

Workshop “Synthesis of Islam and Nationalism in Armenia’s neighboring countries (Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and Georgia): transformations of identity and politics”

On June 7, 2024, the Institute of Oriental Studies of the National Academy, NAS RA, organized an international workshop on “Synthesis of Islam and Nationalism in Armenia’s neighboring countries (Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia): transformations of identity and politics.” The workshop is held in the framework of the “Supporting Leading Research” project № 21AG-6A081 of the Higher Education and Science Committee of the MESCS RA.

The research group members and invited speakers discussed issues concerning the synthesis, coexistence, and interaction of Islam and nationalism within the political, social, and cultural systems of Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In recent decades, four neighbors of Armenia – Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – have faced deep socio-political transformations that have intensified the convergence of religion and nationalism and the rise of conservatism. These realities shaped public discourse, promoting political and ideological currents typical of right and left populism, extremism, anti-Westernism, and a backlash against multiculturalism.

The research project aims to investigate the internal political and geopolitical reasons for the convergence of religion and nationalism in the countries bordering Armenia, to examine the factors that feed these processes, their political and socio-cultural manifestations, and their consequences. Using a comparative research method, the research team practices the latest technological solutions created by artificial intelligence and digital humanities. By combining humanities research methods and the opportunities provided by information technologies, the project research group analyzes the internal political developments and the transformation of the public discourse in the neighboring countries of Armenia.

The group presented the research project's midterm findings at the workshop, including articles published in and accepted by high-impact international scientific journals. Additionally, the research group outlined its upcoming plans, focusing on the procedures for organizing the admission of postgraduate students into the program and conducting field research. The project's website (www.islam-nationalism.org) and its tools and structure were presented.

In his report, “Political manifestations of Islamic Nationalism and Conservatism during the AKP’s era”, Vahram Ter-Matevosyan noted that an analysis of school curricula in Turkey shows that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has used the education system from the top to bottom since 2012 to gradually Islamize social relations and public spaces, implement social engineering, and rediscover and expand conservative social values and traditions.

The Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Presidency of Religious Affairs have been instrumental and ongoing in replacing the Kemalist basis of Turkey's

national identity with an Islamic one. Despite all this, the goal of the AKP's educational policy has not been to end secular/secular order but rather to maximize the Islamic content in a comprehensive reorganization of the educational system and to provide opportunities for development and self-expression for believers. These social groups have been perceived as marginalized for decades.

In his report, “The Rabia of reis: symbols of Islamic Nationalism in contemporary Turkey”, Varuzhan Geghamyan mentioned that political symbols remain crucial in contemporary Turkish political culture. They perform several key functions in government communication, public mobilization, and ideological struggle. In recent years, the ruling elite has created several dominant symbols that reflect the core values and ideological currents the AKP party professes and ensure the legitimacy of President R.T. Erdogan's power. The report refers to five main symbols (rabia, reis, Aksaray, Çamlıca Mosque, Democracy, and National Unity Day).

In the report, entitled “The consequences of Soviet Ethnic Federalism and Islam in South Caucasus developments”, Elahé Koolae noted that after the collapse of the USSR, an ideological vacuum emerged in the post-Soviet space, resulting in increased external religious and cultural influences. The speaker emphasized the Iranian experience. She noted that Iran was remarkably unified with Azerbaijan through shared historical, religious, and cultural ties. While Iran sought to foster cultural cooperation, these efforts were often perceived as hostile by Azerbaijani authorities. The speaker emphasized Iran's intention to pursue deep cultural ties with Azerbaijan was not politically motivated.

In his speech, “The Discourse of Cultural Iran as an endeavor to synthesize Islam and Nationalism”, Vardan Voskanyan explored the ideological context of “cultural Iran”, highlighting the role of Islam, and examined the process and trends of the “culturalization” of Islam. In this context, religion comprises a fundamental element of cultural Iran. His concept of “cultural Iran” positions the country within a distinct value framework, both domestically and internationally, emphasizing Iran's civilizational significance and, by extension, its strategic importance in the global and regional scene.

In his speech, “Can History Open the crossroads of peace? Towards a multi-perspective approach (opportunities and obstacles)”, Ali Kalirad outlined Iran's approaches to the security architecture of the South Caucasus and discussed the actions undertaken within the framework of the “Crossroads of Peace” project initiated by the Armenian authorities. He also addressed the new geopolitical realities that emerged in the region after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. The speaker also provided a historical overview of Armenia-Iran relations and detailed Iran's red-line policy on issues related to Armenia.

During the report titled “Iran and Armenia: a model of peaceful neighborhood and coexistence of Islam and Christianity”, Morteza Moghadam Alkamy presented the transformations in the relations between the two countries after the collapse of the USSR, where the religious factor did not pose an obstacle, but the two peoples aimed to recognize each other and cooperate in a cultural context, also

based on historical experience. The speaker presented the varying perceptions of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue across different segments of Iranian society, particularly in the Iranian Azerbaijan province, where Turkic-speaking Iranians reside. He referenced the late spiritual leader of the province, Ayatollah Muhammad Ali Hashemi, who tragically passed away in a helicopter accident, highlighting his strong support for Armenia-Iran friendship and cooperation. The discussion also addressed the widespread support within Iranian society, including the Turkic-speaking regions, for peace in the area and the future of Armenia-Iran relations. The conversation then shifted to the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Armenian Consulate in the Iranian Azerbaijan province.

In her report entitled “The interaction of Islam and Nationalism in Georgia: transformations of Sunni Muslim communities,” Araks Pashayan outlined the spread of Islam and the transformations of Islam in Georgia, with a particular focus on the Russian Empire and Soviet periods during which Islamic affairs departments gained institutional significances. It was highlighted that following the collapse of the USSR, a national and Islamic revival occurred within Georgia’s Muslim communities, especially in Adjara. The presentation also addressed state-community relations, the Georgian authorities' policies toward ethno-religious and religious minorities, and the interplay between national and religious spheres in Adjara. Additionally, the speaker examined the perceptions and attitudes of the majority population towards Muslim Georgians. The ideological dominance of Georgian nationalism, its influence, and the challenges Muslims face were also discussed. Furthermore, the speaker covered the Sunni community in Tbilisi, the Juma Mosque, the evolution of Sunni radical-Salafi sentiments in the Pankisi Gorge, and the challenges that religious radicalism poses to the state.

In her report titled “Shiite Islam in Georgia: the unveiling of the identity traits”, Nazeli Navasardyan presented issues related to the demographic statistics and primary areas of residence of the Muslim population of Shiites in Georgia. The report included discussions on mosques, religious schools, and religious institutions in regions with significant Shiite communities. The "Borchali" discourse was also explored, highlighting its ideological and political dimensions. The speaker emphasized that the Shiite population of Georgia is, in general, loyal to the Georgian authorities, which, in turn, is trying to implement social and educational reforms in the mentioned regions, has developed a clear set of tools for working with minorities, including the Muslim population, making the processes within the communities controllable. The impact of external factors in the Shiite regions of Georgia and the resulting transformations in religious perceptions and identity were touched upon. The various influences of Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan on the Islamic communities of Georgia and the new realities that have emerged as a development were presented.

In her report titled “Creating the image of the enemy: The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the dehumanization of Armenians in Ilham Aliyev’s official speeches”, Naira Sahakyan examined the

process of the construction of the "image of the enemy" and the dehumanization of Armenians in the speeches of Ilham Aliyev from 2016 to 2020. The research showed that in his speeches addressed to an external audience, Aliyev presents Armenia and Armenians as aggressors and violators of international law without identifying explicit dehumanizing expressions. The situation is different in speeches addressed to Azerbaijanis. When Aliyev speaks to his internal audience, he very often uses expressions such as "savages," "beings devoid of reason," "hyenas," etc. This is a clear manifestation of dehumanization. The leading discursive practice used by Aliyev to dehumanize Armenians has three main components: the identification of Armenians as the sole threat to Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis, the portrayal of Armenians as inhuman and barbaric, and the emphasis on Azerbaijan's superiority in eliminating the threat posed by Armenians. The combination of these three leads to the legitimization and implementation of genocidal actions against Armenians.

In their report titled "Azerbaijan's Islamic diplomacy in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020: the role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation", Araks Pashayan and Nazeli Navasardyan touched upon the Islamic direction of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, noting that for the first time they put the term "Azerbaijan's Islamic Diplomacy" into scientific circulation, which is directly related to the close cooperation between international Islamic organizations, in particular, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation-Azerbaijan. The speakers noted that after the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan wanted to receive the support of the Islamic world in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Membership in the OIC, as well as the unconditional support of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, helped to form an Islamic agenda against Armenia with sharp accents. Azerbaijan exploited several issues sensitive to the Islamic world, including the issue of mosques, periodically drawing the attention of the Islamic world to the issue of the "destruction" of Azerbaijani historical and cultural monuments by Armenians, turning the OIC into a tool. The OIC is a club where the idea of Islamic solidarity and voting against Armenia guides member states. Despite the steps taken against Armenia's reputation, the OIC cannot harm the Arab direction of Armenia's foreign policy in a broad sense.

At the conclusion part of the workshop, it was emphasized that over the past decades and particularly in the four years adjacent to Armenia, Islam, and nationalism have emerged as two central ideological pillars shaping the political, social, educational, and economic systems in Turkey, Iran, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. These systems are transforming rapidly, significantly altering identity and public relations paradigms. The speaker concluded that without addressing the issues above and current trends, conducting a comprehensive study or thoroughly assessing the dynamics and prospects of the complex religious and political processes unfolding in Armenia's neighboring countries would be impossible.