

AZERBAIJAN'S INVOLVEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

Abstract

The Islamic revival in Azerbaijan gave a start to the processes of radicalization and the society's involvement in international terrorism. The radicalization was the result of both domestic and external factors. Under the domestic factors, the study examined the policy measures towards the religious belief and activities, and such external factors as Iranian, North Caucasian and Middle Eastern influences. What analysis has shown is the increased tendency of radicalization. Oppressive policy measures restricted freedoms of the society making them more radicalized. In addition, in line with having imposed restrictions people are becoming more vulnerable to external religious influence. A number of Azerbaijanis continue staying in the ranks of terrorist groups, while others leave the country for reviving the training and afterwards joining the terrorist groups. All those findings suggest that there are prospects of further radicalization, which push the society towards the involvement in international terrorism.

Keywords: *International terrorism, Azerbaijan, Salafism, Radicalization, Islamization.*

Introduction

In the 21st century international terrorism became a buzzword for citizens, policy makers and for any student of international relations. One of the common conviction among them is that in the extensively interdependent world no country is immune to international terrorism. From this perspective, Azerbaijan is of particular interest, as it appears to be an example of a country with growing radical ideology despite the secular nature of the state. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a turning point as Azerbaijan started to witness Islamic revival, which was followed by further radicalization and involvement in international terrorism.

Religious radicalization in Azerbaijan is poised to become a significant security challenge not only to the country itself, but also to the whole region of the South Caucasus. The issue of religious radicalism was initially perceived by the government as an imported threat, which was in-

fluenced by such external factors as the Islamic Republic of Iran, insurgencies in the North Caucasus and the Middle East. In the course of time, the number of Azerbaijanis taking a more radical stance has increased. It urged the government to take decisive policy measures against rising terrorism. However, government's steps, which were mostly oppressive, proved to be counterproductive. Weak economic conditions and social dissatisfaction, on the other hand, have become domestic factors facilitating the homegrown radicalization process of society.

What the capstone project aims to examine is the role of foreign and domestic factors contributing to the radicalization of Azerbaijan's society, and the prospects of involvement in international terrorism. This is important nowadays, taking into account the possible consequences if radicals gain a strong ground in Azerbaijan. Become Azerbaijan a country with strong-based fundamentalists activities, the South Caucasus can face the threat of terrorism by becoming a transit region or even a target for terrorists. Moreover, Azerbaijan has already experienced the role of a transit country for Chechen terrorists during two Russo-Chechen wars in the 1990s. There were also reported cases, when Azerbaijan invited Afghan mujahedeen to fight in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s. Therefore, the issue poses a direct security threat also in case of large-scale war in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. And last but not least, the concerns over the radicalization of the society have already been on the rise in line with the growing number of Azerbaijani fighters in Syria and Iraq. In case those who fought in the ranks of terrorist groups return back to Azerbaijan, they can not only challenge the stability of the country, but also spread the radical ideology, contributing to the further involvement in international terrorism. Taking all these factors into consideration, this is relevant nowadays to understand what triggers the process of radicalization; especially, how potent the foreign influence is today and whether the policy measures used to contend radicalization serve their aim.

The study has the following structure. The first part introduces the case of Azerbaijan in terrorism, where the turning points are presented from independence to nowadays. The research will be finalized by presenting the collection of data and analyses.

Islamic Revival in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

Historical background

Azerbaijan rediscovered Islam after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In search of the new identity, Azerbaijanis appealed to Islam, which was suppressed under the Soviet legacy.¹ The collapse of the Soviet Union pushed for the creation of power vacuum and the question of what kind of entity Azerbaijan should become arose. Tackling this question one of the options was the Iranian pattern; namely, the promotion of Islamic revolution and the development of theocratic state.² The other option was Turkey's scenario due to the "Azerbaijanis ethnic and language closeness to Turks".³ While Azerbaijanis were more close to Iran from the religious perspective, they shared the same culture and history with Turkey.⁴ Inspired by Turkey's secular legacy, the same pro-Western and pro-Turkic system⁵ was embraced in Azerbaijan, which played the role of consolidating ideology.⁶

Notwithstanding the embracement of Turkey's secular ideology, other countries, such as Arab Gulf Countries and Iran, saw the independence of Azerbaijan as an opportunity to spread their religion and influence.⁷ Therefore, not to lose its position, Iran started to strongly support Islamic revival of Shia population in Azerbaijan and their religious feeling with the aim to promote separatist trends in a newly independent state.⁸

One factor promoting Islamic Revival was Azerbaijanis response to enforced atheism by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union left Azerbaijanis with ideological gap, which prompted Azerbaijanis to refer to Islam.⁹ Moreover, even the collapse of the Soviet Union did not stop the uncertain-

¹ Ansgar Jodicke, "Shia Groups and Iranian religious Influence in Azerbaijan: the Impact of Trans-boundary Religious ties on national Religious Policy," *Eurasian Geography and Economic*, (2017); Arzu Geybullayeva, "Radical Islam or Government Paranoia in Azerbaijan?," *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 93:1, (2017): 9-11; Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Political Islam in the Former Soviet Union: Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan compared," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways Toward Terrorism and genocide*, 3:1, (2010): 46-61.

² Ruffat Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society in Independent Azerbaijan: Between Historical Legacy and Post-Soviet Reality with Special Reference to Baku and its Environs*, (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2009), 97.

³ Ibid., 98; Igor Rotar, "Under the Green Banner: Islamic Radicals in Russia and the Former Soviet Union," *Religion, State and Society*, 30:2, (2010), 89-153.

⁴ Rena Salayeva and Michael Baranick, "Addressing Terrorist Threats in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan: Winning Hearts and Minds," *The Cornwallis Group*, (2018), http://www.ismor.com/cornwallis/cornwallis_2005/CX_2005_11-Baranick-CX-July%2012.pdf (accessed May 27, 2018)

⁵ Jodicke, *Shia Groups and Iranian religious Influence in Azerbaijan*.

⁶ Arzu Geybullayeva, "Is Azerbaijan Becoming a Hub of Radical Islam?" *European Stability Initiative*, (2018); Salayeva and Baranick, *Addressing Terrorist Threats in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan*.

⁷ Geybullayeva, "Is Azerbaijan Becoming a Hub of Radical Islam?"; Bogdan Nedea, Sahib Jafarov and Orhan Mamadov, "Radical Islam in Azerbaijan," *Researchgate*, (2012).

⁸ Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society in Independent Azerbaijan*, 10.

⁹ William Maley, "The Potential for Terrorism within the Soviet Union in the 21st Century," *Terrorism*, 13:1, (2008), 53-64; Jodicke, *Shia Groups and Iranian religious Influence in Azerbaijan*; Geybullayeva, "Radical Islam or Government Paranoia in Azerbaijan", 9-11.

ty about Azerbaijanis identity, and the void was tried to be filled by Western legacy and culture. To infer, Islam can be considered as a reaction to both Communism and rapid Westernization.¹⁰ Alstadt claims that some Azerbaijanis saw Islam as a means to bring back their historic identity and a matter of piety, while for the others Islam was a guide of morality.¹¹

Some internal factors are also considered as reasons for Islamic Revival in Azerbaijan. Some scholars indicate that poverty, unemployment and social inequality more or less influenced on the Azerbaijanis appeal to Islam.¹² After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijanis found themselves in economic stagnation and social hardship. Therefore, religious people and mullahs in Azerbaijan started to promote “religion as alternative” to the corruption, nepotism, and socio-economic conditions.¹³ Thus, religion was considered as a solution for domestic problems. Education was another source of Islamic revival. Lack of religious education resulted in more interest in religion, which used to be restricted during Soviet times. Therefore, it was not surprising that people of independent Azerbaijan then willingly welcomed missionaries and “experts on Islam”.¹⁴ The reasons why more radical patterns of Islam were absent in Azerbaijanis society that time were the Soviet’s secular legacy, closeness towards Turkism, multi-ethnicism with its tolerant culture and local traditions,¹⁵ the influence of oil industry and the expansion of western culture.¹⁶ Later on, however, expansion of radicalism and fundamentalism started to be propagated by foreign influences and foreign missionaries.

Factors influencing Islamization and radicalization of Azerbaijan

In course of time, some radical patterns were noticed in Azerbaijan. Literature divides the factors influencing radicalization into domestic and external ones. As Salayeva and Baranick noted, Azerbaijan is vulnerable nowadays and “is not immune from radicalism”.¹⁷ Already in 1990s,

¹⁰ Geybullayeva, “Is Azerbaijan Becoming a Hub of Radical Islam?”; Karagiannis, “Political Islam in the Former Soviet Union”, 55; Nedea, Jafarov and Mamadov, “Radical Islam in Azerbaijan”.

¹¹ Audrey Alstadt, *Frustrated Democracy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*, (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2017).

¹² Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Maya Ehrmann, “The Rise of Militant Salafism in Azerbaijan and its Regional Implications,” *Middle East Policy*, 20:3, (2013); Geybullayeva, “Is Azerbaijan Becoming a Hub of Radical Islam?”; Hema Kotecha, “*Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging Trends and Tensions*,” OSCE, Baku, (2006).

¹³ Vahram Ter-Matevosyan and Nelli Minsayan, “Praying Under Restrictions: Islam, Identity and Social Change in Azerbaijan,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, (2017): 819-837.

¹⁴ Geybullayeva, “Is Azerbaijan Becoming a Hub of Radical Islam?”.

¹⁵ Salayeva and Baranick, “Addressing Terrorist Threats in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan”.

¹⁶ Rotar, “Under the Green Banner,” 94-96.

¹⁷ Salayeva and Baranick, Addressing Terrorist Threats in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

some Azerbaijanis were noticed in various military confrontations taking place in the Caucasus, for instance, in training activities in Khatab camp in Chechnya and Dagestan.¹⁸ Some Azerbaijani radical organizations are known in the country. Those are “al-Jihad”, created in 1995 by an Egyptian; “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, which cell was created in Azerbaijan in 2001; “Forest Brothers”, and “Karabakh Partisans”, involved in a war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, as Sargis Grigoryan noted, underground activities and continuous persecutions do not allow having a complete picture about roots and those, who hold radical Islamic fundamentalist ideas.¹⁹ However, nowadays it is clear, that some external and internal factors, unresolved conflicts all facilitate the creation of fertile soil for radicalization.

Domestic factors

State response to radicalism

When external influence became noticeable in independent Azerbaijan, the authorities adopted the “Law on Freedom of Religious Belief”, which was to control the activities of religious groups in 1992. Every following amendment imposed greater restrictions on religious groups. The image of Azerbaijani authorities trying to reduce the influence of religious radical groups looks like a justification to use counterterrorism activities and persecution.²⁰ Being suppressed by the authorities, religious groups take a more radical stance and strengthened their influence. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (USCIRF) annual report of 2017, “Increasing authoritarianism... and suppression... [have] fostered the emergence of a religious political opposition that the government has sought to discredit by linking it to terrorism....”²¹ The repressions and restrictions became not only stricter after 9/11²², but also let the authorities legitimize their actions as counterterrorism.²³ The suppression only strengthened the thoroughness of reli-

¹⁸ Sargis Grigoryan, *Islamakan armatakanutyuny Kovkasum*, (in Armenian) [Islamic Radicalism in the Caucasus], (Yerevan: Yerevan State University Publishing, 2017), 67.

¹⁹ Ibid. 67-69

²⁰ Julie Wilhelmsen, “Islamism in Azerbaijan: How Potent?,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32:8, (2009): 726-742; Geybulla, *Radical Islam or Government Paranoia in Azerbaijan*, 9-11; Anar Valiyev, “Foreign Terrorist Groups and Rise of Home-grown Radicalism in Azerbaijan,” *Journal of Human Security*, (2008): 95-112.

²¹ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2017: Azerbaijan Chapter*, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Azerbaijan.2017.pdf> (accessed December 7, 2018).

²² Souleimanov and Ehrmann, *The Rise of Militant Salafism in Azerbaijan and its Regional Implications*.

²³ Wilhelmsen, *Islamism in Azerbaijan*, 732.

giosity among people²⁴, which then became a factor leading to the radicalization of the society, since “violence triggers violence”.²⁵ During the first influx of Salafists in Azerbaijan, the authorities of the country tolerated their presence, however, the period from 2001-2003 became a turning point, as the authorities started to persecute followers of Salafism.²⁶ As proof, in 2001 the state authorities initiated an unofficial campaign against the followers of Salafi group. As the majority of followers were Chechens, the government tried to suppress them by creating poor conditions for Chechen refugees. Moreover, regional police was ordered to shut down the mosques and oppress Salafists by any necessary means.²⁷ Those oppressive measures made Valiyev claim that Azerbaijan may soon be threatened by terrorism. Geybullayeva, in its turn, states that Azerbaijan will soon face the threat of domestically emerged militant radical Salafism. Wilhelmsen points out, that radical branch of Islamism seems to be “the most potent ideology of resistance.”

The deterioration of secularity stemmed from further amendments in 2009 over religious law, which regulated all religious activities in the country, which in its turn resulted in increase of arrests and sanctions on religious groups.²⁸ The restrictions even touched such Islamic manifestations as long beards, headscarves and the right of mosques to carry out call for prayers (*azan*).²⁹ Later on, some amendments were presented over control of religious books and materials.

State response has indiscriminate character, targeting all activists of a particular group, which resulted in further its radicalization.³⁰ Harsh treatment of security forces was an important factor in pushing the society towards extremism. Beating, burning and shaving the beards of Salafi followers was counter-productive, which created fertile ground for radicalization.³¹

²⁴ Ter-Matevosyan and Minsayan, *Praying Under Restrictions*; Valiyev, “Foreign Terrorist Groups and Rise of Home-grown Radicalism in Azerbaijan”; Grigoryan, *Radicalism in the Caucasus*, 67.

²⁵ Wilhelmsen, *Islamism in Azerbaijan*, 732-734; Karagiannis, “Political Islam in the Former Soviet Union”, 55; Geybullayeva, *Radical Islam or Government Paranoia in Azerbaijan*, 13-15.

²⁶ Anar Valiyev, “The Rise of Salafi Islam in Azerbaijan,” *Terrorism Monitor*, 3:13, (2005), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-rise-of-salafi-islam-in-azerbaijan/> (accessed December 7, 2018).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Geybullayeva, *Radical Islam or Government Paranoia in Azerbaijan*, 13-15.

²⁹ Ter-Matevosyan and Minsayan, *Praying Under Restrictions*.

³⁰ Ibid; Salayeva and Baranick, *Addressing Terrorist Threats in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan*; Wilhelmsen, *Islamism in Azerbaijan*, 732-734.

³¹ Geybullayeva, *Radical Islam or Government Paranoia in Azerbaijan*; Kotecha, *Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan*.

External Influences

Iranian Influence

Iranian influence posits a Shia “threat”. Many scholars consider Iranian factor as a reason for radicalization of Azerbaijanis society. Shia Muslims comprise the majority of Azerbaijani society, living mostly in the south, Absheron peninsula with Nardaran village as its stronghold and the regions around Baku. Some slogans from Quran are even noticeable in Nardaran with content of “Muslims must become the soldiers of Islam and they should defend Islam”.³² In addition, Lenkaran district, just on the Iranian border, get broadcasts of religious programs from Iran.³³

One way Iran exerted radical patterns of Islam was by cultural representation, such as Organization of Islamic Propaganda, Ministry of Culture, embassies, the Khomeini Relief Committee, etc. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the 1990s many religious schools were opened, where mostly the literature about glorification of Islam and Iran was promoted.³⁴ Since the Southern part of the region is considered as the most religious one, one can find even Iranian books in the local markets. The increasing number of foreign, Iranian-trained missionaries were noticeable, who undertook their activities to propagate the Iranian model. Azerbaijanis were receiving scholarships, which let them attend seminars and universities in Iran.

Indoctrination of imams and humanitarian assistance were other ways of rooting radicalism in Azerbaijan’s society from Iran. One aspect of Iran’s strategy towards Azerbaijan was to place Iranian trained mullahs as heads of mosques in Azerbaijan, which would help to strengthen Iranian influence.³⁵ One example was Juma Mosque, which was considered as a center of Shia activism with Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu as a head of mosque. It should be mentioned that he, being an Iranian-educated cleric himself, was promoting Iran’s position and Islamic principles with the aim to imbed Iranian theocracy in Azerbaijan (European Foundation for Democracy, 2015). Many young people followed Ibrahimoglu due to his ability to connect Islamic roots and principles with modern democratic values and norms (Geybullayeva, 2018).

The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA) created in 1991, was also the result of Iranian influence and was seen as the main source of radical Shia

³² Geybullayeva, Is Azerbaijan Becoming a Hub of Radical Islam?.

³³ Kotecha, Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan.

³⁴ Anar Valiyev, “Azerbaijan: Islam in a Post-Soviet Republic,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 9:4, (2005): 1-13.

³⁵ European Foundation for Democracy. “Secularism in Azerbaijan and the Threat of Radicalization in the region,” (2015), https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/Secularism_in_Azerbaijan_June%202015.pdf (accessed December 7, 2018); Souleimanov and Ehrmann, The Rise of Militant Salafism in Azerbaijan and its Regional Implications.

Islam. Its aim was, as other objects of Iranian influence, to export the Islamic revolution, its principles into neighboring Azerbaijan. Some members of IPA were even accused of spying for Iran, which led to declare the party unconstitutional, accusing it of mixing religion and politics, which contradicts the secular legacy of Azerbaijan.³⁶ Accordingly, the party refused to get registration in 1995 and its leaders were arrested. Scholars claim that IPA explicitly called for the Islamic state's establishment due to its promotion of the governance based on Sharia law and anti-Western ideology, and attempted to bring religion into politics of Azerbaijan. IPA usually used anti-Armenian rhetoric and even advocated for Nagorno-Karabagh conflict solution militarily.³⁷ Although IPA was considered as a strong means for promotion of Iranian revolution, it failed to mobilize the population and did not have mass followers.³⁸ However, besides party's weaknesses it succeeded in a certain extent. Due to its activities and propaganda, Islamic ideology became more visible in the state and many women, for example, started to dress following Islamic traditions.

Some claim that the dissolution of IPA party can be considered as an end to Iranian influence in Azerbaijan and nowadays "Iran has no significant religious influence in Azerbaijan".³⁹ According to them, much greater danger comes from Salafism/Wahhabism movement. Geybullayeva states that although Salafism nowadays constitute significant danger, Iranian influence and Iranian version of radical Islam should not be underestimated.⁴⁰

North Caucasus and Middle East influence: Salafism/Wahhabism

Salafism posits a Sunni "threat" in Azerbaijan. According to Sargis Grigoryan, the increasing number of Sunnis is one of the reasons of radicalization of the society, as they are more inclined to fundamentalist radical ideas.⁴¹ While the South of Azerbaijan is considered as a territory of Shia Muslims, Sunnis are mostly present in the North and Baku. Here concentrated Salafists/Wahhabis are seen as radical branch of Sunni Islam, which are supported by Gulf countries and North Caucasus. Although two notions are not very much the same, literature uses them in-

³⁶ European Foundation for Democracy, *Secularism in Azerbaijan and the Threat of Radicalization in the region*, 38; Rotar, "Under the Green Banner"; Salayeva and Baranick, "Addressing Terrorist Threats in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan".

³⁷ Nedea, Jafarov and Mamadov, "Radical Islam in Azerbaijan".

³⁸ European Foundation for Democracy, *Secularism in Azerbaijan*; Salayeva and Baranick, *Addressing Terrorist Threats in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan*.

³⁹ Rotar, "Under the Green Banner," 144-147.

⁴⁰ Geybullayeva, "Is Azerbaijan Becoming a Hub of Radical Islam?"

⁴¹ Grigoryan, *Islamic Radicalism in the Caucasus*.

terchangeably. Salafism/Wahhabism is considered as a significant danger and a great reason of radicalization of Azerbaijanis society. As it was in Iranian scenario, here also charities played a major role in rooting and promoting Wahhabism.⁴² The main charities came from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Interestingly, not all Salafists consider themselves as members of radical branch. Militant Salafists (*Kharijites*) advocate violence as a means of achieving Islamic state, while moderate Salafists limit their activities to preaching and discussions.⁴³

Literature identifies three phases of Salafists influx to Azerbaijan. The first influx followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first Russo-Chechen war accompanied by penetration of missionaries from the Gulf countries and terrorists from North Caucasus in Azerbaijan. Salafists of first influx took an advantage from catastrophe created by the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which allowed them to advance and strengthen their radical agenda.

The second wave of Salafists penetration took place after the second Russo-Chechen war by influx of jihadi fighters to the South Caucasus, mainly to Azerbaijan and Georgia. This time the main source of radicalism was Chechen refugees.⁴⁴ The significance of this phase was that the most refugees were warlords and wounded fighters, who developed among Azerbaijani society the image of “heroic Chechen warrior”⁴⁵, which later became a facilitating source of radicalism.

The third phase gave a start to the phenomenon of radicalization of Azerbaijani society due to the 1997 construction of the Abu Bakr mosque with Suleymanov, Saudi Arabian educated man as its Imam. The construction of Abu Bakr mosque itself became the epicenter of recruitment. However, the mosque was closed in 2008 due to the terrorist attack there.⁴⁶ The strategy of the mosque was more delicate than that of Juma mosque of Shias. Their focus was not politics as in Juma mosque’s case, rather they focused on morality and habits. Abu Bakr community promoted return to values and not dissolution of a government, at least in public discourse.

While during their first appearance in Azerbaijan Salafi followers were from ethnic minorities, recently it was found out that Azerbaijan-born

⁴² David Lonardo, “The Islamic State and the Connections to historical Networks of Jihadism in Azerbaijan,” *Caucasus Survey*, (2016): 239-260.; Souleimanov and Ehrmann, “The Rise of Militant Salafism in Azerbaijan and its Regional Implications”.

⁴³ Valiyev, “Foreign Terrorist Groups”; Rovshan Ibrahimov, “The Participation of Azerbaijan Citizens in Conflicts in Syria and Iraq and its Potential radicalization Effect in Azerbaijan” in *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism Among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. Marco Lombardi, Iman Ragab and Vivienne Chin, (IOS Press, 2018), 164-169.

⁴⁴ Nedeia, Jafarov and Mamadov, “Radical Islam in Azerbaijan”; Souleimanov and Ehrmann, “The Rise of Militant Salafism in Azerbaijan and its Regional Implications”, 118.

⁴⁵ Nedeia, Jafarov and Mamadov, *Ibid.*.

⁴⁶ Ibrahimov, “The Participation of Azerbaijan Citizens in Conflicts,” 165; Valiyev, “The Rise of Salafi Islam in Azerbaijan”.

people also appeal to Salafism.⁴⁷ As the ways of recruitment to Salafism, the research done by OSCE showed that parents themselves sometimes send children to learn Islamic culture and religion as a counterweight to the Western behavior and Western culture introduced by the TV.

Connections with terrorist networks as external influence

State sponsored terrorism during Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

During the 1992-1994 war in Nagorno-Karabakh many Chechen and Afghan terrorists were involved in military confrontation on Azerbaijan's side. Attempts were made by Azerbaijani authorities to recruit fighters and mercenaries from other states, mainly Islamic ones, to involve them in a war over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁸ As of 1992, around 300 Chechen fighters were noticed in a war. The first transportation of Chechen fighters in Baku took place in 1990s. Those fighters were paid 600-1000 Rubles every month.⁴⁹ According to Hayk Demoyan, the main pushing force of Chechens to Karabakh battlefield was the Islamic and Caucasian solidarity sentiment, and the proximity of the insurgency region to Chechnya. On the other hand, also noted by Demoyan, it is probable that recruitment of foreign mercenaries was a matter of cooperation, based on which Azerbaijan was to transfer weaponry to Chechnya.⁵⁰

After the war waged between Chechnya and Russia, many Chechen fighters returned back. This time, Azerbaijan appealed to Afghan fighters. Involvement of Afghan mujahedeen in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh activated the spiral of terrorist organizations' presence in Azerbaijan. A claim of recruitment of Afghan mujahedeen was "in support of Muslim Azerbaijan".⁵¹ Sources indicate different number of Afghan fighters ranging from 1500 to 3000. Azerbaijan was noted as a territory serving the international mujahedeen, having connections with terrorist groups.⁵² Presence of so-called "Arab veterans" had been noticed in the battlefield. Being involved in a war and supported by Azerbaijani authorities, a number of terrorists and mercenaries took roots in the country, and created their own networks.⁵³

⁴⁷ Karagiannis, "Political Islam in the Former Soviet Union," 50-53.

⁴⁸ Hayk Demoyan, *The Islamic Mercenaries in Karabakh War*, (Yerevan: 2004)

⁴⁹ Ioannis Charalampidis, *Sponsored to kill. Mercenaries and Terrorist Networks in Azerbaijan I'*, (MIA Publishers, 2013) 4.

⁵⁰ Demoyan, *The Islamic Mercenaries in Karabakh War*.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Charalampidis, 'Sponsored to kill,' 4.

⁵³ Grigoryan, *Islamic Radicalism in the Caucasus*, 66.

Azerbaijanis in Syria and Iraq

ISIS

Lack of closeness and lack of common borders with Syria and Iraq did not prevent Azerbaijan from being affected by events. According to Sargis Grigoryan, Syrian events and the establishment of ISIS influenced Azerbaijanis' radicalization.⁵⁴ The number of Azerbaijanis involved in a conflict varies from different sources. Lonardo asserts that the first wave of Azerbaijani fighters had previously been connected with other jihadi networks. Some had been members of "Muhajirin Brigadem", "Karabakh Partisans", fighters in Chechnya, the "Tabuk jamaat", etc.⁵⁵

Involvement of Azerbaijanis in Syrian conflict is an interesting phenomenon. First, radical Islam is becoming more visible in Azerbaijan due to their participation in the conflict. Second, it was the first time when Azerbaijanis participated in a military confrontation having a religious ground outside of their own country.⁵⁶ Azerbaijani Salafists were inspired by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's announcement about the creation of the Islamic State (ISIS)⁵⁷, and their involvement in ISIS was a collective decision. Joining the ranks of ISIS was seen by Salafists as an opportunity to bring changes in their country.

One possible reason of Azerbaijanis involvement is the phenomenon of *sacred jihad* (holy war), which is explained as "elevation of a warrior to the status of *shahid* (martyr)".⁵⁸ Therefore, involvement in jihad was one reason of Azerbaijanis involvement. Another motivating reason was Azerbaijanis' desire to be part of ISIS and participation in the creation of *Caliphate*. Third reason regards financial opportunities, according to which foreign fighters were paid for fighting. Some believe that new members were recruited by radical, militant Salafists by offering financial support. Therefore, it should not be surprising why young uneducated and untrained people were noticed among militants. Joining terrorist group also gives this segment of population an opportunity of self-expression and improvement of social status.

Regarding geographical issues, the lack of common border was not such an issue. Azerbaijani citizens can reach Syria and Iraq only by crossing Georgia and Iran. In reality, citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan do not need to have entry visa to cross the borders when entering these countries, which means that they are free of legal obstacles.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Lonardo, *The Islamic State and the Connections*.

⁵⁶ Ibrahimov, 'The Participation of Azerbaijan Citizens,' 164-169.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 166-167; Leonardo, "The Islamic State and the Connections".

⁵⁸ Ibrahimov, 'The Participation of Azerbaijan Citizens,' 164-169.

Little information exists about sources of recruitment. However, it seems that ISIS recruitment was mainly done by the internet, especially when several new pages were created online in 2012, when IS official website al-Hayat started its propaganda in Turkish language.⁵⁹ One domestic propagator of ISIS was Omar Abu Mucahid, whose lectures praised ISIS and its founders, and called for jihad. In 2014, Azerbaijanis themselves were posting photos in the Internet, where they destroy their passports and identification cards.⁶⁰ On 24 May of 2016 IS released video, which was directed specifically to Azerbaijanis. It was entitled as “Message From the Lands of the Ribat to Occupied Azerbaijan”⁶¹, with Abdulla Kavkazskiy as a speaker, who called for joining ISIS or conducting attacks in Azerbaijan.

Al-Qaeda

Some claim that al Qaeda created its network in Azerbaijan; there is a belief that Azerbaijani mujahedeen were supported by al Qaeda’s office established in Baku during the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh from 1988-1994. For instance, Charalampidis indicates that one of al-Qaeda’s cells was established in Baku in 1995.⁶² However, there are no existing facts showing the presence of al Qaeda in Azerbaijan; instead, Azerbaijan was used as an appropriate geographical territory for communication. After 9/11 neutralizing al-Qaeda’s cells became a fashionable sign to show a country’s importance to the anti-terrorism coalition. Azerbaijan also followed that scenario. Azerbaijani media posted information about al Qaeda’s intention to conduct attacks in Azerbaijan because of its involvement in anti-terrorism coalition. However, Azerbaijan is not so attractive for al-Qaeda, and will not bring much benefit. The only target that can be of interest is Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, the US and Israeli embassies.⁶³

The case of assassination attempt on Russia’s president Vladimir Putin in Azerbaijan

The first noted assassination attempt on Vladimir Putin was prepared in Azerbaijan in the end of 2000 during his trip to South Caucasus although the war in North Caucasus was going on. Being only six months in the office, Azerbaijan was considered as the first country for a visit. The mission towards the support of Chechnya has already been established in Azerbaijan, where terrorists have got a foothold. While envis-

⁵⁹ Leonardo, “*The Islamic State and the Connection’s*”.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Charalampidis, *Sponsored to kill*, 4.

⁶³ Valiyev, “Foreign Terrorist Groups”

aging the president's visit, the Alley of Heroes was supposed to become a place for assassination, which V. Putin would obviously have to visit.

A terrorist being in charge of the terrorist act was a citizen of Iraq born in 1974, so called Chanan Ahmed Rustam, also known as "Abdurrahman Bukhari, Abu Sayyid Al Kurdi, Magomedov Kanan Ahmedovich".⁶⁴ Being already noticed in May 2000 by the Azerbaijanis National Security Services, with the joined actions of Russian Intelligence Services Rustam was detected when making a call to Khattab. He was a professional terrorist with received trainings from al-Qaeda camps, being responsible for several terrorist acts in Pakistan and Afghanistan, who later on turned out to be a trainer of explosive acts. The assassination was planned to be through the one call: the newest bomb systems were imported in Azerbaijan, which were linked to a mobile phone SIM cards. It should be mentioned that the mobile phones in 2000 were considered as luxury items. As planned, the Alley of Heroes would have to be exploded by one phone call. This is the unique and a demonstrative example, which shows that already in 2000 Azerbaijan was a hub for terrorists. Probably this is not the only case, while the significant one, proving the statements of many scholars that Azerbaijan was a territory for communication between terrorists.

Analysis of domestic factors

Content analysis of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Freedom of Religious Belief"

The law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Freedom of Religious Belief" was first been introduced in 1992, and later been amended twenty times between 1992 and 2015. The year of 2009 can be considered as a turning point in government activities, as the authorities came to suppress the religion with more restrictions by adopting new amendments on 8 May 2009. The further restrictive amendments have been introduced also in October 2015 with new provisions.

There are some contradictions in the law itself. According to the law, the Muslim Caucasus Board (MCB) is the entity, which all mosques should belong to. This provision contradicts Article 5, which states "Religion and religious organizations are separate from the state in the Republic of Azerbaijan..."⁶⁵ Then, Article 6 states "the state educational system is separate from religion...religious philosophy and basis of sacred religious books

⁶⁴ "Assassination Attempt: How Muslim Terrorists Planned to Kill the Russian President in Azerbaijan," *Vesti.ru*, March 20, 2018), <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2997443> (accessed October 7, 2018).

⁶⁵ Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan. On Freedom of Religious Beliefs, (1992), https://www.econet/en/file/local/1399923/1226_1495184122_azerbaijan-law-freedom-religious-beliefs-1992-am2015-en.pdf (accessed October 7, 2018).

may be included in the curricula of the state educational institutions”.⁶⁶ However, no other option is available in case those teachings are against a person’s and his/her parents’ religion and beliefs, which contradicts Article 1, according to which “[parents] may educate their children in accordance with their religion or their attitude towards religion”.⁶⁷ The religious literature, audio and video materials must be controlled under the religion law. The Article 22 claims that “organizations, and other natural and legal persons who are not religious organizations, may produce, import, export and freely disseminate religious literature, items and other information materials”.⁶⁸ However, the right of distribution of literature is allowed only with the permission of a relevant state body (State Committee).

Much attention was devoted to the registration of the religious organizations under the 2009 amendments. This was illustrated in Article 12, which requires the registration of the religious organizations, otherwise they are considered as illegal. Any manifestation of freedom of religion by more than one person is seen illegal without state permission. The amendments of 2011 of Article 12 went further stating that only those religious organizations having 50 founding members (not 10 members as it used to be) could have a registration, meaning that those without this amount of members would not be considered eligible for applying for registration. While besides the submission of information about citizenship, dates of birth of founding members, copies of identity cards, Article 12 also requires the religious organization to present the information about the future activities and their methods and their objectives. However, the law does not indicate what are the indicators of making decisions to provide the registration or reject it. Moreover, no point about possibility to appeal the decision exists; what Article 12 only claims is “religious organizations denied state registration shall be informed of the reasons for this, citing relevant legislative provisions”.⁶⁹ The time required for making the decision is not indicated also. Additionally, religious organizations can perform religious activities only at legally registered address, and would face punishment if build or reconstruct religious buildings without the consent of the State Committee.

There are also extra restrictions for Muslim community. According to 2015 amendments, Article 7 of the Law on Religion states that all Islamic communities must “present a report on their activity”⁷⁰ with details about their actions and finances. However, the law does not specify how often an organization should present the report. Article 21 claims that non-citizens of Azerbaijan and those citizens of the country who received foreign education are prohibited to perform Islamic activities and rituals.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

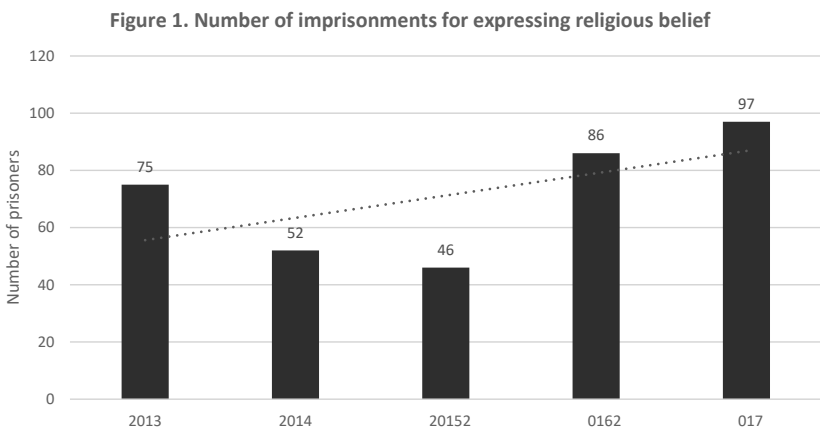
⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Measuring the religiosity of Azerbaijan's society

To understand the dynamics of the government repressive policies, Figure 1. is presented to show the number of imprisonments for religious belief by years. The numbers of prisoners of 2014, 2015, 2016 years are taken from “Azerbaijan 2014 International Religious Freedom Report”⁷¹, “Azerbaijan 2015 International Religious Freedom Report”⁷², “Azerbaijan 2016 International Religious Freedom Report”⁷³, and from “The Working Group on Unified List of Political Prisoners Presents Updated List”⁷⁴ for the data of 2017, and “Azerbaijan: an Updated List of Political Prisoners” for the data of 2013.⁷⁵

Figure 1.illustrates the deterioration of the situation in Azerbaijan, as the tendency of increased number of imprisonments for religious belief has been identified. While the number of prisoners decreased from 2014 to 2015, probably the amendments presented in 2015 triggered the increase of number of imprisonments. In addition, the press release of “The Working Group on Unified List of Political Prisoners Presents Updated List”⁷⁶ (2018) states that as of March 22, 2018, 83 people were imprisoned expressing freedom of religion.



⁷¹ United States Department of State, “Azerbaijan 2014 International Religious Freedom Report,” <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/238568.pdf> (accessed May 7, 2018).

⁷² United States Department of State, “Azerbaijan 2015 International Religious Freedom Report,” <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256377.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2018).

⁷³ United States Department of State, “Azerbaijan 2016 International Religious Freedom Report,” <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269034.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2018).

⁷⁴ “The Working Group on Unified List of Political Prisoners Presents Updated List 2018,” *Smdtaz.org*, August 27, 2017, <https://smdtaz.org/en/the-working-group-on-unified-list-of-political-prisoners-presents-updated-list/> (accessed December 7, 2018).

⁷⁵ “Azerbaijan: an Updated List of Political Prisoners,” *Civic Solidarity*, October 1, 2013, <http://www.civicsolidarity.org/article/800/azerbaijan-updated-list-political-prisoners> (accessed October 7, 2018).

⁷⁶ The Working Group on Unified List of Political Prisoners Presents Updated List 2018

While the above presented data illustrates the increase of restrictions and imprisonments for expressing religious belief, it does not show the extent to which the society is referring to religion. For that, the data is gathered from Caucasus Barometer⁷⁷ of the years from 2009 to 2013, which identifies the level of religiosity of the Azerbaijan's society. To measure the religiosity five variables – the importance of religion life in a daily life, importance of following traditions, attendance of religious services, the extent to which the respondents perceive themselves as religious people and trust towards religious institutions – have been chosen.

Figure 2. The level of religiosity of the society

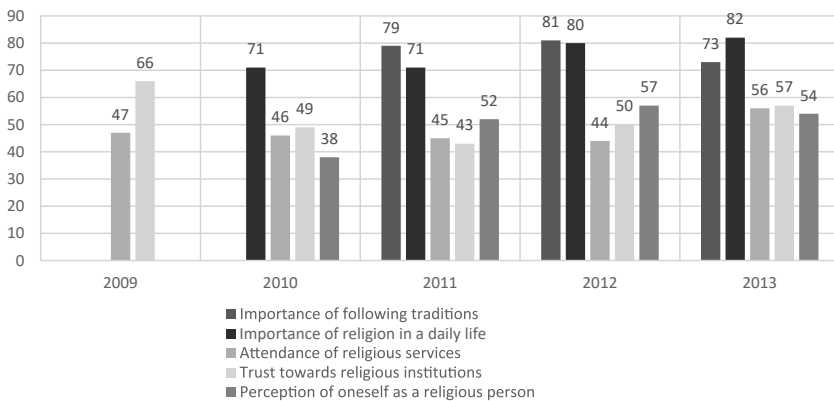


Figure 2. reveals that the religion among the society of Azerbaijan has become an important element in their life, as the number of respondents, who perceives the religion as an important element of their daily life has increased from 2010 (71%) to 2013 (82%). This fact has been accompanied by the increase of the level of attendance of religious services whether it is more than once a month or only on religious holidays, showing the rise from 47% as of 2009 to 56% as of 2013. The same tendency concerns the importance of following the traditions. This can be considered another proof of increased level of religiosity of Azerbaijan's society. The tendency of trust towards religious institutions is also an interesting phenomenon. The highest rate of trust towards religious institutions was in 2009 with 66%. Probably this number was dictated by the adoption of new 2009 amendments of the "Law on Freedom of Religious Belief". While the number dropped in 2010 (49%), there is still a tendency of increase as of 2013. Finally, the same tendency is observed regarding the society's perception of being religious. The number of those

⁷⁷ Caucasus Research Resource Centers, *Caucasus Barometer*; <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/> (accessed October 7, 2018).

perceiving themselves as religious ones rose systematically from 2010 to 2013, reaching 57% of those identifying themselves as religious people.

Analysis of external influences

Azerbaijanis in Syria and Iraq

On 3 March of 2017 a conference “The role of youth in the fight against terrorism, extremism and radicalism” was held in Azerbaijan.⁷⁸ According to the State Security Service Lieutenant General Madat Guliyev, around 900 Azerbaijanis have been fighting in the ranks of ISIS. As he also reported, 85 people were condemned on terrorist activities, as of 2016, 54 Azerbaijani citizens were stripped of citizenship for joining the terrorist fight in Syria and Iraq.⁷⁹ In addition, he also admitted, that radicalism has becoming a widespread phenomenon in Azerbaijan.

An interesting trend is the significant number of women aiming to travel to Syria with their children and those women refusing to return to Azerbaijan even if their husbands had been killed. Although there is not an estimated number, such cases are not few. Many cases have been reported in 2014. Recently, Kavkaz Uzel media outlet reported about 300 killed Azerbaijani citizens and more than 100 Azerbaijani families with children still staying in the ranks of ISIS.⁸⁰ On 19 February of 2018, Azerbaijani media informed that 11 women were sentenced to life in jail for being in the ranks of ISIS, one of whom was an Azerbaijani woman.⁸¹ As women claimed, they were forced to join ISIS by their husbands, who pretended to be wounded. As one of the women stated “I wanted to live in an Islamic state where sharia is the law of the land,”⁸² According to media reports, ISIS pays money to those, who wants to bring his/her family in Syria and Iraq.⁸³ As noted, now Azerbaijani children replenish the ranks of ISIS.

Media also covers the cases of those, who received training outside of Azerbaijan within ISIS and were involved in the operations of creating

⁷⁸ “State Security Officer: More Than 900 Azerbaijanis in the Ranks of ISIS,” *Meydan TV*, March 7, 2017, <https://www.meydan.tv/en/site/news/21656/> (accessed March 15, 2018).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ “Vlasti Obyavili o Gibeli na Blizhnem Vostoke Bolee 300 Azerbaidzhancev,” (in Russian) [The authorities announced the death of more than 300 Azerbaijanis in the Middle East], *Kavkaz Uzel*, January 29, 2018), <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/315784/> (accessed May 7, 2018).

⁸¹ “Turkish, Azerbaijani Women Sentenced to Life in Prison for Collaborating with ISIL,” *News.az*, February 19, 2018, <https://news.az/articles/society/129135> (accessed April 28, 2018).

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ “Uchyoniye Nazvali Prichiny Radikalizatsii Molodyozhi Yuzhnogo Kavkaza,” (in Russian), [“The Scientists named the reasons of the youth radicalization in South Caucasus”] *Kavkaz Uzel*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/318200/> (accessed April 29, 2018).

new armed group.⁸⁴ After getting trained, they joined the battlefield, fighting in the ranks of terrorist groups. In June 2014, APA reported about Islamic passports that ISIS had started to distribute to its militant members. According to the report, there are also Azerbaijanis, who had already obtained Islamic passports.⁸⁵ It became clear when the photos of those passports started to appear on social networks. Moreover, in line with new Islamic passports, the ISIS members shared photos tearing their previous Azerbaijani passports, illustrating that they were not inclined to return to Azerbaijan.

Such cases when Azerbaijanis were noticed fighting or having links to terrorist groups are immense. Repeatedly the media in Azerbaijan reports and makes publications where Azerbaijani fighters, even being killed, had been identified. What above presented cases illustrate, is that no Azerbaijani citizen fought for the government, despite Shi'a being the majority in Azerbaijan. Rather, based on media reports, all Azerbaijanis fought in the ranks of rebel groups, particularly within ISIS.

Some Azerbaijani fighters appeared to find themselves in dire economic conditions before they joined terrorist groups. Not being able to provide a well-being to his/her family, people joined the ranks of terrorist groups. However, another phenomenon has also appeared in case of Azerbaijani fighters. It illustrates that some fighters had better economic conditions and good educational backgrounds, when left the country. In this case, the motivation differs from the previous case.

Azerbaijani citizens continue staying in the ranks of terrorist organizations. Those remaining constitute a danger in case they return to Azerbaijan. First, when combating military operations, Azerbaijanis, fighting in the ranks of terrorist organizations, have become indoctrinated about the ISIS ideology, established the networks with jihadists whom they met during military activities, know about training methods- all these may trigger further radicalization and the spread of jihadist ideology. Second, those, who may return to their homeland, would return with knowledge of use of military weapons and military expertise. This may become an open window for creating new terrorist cells. What is clear, is that while the impact of the rise of terrorist groups, such as ISIS, is evident, the motivating factors of joining the ranks of military groups stay not well-understood.

⁸⁴ *Turkish, Azerbaijani Women Sentenced to Life in Prison for Collaborating with ISIL.*

⁸⁵ "ISIS Issues Passports to Azerbaijani Fighters in Syria," APA, 2014, <http://en.apa.az/azerbaijani-news/developments/isis-issues-passports-to-azerbaijani-fighters-in-syria-photo.html> (accessed May 2, 2018).

Iranian influence today

As already mentioned after gaining independence in 1991, many Muslim countries tried to spread their influence over Azerbaijan. The Iranian influence nowadays worth to be examined. The religious activities sponsored by Iran are considered successful by many scholars. According to both official and nonofficial data, nowadays there are 150 madrassas, 22 of which are controlled by Iran.⁸⁶ Besides those, there are also 8 representative institutions of Iran.

The process of radicalization was more vivid during so called “Nardaran case”. The rural region of Nardaran on the Absheron peninsula is considered as the most religious one, which is influenced by Iran. The data taken from Caucasus Barometer presented in Table 1. shows that the level of religiosity is more robust in rural areas, rather than in capital or in urban territories. Therefore, Nardaran is considered as a significant example of a region under the external influence, in this case, Iran.

Table 1. Importance of religion by types of settlement

	2010	2011	2012	2013
Capital	28%	30%	23%	22%
Urban	32%	36%	37%	29%
Rural	41%	34%	40%	49%

People of this region are often involved in clashes with authorities, out of which most notably one is the protest against the ban of headscarves, an action, which provoked conservative inhabitants. In response to this decision, and also because of repression of Shia community, the radical Salafi inhabitants organized mass demonstrations. On November 26 of 2015 Azerbaijani forces organized a raid in Nardaran, during which 5 Inhabitants and 2 policemen were killed, and many protesters were put in a jail for 10-20 years. After the amendments had been adopted in 2009, many mosques in Nardaran did not get the registration, because of which were closed. However, after the raid of 2015, other mosques also were closed. The only one, which get the registration was Juma mosque.

In 2013 Azerbaijan eased off the restrictions over the preaching in public places. The actions aimed at limiting the flow of Azerbaijanis in Syria and Iraq. However, it also contributed to Iran’s reaction and increase of its influence. According to Azerbaijan Iran is working towards recruiting Azerbaijani society to visit the holy city Karbala in Iraq. In ad-

⁸⁶ Ehsan Soltani Nezhad and Pahlevan Mohammedali, “ The Madrasa at Iran: role of tradition and religious education,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3:2, (2018): 43-52.

dition, as estimated, the number of pilgrims increased by 33%, counting for around 30,000 Azerbaijanis during 2017⁸⁷, although it cannot be stated that there were no any other intervening variables motivating people to visit Karbala.

In addition, children have been noticed participating in Ashura celebration and rituals such as self-flagellation. It is hardly likely that those children, wearing hijab, have a clear understanding of their religion. Such actions contribute to the radicalization of the society. The legislation was proposed over prohibiting the involvement of children in such ceremonies as Ashura. However, the idea has been criticized by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who commented “We should appreciate this great opportunity and the glorious mourning ceremonies of the Shiites in Azerbaijan, because they will strengthen the identity of Azerbaijan’s nation and country”.⁸⁸

All these actions show the tendency of Iran’s increased influence. What should be mentioned is that in line with having oppressive measures and indiscriminate persecution, people are becoming more vulnerable to external religious influence, which is proved both by the increased level of persecutions, religiosity and external influence in the face of Iran and Syria and Iraq. Therefore, the internal factor of oppressive policies push the Azerbaijani society towards looking for other means of expressing their religion, while the external influence fuels the willingness and involvement in international terrorism is seen as the best alternative for the Azerbaijani society.

Conclusion

The analysis of the present study confirms that there are both domestic and external factors influencing the religiosity and radicalization of Azerbaijan’s society. It seems that the stages of Islamization, radicalization and involvement in international terrorism are visible in case of Azerbaijan. The revival of Islam in the country was the result of ideological gap and suppressed religion under the Soviet legacy. Later on, being influenced by Iran, missionaries penetrated from Gulf countries and jihadi fighters from Chechnya after Russo-Chechen wars, Azerbaijani society witnessed the increase in radicalization, which later on pushed them towards the involvement in international terrorism.

⁸⁷ “Azerbaijan Wrestles with Rising Iranian Influence,” *Eurasianet*, December 27, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-wrestles-with-rising-iranian-influence> (accessed May 4, 2018).

⁸⁸ “We Must Solemnly Oppose Disruption of Iran-Azerbaijan Fraternal Relations,” *Khamenei.ir*, November 2, 2017, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5253/We-must-solemnly-oppose-disruption-of-Iran-Azerbaijan-fraternal> (accessed May 5, 2018).

The level of religiosity is increasing in Azerbaijan in line with increased oppressive measures, as shown in analysis. The content analysis of law on “On Freedom of Religious Belief” asserted that the policy imposes greater restrictions on religious groups and ability to perform religious activities. These restrictions only increase the disappointment of the society, pushing them towards the radicalization. Azerbaijan’s restrictive law on religion seems to be used for justification of fines, punishments and police raids, while increasing the cases of legal restrictions. The vague wording and interpretations open the space for maneuvering among decisions over persecution and imprisonments.

The analysis of Iranian influence nowadays has shown that Iran continues to spread its influence by making the society more religious and advocating for strengthening their identity. What comes to Azerbaijanis involvement in terrorist groups, a number of them is still fighting for the ISIS, the fact which is proved my analysis of the news of different media outlets. As the analysis of tendency of involvement in ISIS showed, all Azerbaijani citizens fought for the terrorist group. Then, the cases of those leaving the country with the aim of receiving training for joining the ranks of terrorist groups also constitute a factor of increased tendency of radicalization.

To combine the findings – the tendency of increasing religiosity, the growing number of imprisonments for religious belief and restrictive policy measures, expanded Iranian religious influence and a number of those still involved in the ranks of terrorist groups – it can be inferred that there are prospects of increasing tendency of radicalization, which push the society towards involvement in international terrorism.

Based on analyses of domestic and external factors the hypothesis is accepted. The analysis of domestic policy measures proved that oppressive policy measures restricted freedoms of the society making them more radicalized. In addition, in line with having oppressive measures and indiscriminate persecution, people are becoming more vulnerable to external religious influence. Therefore, the relationship of religious external influence and oppressive domestic measures pushes the society towards international terrorism.