Dini Qurumlarla İş üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi) but coordinated by the CMB (Report.az 2017). Madrassas are targeted at both Sunnis and Shiites. Some Sunni madrassas, including Alibad, are influenced by Turkish Islam. The madrassas operating in Nardaran have a pro-Iranian orientation. According to some data, the CMB is not able to properly manage this area. Corruption is common in this field, and students are given low qualifications. In general, the training of religious servants in Azerbaijan continues to be in the same deplorable state as during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. On the other hand, the CMB continues to be the permanent service structure of the discredited, corrupt, and authoritarian regime. This circumstance also negatively affects the attitude of young people towards religion. In other words, "Azerbaijani Islam" is not attractive to young people. Meanwhile, Islam is penetrating through foreign channels, and imams educated outside Azerbaijan are in many cases more attractive to young people.

### **The role of Islam in the context of the Artsakh War of 2020**

During the last Artsakh war and in the post-war period, the Islamic discourse that was generated for an external audience began to manifest itself in the public sphere (Pashayan 2021, 254). Early in October 2020, state news about the Jbrakan (Jabrayil) district, which came under Azerbaijani control, mentioned a call to prayer in a mosque for the first time in 27 years. Following the end of the war, Ilham Aliyev and members of his family began to visit separate mosques in Baku-occupied areas (Ibid). The "most Islamic" speech of Ilham Aliyev was delivered at the Akna (Ağdam) Mosque, where he emphasized: "Today I can say that I am a happy person in front of the mosque destroyed by vandals. I thank Allah once more for hearing my prayers and providing me with strength. I consider myself fortunate to have visited Mecca four times, once with my late father and three times as president. I am grateful to have prayed in the Kaaba with my family. I have the same emotions as the rest of us. My first prayer was for the liberation of our lands. I begged Allah to grant me the authority to liberate our occupied lands from the occupiers, to grant us this happiness, and to return our ancestors' lands" (Goyushev 2021). Whatever the case, not everyone in Azerbaijani society agreed with Aliyev's impassioned address because there have long been serious issues in the socioeconomic, political, and human rights sectors, as well as widespread discontent with the dictatorial rule.

The Azerbaijani authorities tried to use the Islamic discourse on the domestic political field to ensure victory and gain the support of public circles dissatisfied with the ruling regime. Azerbaijan used the Islamic factor extensively during the 2020 war, not only externally but also internally, to incite the Armenian world, form anti-Armenian sentiments, etc. It is noteworthy that during and after the Artsakh war, Azerbaijan received the unconditional support of both the Sunni and Shīʿa worlds.

The sympathies of the Iranian Azerbaijani province towards the Republic of Azerbaijan were also undisguised (Pashayan, Navasardyan 2021 (a), 113-114). It is remarkable that before the Artsakh war of 2020 in Azerbaijan, it was unofficially forbidden to make the Artsakh topic a part of religious discourse. The authorities feared that the move of the Artsakh question to the religious field would become a new impetus for the formation of anti-government sentiments. However, after the war of 2020, anti-Armenian propaganda also penetrated the religious field. Notably, some imams started criticizing Armenia in their sermons for destroying Islamic monuments and mosques in Nagorno Karabakh and beyond. Despite that fact, that during of the Artsakh War 2020, Iran supported Azerbaijan (Pashayan, Navasardyan 2021 (a)) and made many statements in behalf of Azerbaijan territorial integrity (Khamenei.ir 2020, Isna.ir 2020, Qafqaz.ir 2020), the post-war Azerbaijani-Iranian relations have been continued to develop in an environment of mutual mistrust. Iran tries to counter the Pan-Turkic plans by activating cooperation with Armenia. Iran is worried not only by the growth of Turkish, but also Israeli influence in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan and Turkey's demands for the so-called "Zangezur corridor" to Armenia Iran is considered a big threat to its national interests (Kucera 2022). In this context, Iran and particularly many pro-Iranian clerics in Azerbaijan also appeared to be under attack. Baku accused Iran of its unambiguous and uncompromising position on the issue of the inviolability of Armenia's borders (Report.az 2022), when the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran has stated that the borders of Armenia are the "red line" of Iran and Iran will not allow any changes in the borders in the region (Khamenei.ir 2022). In October 2021, during another escalation with Iran, the Azerbaijani government shut down a number of pro-Iranian websites. Although Baku did not make any official announcement, media sources revealed that six websites were blocked: Deyerler (values), Maide (blessings), Ahlibeyt (Prophet's House), Ehlibēt (Prophet's House), Shī'a, and Islaminsesi (the Voice of Islam). Some reports also claimed that YouTube channels broadcasting Iranian religious programs were also blocked (Sinaee 2021). Parallely, the Iranian embassy in Baku said that Azerbaijani police had inspected the Husseiniya mosque in Baku and shut it down. The office of the representative of Iran's leader, Ali Khamenei Ali-Akbar Ojaghnejad, was located in that mosque (ibid). At the same time was developed a trend of the Azerbaijani regime intends to involve Shī'a clerics in the field of anti-Iranian sentiment. In October 2022, when Iran started unprecedented military exercises on the border with Azerbaijan (Iran International 2022), Baku began to more strongly exploit the religious card in the confrontation with Iran. Proof of this is the recent anti-Armenian sermon of Imam Javid, which, surprisingly for a Shī'a cleric, is also highly anti-Iranian. Iran is regarded as an ally and supporter of Armenia. According to him, such a move diminishes the religious feelings of the Shī'a Turks (The Imam reveals the

rotten nature of the Iranian turban-wearers 2022). Furthermore, CMB chairperson Allahshukur Pashazade, in one of his interviews, said: "My brother Iran sold me to Armenia. The hopes of millions of Shiites were dashed" (REAL TV 2022). These anti-Iranian statements are not accidental, as they were punished a year earlier by the information space of Azerbaijan. He was careless to emphasize that the victory was also achieved thanks to Iran's support, and the media accused him of putting Iran on the same level as Turkey, demanding his resignation (Media.az 2021). However, Iran's expectations regarding a new geopolitical alignment in the post-war region did not come true. Turkey, Israel, and Pakistan, Azerbaijan's strategic allies, have become more active, which poses a threat to Iran's security. New realities have created a new tension in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, in which the religious factor again came to the fore. The Iranian interpretation of Shīʿa Islam and its legitimacy in the Azerbaijani environment began to be questioned.

## **Conclusion**

The research concludes that the beneficiaries of Shīʿa factor in Azerbaijan are the state, society, and external forces that have interests in the country. Other beneficiaries of Shīʿa Islam were those segments of Azerbaijani society that were distinguished by Shīʿa religiosity, religious conservatism, civil activism, anti-authoritarian attitudes, etc. Since independence, the state apparatus has constantly monitored the activities of pro-Iranian circles in all directions, developing the necessary tools. Meanwhile, the state used Shīʿa Islam in the nation-building process, representing Islam as an important segment of the history and culture of Azerbaijan. At the same time, authorities prevent the politicization of Shīʿa Islam through continuous restrictions and repression in order to prevent the religion from being redrawn. The sum of the evidence demonstrates that Islam continues to be the government's primary weapon on both the internal and external fields. It is no coincidence that the Islamic factor was used to some extent during the Artsakh war of 2020 in order to consolidate society against the enemy and strengthen the legitimacy of Aliyev's regime.

In this context, two questions are important: to what extent Aliyev succeeded in shaping "official Islam", putting it forward as the core of nation-building, and to what extent Aliyev's religiosity is perceived by the Azerbaijani society. The authors argue that the regime not only failed to rationally use Islam in state-building, but also to institutionalize "Shīʿa official Islam" and make it competitive. The reason is the lack of trust in Azerbaijani society towards the authoritarian regime and the imitation of religiosity by Aliyev, as well as the repressions and restrictions imposed by the law on the free practice of religion and freedom of speech.

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