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 EUROPEAN CENTRE
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MINORITY ISSUES

Georgia's Muslim Community: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

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ECMI WORKING PAPER #58

February 2012



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ECMI Working Paper
European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI)
Director: Dr. Tove H. Malloy
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The principle objective of this paper is to examine the creation of the new Administration of Georgian Muslims; how and why it has been created and what its specific role, function and means of operating will be. Most importantly, it will examine how the administration has been received by Georgia's Muslims and how it will affect them. However, in order to understand fully both the causes and implications of the new administration, it is first necessary to understand the Muslim community which it is attempting to manage. Significantly, this administrative change has been carried out against the backdrop of a Muslim community which has not only been in a state of change for a number of years, but is also far from united.

Conor Prasad, February 2012
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I. INTRODUCTION

In early May 2011, an Administration of Georgian Muslims (AGM) was established.¹ Although founded with government help and by government officials, it is officially a non-governmental organisation (NGO) whose aim is to manage and address problems and issues affecting Georgia's diverse Muslim population. The new administration replaces the semi-independent, Baku-based Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM) which until recently was the governing body for Georgia's Muslims.

Senior Georgian government sources maintain that the new body was created in response to popular demand and that it has been welcomed by the majority of Georgia's Muslims.² However, Muslim leaders and communities in the predominantly Azeri-populated Kvemo Kartli region reveal substantial opposition to the form in which the organisation has been created. Not surprisingly, its creation has also been sharply criticised by the head of CBM, Sheikh ul-Islam, Allahshukur Pashazade, and his representative in Tbilisi, Haji Ali Aliyev.

In February 2011, the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD), published a report which points to a growing role of

religion in the south-eastern Kvemo Kartli region's public life that is fuelling tensions between different communities.³ It identifies a heightened fear of ethnic and religious violence as one of the key challenges facing the region, stating that there are low-level incidents taking place between local Muslims and Christians, as well as indications of "increased tensions and possible conflict between liberal and fundamentalist Muslim groups".⁴

This paper will principally focus on dynamics and relationships within the Muslim community. It will deal primarily with Georgia's ethnic-Azeri community, which is simultaneously the largest ethnic and religious minority in the country and is concentrated in the Kvemo Kartli region; the main regional focus of this paper. Reference will also be made to a smaller community of Chechen Kists who inhabit the Pankisi Gorge in the north-eastern reaches of the country. The ethnic-Georgian Muslim population of Adjara will not be addressed. Thus, we can say that the paper deals with Georgia's non-Georgian Muslim population.

¹ Officially, the administration was registered as an NGO on 5 January 2011.

² ECMI Interview with senior government official, Tbilisi, August 2011.

³ Peace, Security and Stability in Kvemo Kartli, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, February 2011. Available at:

http://www.cipdd.org/files/40_532_272132_Communityinfo_rmedstrategy-KvemoKartli-eng-reduced.pdf

⁴ Ibid.



Senior Georgian government sources have expressed particular concern regarding the level of foreign influence amongst Georgia's Muslim population in general, and in the Kvemo Kartli region in particular. As mentioned, until the creation of the new structure, Georgia's Muslims were officially subject to CBM. As this paper will show, CBM had limited influence and authority amongst Georgia's Muslims and was considered by many to be corrupt. Nevertheless, it both contributed to and highlighted the long-standing religious and cultural ties between Georgia's Azeri population and Azerbaijan.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, former Presidents Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze paid little attention to Georgia's regions, meaning that there was limited regulation or supervision from either the CBM or the Georgian government with regard to Georgia's Muslim communities. During this time, a number of foreign missionaries entered the region and several religious organisations, both Sunni and Shia, were established. Most have links with other Muslim countries. In Kvemo Kartli this is predominantly with Iran, although there is also a Turkish-funded madrassah (religious school) in the village of Meori Kesalo.

The demarcation between adherents of both traditional Islam and Shiism, and followers of fundamentalist Salafism is also significant.⁵ The number of Salafis in Georgia is relatively small, but has grown in recent years and this growth is thought to be continuing. Salafis, who follow a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, are often referred to as Wahhabis, a term used pejoratively in many post-Soviet countries to refer to all pious Muslims.⁶ Although Salafis in Georgia are generally not politically active, relations between them and other Georgian Muslims are often strained.

The working paper will thus first examine the situation of Georgia's non-Georgian Muslim population. Through a number of key interviews and focus group meetings it will analyse the main influences at work in the region and how they impact on Muslim religiosity and on relations between and within different religious groupings. It will pay particular attention to the activities of religious organisations, in particular those linked with Iran, and determine to what extent the Georgian government is right to have concern about their activities. Secondly it will examine the government response to the situation,

⁵ It is important to note, however, that none of these constitute unified or homogeneous groups in themselves.

namely the creation of a new Administration of Georgian Muslims.

Field research for this paper was carried out between May and November 2011, in Kvemo Kartli, Tbilisi, and the Pankisi Gorge. Except as otherwise indicated in the text or the footnotes, the conclusions expressed are the result of that direct work by the European Centre for Minority Issues.⁶

II. SECTION I: THE SITUATION: ISLAM AMONGST GEORGIA'S NON-GEORGIAN MUSLIMS

Islam has a long history in Georgia, having been introduced in the 8th century after the conquest of Tbilisi by the Arabs. It was adopted by what is now the Azeri population in the 11th century and today is considered a 'traditional minority religion' by the Georgian state.⁷ This report will focus primarily on Georgia's Azeris. However, there are several other Muslims groups in Georgia to which it will make reference: Chechen Kists who number some 8,000 and live primarily in several villages in the Pankisi Gorge in north-eastern Georgia and small groups of approximately 2,000 Sunni Muslim Avars who are compactly settled in three villages in the Kvareli district of the eastern Kakheti region.

Georgia's ethnic Azeri population is concentrated in the south-eastern Kvemo Kartli region (6,528 sq km) where there are some 226,000 Azeris (45.5 percent of the total regional population).⁸ Approximately 33,600 live in the eastern region of Kakheti, with a further 18,000 living in Tbilisi. The rest are scattered across other parts of the country. The total Azeri population in Georgia declined from 307,500 in 1989 to 284,761 in 2002,⁹ mainly due to emigration to Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia. Ethnic Azeris cite difficult socio-economic conditions, high unemployment, and uncertainty about the future, as the

⁶ The author would like to thank the staff of the ECMI Caucasus office, in particular Tom Trier, Shoren Kobaidze and Giorgi Sordia for their invaluable help and advice. I would also like to thank Jamila Babaeva.

⁷ According to the 2002 census, the total Muslim population in Georgia is 433,784 or 9.9 percent of the total population.

⁸ Figures are from Georgia's Azeri and Armenian Minorities, Crisis Group Europe Report N°178, 22 November 2006. Available at:

http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/178_georgia_s_armenian_and_azeri_minorities.pdf.

⁹ Based on the 1989 and 2002 censuses.



main causes of emigration. Nevertheless, Azeris remain both Georgia's largest ethnic and religious minority, and the fastest growing, due to a high birth rate.

Religious activity amongst Georgia's Azeris has traditionally been considered modest, with Muslim identity in the region tending to be based on culture and ethnicity rather than religion.¹⁰ Spokesperson for the Geyrat People's Movement in Marneuli,¹¹ Zumrud Qurbanov, states that "[for Azeris,] Islam is not a way of life, but closer to a way of thinking []." While many Georgian Azeris observe the fast of Ramadan, for example, others do not. Others might observe it only for a few days. Qurbanov stated that some Azeris even eat pork as an example of his belief that Georgian Azeris are not 'fanatics' and "more European than most Muslims living in Europe."¹²

By contrast, mullah of Tbilisi and head Sheikh of the newly created Administration of Georgian Muslims, Vagiph Akberov, states that the majority of

¹⁰ Regional Expert, Svante Cornell, writes for example that "the spread of Islam [to Azerbaijan] did not necessarily mean the conversion of the population into orthodox Islamic belief. Quite to the contrary, in many areas Islamic ideals were added to, or combined with pre-Islamic, mainly Zoroastrian beliefs, creating a syncretistic mix." He goes on to say that "Azerbaijan has generally been considered among the most progressive and secular-minded areas of the Muslims world, [] even before the Soviet Union's domination of the Caucasus implemented State-sponsored atheism and secularisation." For further information, see: *The Politicisation of Islam in Azerbaijan*, Svante E. Cornell, Silk Road Paper, October 2006. Available at: <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0610Azer.pdf>.

¹¹ The Geyrat people's movement was established in February 1990. At this time, Geyrat united Azeris from different backgrounds, with the Azeri intelligentsia playing a particularly significant role. Its initial aims were to halt the rapid emigration of Azeris from Georgia and to establish a dialogue with the Georgian national liberation movement. Geyrat has continued to play a mediating role between society and state and in defending the rights of members of the Azeri community. While its influence has waned in recent years, it is still held in esteem by many ethnic-Azeris and its leaders retain close links with political and media circles in Baku. For more detailed information, see: *Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia*, Jonathan Wheatley, Working Paper #23, European Centre for Minority Issues, February 2005.

Available at: <http://www.ecmi.de/publications/detail/23-obstacles-impeding-the-regional-integration-of-the-kvemo-kartli-region-of-georgia-173/>.

¹² ECMI Interview with Zumrud Qurbanov, Spokesperson for the Geyrat people's movement, Marneuli, August 2011.

Azeris in Georgia today "observe and hold on to Islam."¹³ Moreover, while, after the fall of Communism, many Muslims in Georgia and Azerbaijan were only vaguely familiar with the tenets of their faith, levels of religiosity have been rising, in common with religion and spirituality in general in Georgia and throughout the post-Soviet region. In one example, Elbrus Mamedov, head of the Tolerance Public Association for Human Rights, states that more and more people are making the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and also to religious sites in Iran.¹⁴

Similarly, Leila Jejelava, lecturer and expert in religious issues at Tbilisi State University, observes that while previously only old people frequented the mosque, now it is predominantly young people that do.¹⁵ The main Juma mosque in Tbilisi is generally full at Friday prayer services, and the majority of the congregation is young. The mosque serves not only the local Azeri community, but also an increasing number of foreign nationals. On a typical Friday, in addition to locals, there are Muslims from Pakistan, Arab, and African countries amongst others in attendance.¹⁶

Although the mosque is officially Sunni, it is used by both Sunnis and Shias - indicative of the traditionally good relations between the two denominations in the Georgian context. In Kvemo Kartli, mosques and religious organisations also generally cater equally for both Sunnis and Shias. Religious organisations which run madrassahs (religious schools) in the region stated that they do not ask whether a student is Sunni or Shia.¹⁷ An exact denominational breakdown among Azeri Muslims is not possible. Although according to most estimates, 60 to 70 percent of the Azeri population in Georgia is Shia, others argue that the population is more evenly split between Sunnis and Shias. Exact figures are not known.

Larger mosques in Kvemo Kartli are found in the towns of Dmanisi, Bolnisi and Marneuli, which many consider to be the 'capital' of Azeri-populated Georgian lands. There are smaller, more informal mosques in almost every town with an Azeri

¹³ ECMI Interview with Vagiph Akberov, Head Sheikh of the Administration of Georgian Muslims, Tbilisi, May 2011.

¹⁴ Report "Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011", Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities "MRMG", Tbilisi, December 2011.

¹⁵ ECMI Interview with Leila Jejelava, Lecturer at Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, June 2011.

¹⁶ ECMI observations at Juma mosque, Tbilisi, June-July 2011.

¹⁷ This point is disputed, however, and will be discussed further in following sections.



population.¹⁸ In many larger towns there are more than one.¹⁹ In addition, in some smaller villages ordinary houses are used for worship. Thus it is also hard to estimate the exact number of mosques in the region. Nevertheless, it is estimated that there are a total of some 79 mosques in the regions of Kvemo Kartli, Shida Kartli and Kakheti; of which 37 have been built since Georgia gained independence in 1991.²⁰

Influences (i) Religious Organisations

The establishment of a number of religious organisations in the last 10 to 15 years is a primary reason behind increased levels of religiosity amongst Azeri Muslims in Georgia. This mirrors, but to a lesser extent, the situation in Azerbaijan, which after 1991 became the target of several religious movements vying for influence.²¹ 70 years of Soviet rule had had a profound effect on religious practises in both regions, meaning that most Azeris had lost their attachment to organised religion and knowledge of the basic tenants of Islam was rudimentary. In common with many areas in the post-Soviet region, there was a 'religious vacuum' in Muslim-populated areas of Georgia. People knew little about their religion, but many were eager to learn.

In the 1990s, little government attention was paid to developments taking place in many of

Georgia's regions. The Georgian government did not intervene directly in the affairs of the citizens of Kvemo Kartli at this time and little effort was made to integrate the Azeri population.²² In this context, missionaries, in particular from Iran, came to Kvemo Kartli and brought young people with them to study in major centres of Islamic learning, such as Qom.²³ Having received a higher religious education at such institutes, these students later returned to Georgia, some of whom set up religious organisations. Religious organisations in Kvemo Kartli are thus generally run by local ethnic Azeris, but retain foreign links. They run madrassahs, fund mosque construction or renovation and engage in several other activities.

One of the largest and most active is Ahl ul-Bayt; Shiite and officially independent, but with informal links to Iran. Founded in 2001, it is based in the Kvemo Kartli town of Marneuli. Its head,²⁴ Rasim Mamedov, who received religious education in Qom in the 1990s, states that around 5,000 students have studied in Ahl ul-Bayt's madrassah since its founding, while currently there are 600.²⁵ The organisation's official aim is the religious education of the Azeri population of Georgia. It thus teaches courses on the Qur'an and other religious subjects related to Shiite theology. Since 2003, it has also offered lessons in Georgian, English, and information technology (computer classes). It organises events on important religious days and publishes a newspaper of the same name. It has also published a number of books on religious subjects and, since its founding in 2001, has organised trips of pilgrimage for some 500 Georgian Azeris to holy Shiite sites in Iran, namely Qom and Mashad.

¹⁸ It is important to note that Muslim mosques or houses of worship are not only used for the purposes of worship alone, but also serve as the centre for all social, cultural, political, and various activities. There is no special design or structure for a mosque. Thus, any building erected or used for congregational prayers is considered a mosque. Source: Mosque: its significance, Islam.com, <http://www.islam.com/salat/mosque.htm>.

¹⁹ In the village of Sadakhlo, on the Georgian-Armenian border, for example, there are four. One of these is considered a "Wahhabi" mosque by many villagers. It was built by an ethnic Azeri Georgian family who lived in Turkey for many years. Links with Turkey are said to persist, as local observers say they continue to receive money from religious groups in Turkey.

²⁰ ECMI Focus Group Meeting with Ahl ul-Bayt, Marneuli, July 2011.

²¹ There are some 1750 functioning mosques in Azerbaijan, following a boom in religious observance after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Construction of 92 of these mosques was funded from abroad: 63 from Kuwait, 24 from Turkey, and the rest from Qatar, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Source: Mosque Demolitions Under Way, ETH Zurich, 26 May 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch-Archive/Detail/?lng=en&id=100612>.

²² The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia, Jonathan Wheatley, ECMI Working Paper #44, September 2009. Available at: http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_lfpubdb/working_paper_44_en.pdf.

²³ Ramilya Aliyeva, an independent journalist, states that the early 1990s in particular were a time of significant psychological stress for Georgian Azeris, survival was the most important thing meaning many children didn't go to school. Aliyeva states that missionaries chose these children in particular. ECMI Interview with Ramilya Aliyeva, independent journalist, Tbilisi, November 2011.

²⁴ ECMI conducted a four-hour focus group meeting with the head, deputy head and senior teacher of Ahl ul-Bayt in early July 2011.

²⁵ Outside observers, however, argue that this number is exaggerated somewhat. ECMI Interviews, Marneuli, July-August 2011.



from Iranian books, celebrates Shia holy days and has even celebrated Ayatollah Khomeini's birthday. "It's not religion, it's politics,"³¹ he says. According to a 2005 article for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, some observers believed that Georgia's Azeri community was actually "changing before their eyes, overturning decades and even centuries of religious and cultural tolerance."³² It argued that one saw women dressed in Iranian-style head coverings more and more often on the streets of Marneuli and that Shias were being told to stick together "like a fist."³³

Recent events in neighbouring Azerbaijan also set a worrying precedent for the Georgian government. Between December 2010 and May 2011, a series of protests, organised by the banned Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, took place in the capital, Baku, against a de facto government ban on wearing Islamic head scarves in schools and universities.³⁴ Clerics in Iran slammed the Azerbaijani government's decision and called on Azerbaijanis to protest against it. One senior Iranian cleric, Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi, explicitly called on the people of Azerbaijan to reject the ban and stand up against it by practising civil disobedience.³⁵

³¹ ECMI Interview with Zumrud Qurbanov, Spokesperson for the Geyrat People's Movement, Marneuli, August 2011.

³² Georgia: Iranian Missionary Work Questioned, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 17 November 2005, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/georgia-iranian-missionary-work-questioned>.

³³ Ibid. See also: Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging trends and tensions, OSCE Discussion Paper, Hema Kotecha, July 2006. Available at: <http://www.osce.org/baku/23809>.

³⁴ Azerbaijan: Hijab Ban in Schools Fuels Debate in Baku on role of Islam, Eurasianet.org, 6 January 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62670>. This article also notes that "signs of resurgent Islam are commonplace" in Azerbaijan. Many large companies and NGOs, for example, now have special rooms in their offices where believers can perform ritual prayers during work hours, while women wearing traditional head coverings are seen throughout Baku. Given that the Azerbaijani Constitution provides for the right to religious freedom, to enforce the hijab ban in schools, the Ministry of Education cites the Law on Education, which stipulates that public school students wear uniforms.

³⁵ Azerbaijan: Feud over ban on Islamic head scarves fuels fears of Iranian meddling, Los Angeles Times Blog (Babylon & Beyond), 30 December 2010, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/12/azerbaijaniran-hijab-ban-school-girls-iran-cleric-fatwa-ideology-islam-war.html>.

The Iranian government is suspected of financing the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, with the aim of destabilising the Azerbaijani government. Nasib Nasibli, a former Azeri ambassador to Iran, said in a March 24 interview, "Iran doesn't want to see a democratic, pro-Western system in Azerbaijan, it wants to see pro-Iranian Islamists in charge."³⁶ The leader of the Islamic Party, Movsum Samadov, was arrested by Azerbaijani authorities on 7 January 2011 and is now standing trial for attempting to overthrow the government. The acting head, Elchin Manafov, dismisses allegations against his party, stating that Iran provides it only with 'moral' support.³⁷

Significantly, in September 2010, Ahl ul-Bayt organised sanctioned demonstrations in Marneuli against proposed plans by an American pastor to burn copies of the Qur'an.³⁸ Georgia Online reported on 14 September 2010 that 500-600 people marched from Ahl ul-Bayt's building in Marneuli to the town's Imam Ali Mosque, shouting: "God is great, there is no God but God. The Qur'an is a book of happiness and guidance."³⁹ Again in December 2010, Ahl ul-Bayt organised protests, this time in response to the 'hijab

³⁶Iran Influence in Azerbaijan May Unsettle BP's Oil Investments, Bloomberg, 31 March 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-30/iran-influence-in-azerbaijan-may-unsettle-bp-s-oil-investments.html>.

³⁷ Ibid; following the outbreak of protests in Egypt and across the Arab world, the Azerbaijani government became particularly cautious about any social unrest. In January a 20-year-old political activist was arrested after posting a message on his Facebook page calling for Egypt-style protests in Baku's central square. Like in Tunisia and Egypt, government corruption, nepotism, and heavy-handed limitations on freedom of speech are widely regarded as the primary source of public discontent in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan came in 134th out of 178 countries in an index of citizen perceptions of corruption, compiled by Transparency International in 2010. Azerbaijan: Egypt-inspired protests spread to Caucasus, raising tensions, Los Angeles Times blog (Babylon & Beyond), 10 February 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/02/azerbaijan-egypt-inspired-protests.html>.

³⁸ This Qur'an burning prompted protests throughout the Muslim world. See for example: Petraeus condemns Quran burning as protests rage on, CNN World, 3 April 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2011-04-03/world/afghanistan.protests_1_quran-protests-rage-pastor-terry-jones/2?_s=PM:WORLD.

³⁹ "

" (Georgian Azeris demonstrate against desecration of Qur'an), Gruzia Online, 14 September 2010, <http://www.apsny.ge/2010/soc/1284522018.php>.



ban' in Azerbaijan, thus coinciding with protests taking place in Baku. Geyrat spokesperson, Zumurud Qurbanov, recounts that about a thousand locals marched on the streets of Marneuli, held placards and shouted slogans. He alleges that Ahl ul-Bayt recorded the protest and sent it to Iranian authorities. The Azerbaijani Islamic news site, D y b r, reported that demonstrators held placards saying: "The hijab is a symbol of courage and honour".⁴⁰

When questioned about why they should protest about events taking place in Azerbaijan or America, Ahl ul-Bayt replied that "Islam is not delimited by state borders, it is transnational and, thus, events taking place in Azerbaijan, or elsewhere, concern us like those taking place on our own doorstep."⁴¹ These incidents provoked particular concern within the Georgian government as it appeared that Ahl ul-Bayt could now command considerable influence amongst local people and was willing and able to mobilise them. "For one, Georgia is a strategic partner of America, and America and Iran are enemies. We are thus keen to limit Iranian influence in Georgia," said one government official and quoted these issues as amongst the principle reasons behind the government's decision to create a new, specifically Georgian, Muslim administration.⁴²

The leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt itself stresses that the form of Islam that they teach is entirely peaceful and tolerant, although it is also "pure, as it was at the time of the prophet." Their attitude towards other religions and religious groups in Georgia appears to be very tolerant and accommodating. "We have respect towards all religions, even towards 'Wahhabis,'" they say, "but ['Wahhabis'] do not reciprocate. Entry to our classes is also open to everybody, Sunnis and Shias. Christians could also join if they wished."⁴³ They also stress their respect for, and loyalty to, the Georgian government which

they believe, until now, has treated them well. At international religious conferences, for example, they say they always "spoke positively about [the Georgian Government] and the situation for Georgian Azeris [in Kvemo Kartli]."⁴⁴

Furthermore, even if it is Ahl ul-Bayt's objective to further some political aims, the extent to which they can influence the population of Marneuli is limited. A representative from Geyrat stated that the demonstrations Ahl ul-Bayt organised in 2010 may have given the impression of greater influence but the reality is different: "So many people came onto the streets because the issue [of burning copies of the Qur'an] affected people, they felt strongly about this particular issue. It was not necessarily a sign of Ahl ul-Bayt influence. For another issue, only a couple of hundred of close supporters might come out to protest."⁴⁵

Despite the fears expressed several years ago, few women today can be seen wearing headscarves on the streets of Marneuli.⁴⁶ Local observers state that the local population in general is not very interested in their religious ideas, and that Ahl ul-Bayt's direct sphere of influence in religious issues is quite small. There is also a perception that Iran's policies towards the large Azeri minority living in the north of the country are discriminatory.⁴⁷ The director of one think-tank states that there has always been an awkward relationship between Azerbaijan and Iran: "[Iranian Azeris] were not allowed to give their son or daughter an Azeri name. The cultural life in Iran pushed Azeris

⁴⁰ Gürcüstan azərbaycanlılarının Tasua yürü ünd "Hicaba azadlıq!" səsli və yazılı [During the march of Georgian Azeris, the slogan, "Freedom for the Hijab" was heard], 15 December 2011, D y b r Azerbaijan Islam News, <http://deyerler.org/73675-gurcistan-azerbaycanlilarinin-tasua-yurusunde-hicaba-azadliq-seslendi.html>.

⁴¹ ECMI Focus Group Meeting with Ahl ul-Bayt, Marneuli, July 2011.

⁴² ECMI Interview with senior government official, Tbilisi, August 2011. Nevertheless, Georgian-Iranian relations have grown closer in recent years and there is now a visa-free regime between the two countries. See: Iranian FM on 'Historic' Visit to Georgia, Civil Georgia, 3 November 2010, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22812>.

⁴³ ECMI Focus Group Meeting with Leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt, Marneuli, July 2011.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ ECMI Interview with local political leaders (Geyrat), Marneuli, July 2011.

⁴⁶ Zumurud Qurbanov states that some even make fun of men whose wives wear headscarves and that they could not do this if these people were influential and strong. Moreover, the headscarf in itself is not necessarily a sign of increased religiosity. In an OSCE Discussion Paper, Hema Kotecha emphasises the difficulty of interpreting such markers of religiosity, writing that women covering their heads can result from several impetuses: family coercion for religious reasons, a need for self-protection, an assertion of belonging to a confession or as an ethnic marker. It can also enable a woman to behave with more freedom in public, secure in the knowledge that the covering wards off unwanted approaches as well as derogatory assumptions or negative interpretations of her actions. As such it can enable behavior opened up to women through Soviet and other "modern" ideologies, rather than simply indicating a rejection of it. ECMI Interview with Hema Kotecha, Tbilisi, October 2011.

⁴⁷ ECMI Phone Interview with regional expert, November 2011.



to become Persians.”⁴⁸ These issues have led to suspicion towards Iran amongst some Azeris and may also discourage Iranian influence in the region.⁴⁹

However, while the influence of its religious ideas may be limited, Ahl ul-Bayt’s leaders are known in the local community to be educated, intelligent and knowledgeable. Moreover, they have worked in Marneuli for many years and, thus, have come to be both trusted and respected. Given the right circumstances, some local experts believe that Ahl ul-Bayt does have the ability to “unite the people of Marneuli”.⁵⁰

Influences (iii) Salafism (Wahhabism)

Another religious demarcation within Georgian Islam is drawn between adherents of traditional Islam and Shiism, and followers of reformist Salafism. The number of Salafis in Georgia is relatively small, but has grown in recent years and this is thought to be continuing. Salafism, a fundamentalist offshoot of Sunni Islam, looks to the first three Muslim generations as a time when Islam was pure, unadulterated and authentic and uses it to understand the ‘true’ interpretation and practice of Islam. It rejects the four schools of Islamic law, adopts a rigid dress and personal appearance code and shuns formal organisation as a distraction from devotion to the faith. Salafis are often referred to as Wahhabis, which most consider derogatory. Although the nature of the relationship between Wahhabism and Salafism is disputed, in essence Wahhabism is an ‘ultra-conservative’ strand of Salafism rooted in the teachings of the Arab Islamic scholar, Muhammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792).⁵¹ Al-Wahhab sought to purge Islam of what he perceived as imperfections and innovations in contemporary Islamic practices.

⁴⁸ Azeris feel Iranian pressure, BBC News, 16 February 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8516682.stm>.

⁴⁹ ECMI Interviews with local Azeris, Marneuli and Sadakhlo, October 2011.

⁵⁰ ECMI Interviews with local experts, Marneuli, July-August 2011.

⁵¹ Crisis Group writes that the Hanbali madhhab, or school (the most conservative of the four Muslim madhabs) was the doctrinal basis of al-Wahhab’s preaching in central Arabia in the mid-eighteenth century, and Wahhabism can be described as a form of revivalist Hanbalism in the Arabian context. For more, see: Understanding Islamism, Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, 2 March 2005, Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Understanding%20Islamism.pdf>.

Wahhabism today has become associated with the very strict interpretation of Islam adopted in Saudi Arabia (although the term is rejected there) and with global terrorism, as well as with the Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus.

The term is commonly used in post-Soviet countries to refer to any pious Muslim, or as one regional expert puts it, “to refer to any Muslim we don’t like.”⁵² Its use thus often has a political connotation. One Tbilisi-based adherent of Salafism and figurehead within his community, Ulvi Mamedov, states that “many people think Salafism and Wahhabism are the same thing. To really understand the difference, however, you must be inside Islam; it takes years.” He goes on to say that “nobody refers to themselves as Wahhabi, it is a label given to us.” In Georgia he states that “Shias label all Sunnis Wahhabis.”⁵³

The appearance of Salafism in Georgia’s Azeri community is thought to have originated in Azerbaijan, where there are now an estimated 10,000-20,000 adherents.⁵⁴ Missionaries, young Azerbaijanis who studied in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or Egypt, and pilgrims who went on the Hajj to Mecca in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought Salafi Islam to Azerbaijan.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, throughout the 1990s significant numbers of Georgian Azeris moved to Azerbaijan due to deteriorating socio-economic conditions in Kvemo Kartli. Some of these came under the influence of Salafism in Baku and brought these ideas and links back to Georgia when they returned home. Some also started to proselytise.

Mamedov himself is an ethnic Azeri from the Tbilisi suburb of Ponichala. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, like most other Azeris of the time, he was a Shia Muslim with little knowledge of his religion. In tune with the religious revival of the post-Soviet period, he says he read and taught himself more and more about Islam and eventually became a Salafi, and thus a Sunni. While not describing himself as a

⁵² ECMI Phone Interview with Paul Goble, Regional Expert, July 2011.

⁵³ ECMI Interview with Ulvi Mamedov, local Salafi figurehead, Tbilisi, August 2011.

⁵⁴ Azerbaijan: Sunni Groups Viewed With Suspicion, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 8 April 2011. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4da3f66a2c.html>. In 2008, International Crisis Group estimated 10,000 as a likely maximum in Azerbaijan.

⁵⁵ Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State, Europe Report N°191, 25 March 2008. Available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/191_azerbaijan_independent_islam_and_the_state.pdf.



local leader, he says everyone in his neighbourhood knows him and that he knows a lot about Islam: “If they want to learn they come to me and I help them.”⁵⁶ In this way, he says he spreads a ‘pure’ interpretation of Islam.

Salafism in the region does not appear to be political. In 2008, Crisis Group argued of Azerbaijan that the overwhelming majority of Azeri Salafis are pious Muslims with a purist approach to Islam, no political aspirations and generally good relations with the Azerbaijani government.⁵⁷ Georgian Salafis similarly appear to have generally good relations with the Georgian state and do not appear to have political objectives. Relations between Salafis and Shia Azeris are often strained however.⁵⁸ For example, there is no communication between Mamedov and the leaders of a newly-constructed Shia mosque, also in Ponichala.⁵⁹ They do not speak to each other, even though they are related and from the same small town. The mosque’s ahund states that they do not interact as when they do, disagreements arise and they argue.⁶⁰ Mamedov states that disagreement centres on higher issues of Islamic theology, such as the importance of the caliphate.”

One ethnic Azeri worshipper at Juma Mosque in Tbilisi, bearded and with his trouser legs rolled up,⁶¹ referred to himself as a Salafi but vehemently rejected any links with ‘Wahhabis.’ He says that he cannot enter the Shia mosque in Ponichala. “They call me a

terrorist,” he said.⁶² While he emphasised the peaceful nature of Islam, he, and his companions, were very keen to proselytise. At 33, he was unemployed and keen to leave Georgia, claiming that Georgians will never give him a job.⁶³

There is possibly a core group of some 400 committed Salafis in Georgia,⁶⁴ who have spent considerable time either teaching themselves or studying abroad at Salafi centres of learning in the Middle East and a larger group of more recent, probably less-committed, converts, as young as 15 or 16 years old and up to 35. Local NGO sources estimate that some 20 percent of young Azeri males in the Kvemo Kartli region have already turned to Salafism.⁶⁵ While this figure is hard to verify, the leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt also believes that “Wahhabism is strong amongst the young.”⁶⁶

Ahl ul-Bayt says that such converts often come from poor families and/or are unemployed. They are reportedly attracted to Salafism by promises of money or a job.⁶⁷ One senior government official claims that young people receive USD 200-300 (approximately EUR 145-215) cash in hand when they start to pray at a ‘Wahhabi’ mosque.⁶⁸ Ahl ul-Bayt also believes that ‘Wahhabi’ preachers initially do not show the intolerant side of Salafism, but rather portray it as focusing on love and respect. Converts are then slowly; ‘indoctrinated’ as they become more involved. Being young and with often only rudimentary knowledge of Islam, they believe what they are told and are easily influenced.

While Tbilisi-based Salafis reject these contentions, the situation in the Pankisi Gorge, where Salafism is particularly prevalent, seems to substantiate at least some of the claims. In Pankisi, Salafism has developed in opposition to the traditional Islam of local Kist villagers. This traditional form of Islam, which is similar to that practised throughout the

⁵⁶ ECMI Interview with Ulvi Mamedov, local Salafi, Tbilisi, August 2011.

⁵⁷ Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State, Europe Report N°191, 25 March 2008. Available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/191_azerbaijan_independent_islam_and_the_state.pdf.

⁵⁸ Two NGO leaders from the Kvemo Kartli village of Sadakhlo stated that “‘Wahhabism’ is not a part of Islam; it is created by the enemies of Islam.” ECMI Interview with NGO Leaders from Sadakhlo, Tbilisi, June 2011. This refers to a story often referred to by Georgian Azeris of a British spy named Hempher who was planted by the British government in the Middle East to weaken the Ottoman Empire by whatever means he could. He allegedly conceived of and spread the Wahhabi doctrine to divide the Muslim population. A book purporting to be a first-hand account, titled *Memoirs of Mr. Hempher*, has also been published. The story is generally considered to be fictional.

⁵⁹ This mosque was recently completed with financial assistance from an Ayatollah from Iraq. It was opened on 17 July 2011.

⁶⁰ ECMI Interview with head of Shia Mosque, Ponichala, August 2011.

⁶¹ Both the wearing of a beard and rolling up trouser legs are practices often adopted by “Wahhabis.” Both were practices followed by the prophet Muhammad. Rolling up the trouser legs prevented them from getting dirty.

⁶² ECMI Interview with Salafi worshippers at Juma Mosque, Tbilisi, June 2011.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ This estimate was provided by Ahl ul-Bayt. Regional expert, Paul Goble, believes that the number depends on how one defines a “Wahhabi”, noting that there are few “pure” Wahhabis in Georgia. ECMI Phone Interview with Paul Goble, Regional Expert, July 2011.

⁶⁵ ECMI Interview with NGO leaders from Kvemo Kartli village of Sadakhlo, Tbilisi, June 2011.

⁶⁶ ECMI Interview with Leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt, Marneuli, July 2011.

⁶⁷ ECMI Focus Group Meeting with Leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt, Tbilisi, June 2011.

⁶⁸ ECMI Interview with Senior Government Official, Tbilisi, August 2011.



Caucasus region, is influenced by Sufi practices as well as Christian and ancient pagan rituals. Mamuka Areshidze, Director of the Caucasus Centre for Strategic Research, argues that traditional Islam has much in common with traditional Christianity as it is practiced in the region. Both have been influenced by pre-Islamic and pre-Christian local traditions and customary law (adat).⁶⁹

Salafism was introduced to Pankisi during the second Chechen war (1999-2000) by Chechen refugees fleeing fighting in Chechnya.⁷⁰ Among the some 7000 refugees,⁷¹ there were also Chechen fighters and non-Chechen jihadis from several Muslim countries, who used the Pankisi region for training and as a base to carry out operations against Russian federal forces.⁷² While successful counter-insurgency operations were carried out by the Georgian military with some American assistance in August 2002 and it is widely acknowledged that there are no longer militants or jihadis in the gorge, Salafism has remained and grown in the subsequent decade.

Here too the Salafist ideology has gained ground amongst unemployed, frustrated, young males, deprived of opportunities. Economic conditions in the gorge are desperate with most young people who remain unemployed.⁷³ Locals blame the closure of the border with Chechnya for the deteriorating socio-economic conditions.⁷⁴ "Before [young people] could go to Grozny [in Chechnya] to find work," said one older villager, "but now, they have nothing."⁷⁵ As of June 2011, local observers estimate that between 60 and 80 per cent of young males in Pankisi villages

have turned to Salafism.⁷⁶ This figure continues to grow and one local expert states that if the situation does not change, within 15 years Pankisi will be entirely Salafi.⁷⁷

Both local Kist villagers and some local government officials in Telavi believe that Salafis in Pankisi receive funding from religious organisations and wealthy families in Saudi Arabia.⁷⁸ One older villager said: "We can see it with our own eyes, [the 'Wahhabis'] do not work, yet they have a large house, a nice car. Where are they getting the money from?"⁷⁹ Money has enabled them to raise new mosques, madrassahs and to send some young people abroad to study Islam in Arab countries. Salafis have thus been able to offer young people tangible support. Some locals also claim that young people are offered money or an allowance for praying at the 'Wahhabi' mosques, but ECMI has not been able to find corroborating evidence to substantiate this.⁸⁰

There are six main mosques in Pankisi and several smaller, more makeshift prayer houses. There is a clear division between traditional and Salafi mosques. For example, in Duisi, the main town in the gorge, there is an older traditional mosque where mostly older people pray and a new, Salafi, mosque, constructed in 2002, where mostly younger people pray.⁸¹ One elderly Kist man and third head of the traditional mosque said he would never enter the Salafi mosque.⁸² In July 2010, a local traditional prayer house in the Pankisi village of Birkiani was removed by the

⁶⁹ECMI Interview with Mamuka Areshidze, Director of the Caucasus Centre for Strategic Research, Tbilisi, July 2011.

⁷⁰ There is some evidence that even before this, between 1996 and 1999, some young local Kists were beginning to go to Arab countries to receive religious education.

⁷¹ Today there are approximately 1100 refugees left, of whom 400-500 have already been naturalized and received Georgian citizenship. Relations between locals and the remaining Chechens have improved considerably.

⁷² See for example: US targets al-Qaida hideout in Georgia, The Guardian Online, 15 February 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/feb/15/afghanistan.ia> ntraynor.

⁷³ There is very little economic activity in the gorge. One mini-factory manufacturing halal kolbasa (sausage made without pork) was set up relatively recently. It employs only a handful of people, however. One ethnic-Kist government official named unemployment as the single biggest problem facing the community. ECMI Interview with government official, Tbilisi, October 2011.

⁷⁴ ECMI Interviews with local villagers, Pankisi, June 2011.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ ECMI Interviews with local community activists, Pankisi, June 2011. However one ethnic-Kist government official stated that she believes this figure is closer to 50 per cent. ECMI Interview with government official, Tbilisi, October 2011.

⁷⁷ ECMI Interview with Tamar Bekauri, Local NGO leader, Telavi, October 2011.

⁷⁸ ECMI Interview with local government officials, Telavi, June 2011. One NGO leader explains that rich Muslims in Arab and other Muslim countries collect and give money to poor Muslim communities. Within Pankisi

⁷⁹ ECMI Interviews with local villagers, Pankisi, June 2011. A local observer, however, notes that some Kists have relatives in Russia, some of whom maybe relatively wealthy who send money back to Pankisi. This may also help to explain the discrepancy.

⁸⁰ ECMI Interviews with local Kists, Pankisi, June and October 2011.

⁸¹ Funding for this new mosque is said to have come from an anonymous foreign individual who donated a large sum of money. ECMI Interview with local Salafi, Duisi, October 2011.

⁸² ECMI Interview with elderly villagers, Duisi, October 2011.



Salafis⁸³ and a Salafi mosque built in its place.⁸⁴ Meanwhile in the village of Jokolo, a new Salafi mosque is being built. As of June 2011 the new mosques were already in use, though they were not completely finished. Such moves, which often leave older villagers without a proper place to pray, are indicative of the tension and animosity that has grown between followers of traditional Islam and Salafism.

Attached to the Salafi mosque in Duisi is a small Salafi madrassah where some 50 to 60 boys and girls, studying separately, learn the Qur'an and Arabic. There are classes three to four evenings a week, and similar small madrassahs in other Pankisi villages. Many young Kists also go on to further their studies in religious institutions in Arab countries or Turkey, where they receive free tuition, free accommodation and a study allowance from the institutions.⁸⁵ Most of these return to Pankisi to marry and live within their own community, meaning their wives and children also become Salafi.

Although most local observers consider that there is "some good" in Salafism, most would like to see its continued growth stymied. Older villagers in particular bemoan its presence in their community which, they say, is dividing it and breaking down the traditionally respectful relationship between young people and their elders, even within families. Salafism in Pankisi, and elsewhere in Georgia, does not appear to be politicised, nor is it associated with terrorism. Instead it is a socio-cultural trend which threatens the existing social order through the rejection of hitherto accepted local religious practices and social norms of the Kist community. What many Kists consider the centre of their practise and understanding of Islam, practises such as dhikr, an Islamic devotional act involving the repetition of the names of God and the veneration of saints, are sharply criticised by Salafis as un-Islamic.⁸⁶ One local Salafi, Aslambek, states:

⁸³ Chechen Wahhabis destroyed prayer house in Pankisi Gorge, Interfax Religion, 20 July 2011, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=7488>.

⁸⁴ Prayer house destroyed in Pankissi [sic] Gorge, residents assert, Caucasian Knot, 21 July 2011, <http://dagestan.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/13901/>

⁸⁵ ECMI Interview with local NGO leaders, Kakheti Regional Development Fund, Akhmeta, October 2011.

⁸⁶ Wiktor-Mach (2009) points out that the rejection of local traditions may also be seen as a search for a new, more global, identity. Reformist Salafism is a global phenomenon which accentuates the unity of the umma, or Muslim community, and equality of all Muslims and is often viewed by young people as a more attractive frame of reference than the ritual practices of the elders. "Competing Islamic Traditions in the Caucasus," Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach,

"Traditional Islam was created by people. Now we base our practise only on the Qur'an and hadiths. We follow the true path." According to Salafis, women should be covered, besides hands and face, and should 'belong' to their husbands.⁸⁷ One Kist government official based in Tbilisi terms the process taking place in the region as the 'Arabisation of Pankisi'.⁸⁸

The presence of Salafism, in Pankisi and elsewhere in Georgia, has likely given fuel to Russia's continuing, but unsubstantiated, accusations that Georgia is supporting or turning a blind eye to militant activity. On 7 July 2011 the director of the Federal Security Services (FSB) announced, without offering evidence or details: "We have operative information that leaders of bandit groups, located on the territory of other countries, are nurturing the intention of using the territory of Georgia to infiltrate the North Caucasus."⁸⁹ The Georgian Interior Ministry categorically dismissed these accusations, stating that "in Pankisi there are no terrorists: not underground, not above ground, not sitting on balconies; this is more nonsense spread by Russian special services."⁹⁰

Caucasian Review of International Affairs, Vol. 3 (1) – Winter 2009. Available at: http://www.cria-online.org/Journal/6/Done_Competing_Islamic_Traditions.pdf.

⁸⁷ ECMI Interviews with local Salafis, Duisi, October 2011.

⁸⁸ ECMI Interview with government official, Tbilisi, October 2011.

⁸⁹ :

["FSB: Insurgents plan to use Georgia for penetrating into Russia"], RIA-Novosti, 7 July 2011. The Russian media often reports of continued militant activity in the Gorge. In July 2011, for example, it was also reported that up to 70 armed militants had crossed the Georgia-Dagestan border. These claims were rejected by the Georgian authorities and remained unconfirmed. See: Dozens of militants find way into Russia, Russia Today, 1 July 2011, <http://rt.com/news/terrorism-militants-georgia-russia/>; Moscow Renews Accusations against Neighbouring States for Harboring Chechen Fighters, Mairbek Vatchagaev, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 8, Issue 130, 7 July 2011, [http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20110707/398424057.html](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nca/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=38146&tx_ttnews[backPid]=189&no_cache=1http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20110707/398424057.html).

⁹⁰ ["

”] : – ["Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia: Reports that militants crossed into Russia from Pankisi nonsense"], Grani.ru, 2 July 2011, <http://grani.ru/Politics/World/Europe/Georgia/m.189681.html>.



Nevertheless, local villagers in Pankisi express fears that the presence of Salafism in the gorge could be used by Russia as pretext to invade the region. They point to Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's campaign against 'Wahhabis' in Chechnya and statements: "Wahhabis are not only enemies of Islam, but also of the whole of mankind, and I cannot see any way to oppose them, but [to] annihilate [them] physically."⁹¹ "They have killed all the Wahhabis there," Kist villagers say, "they do not care if they kill entire households."⁹² Kist attitudes towards Kadyrov are mixed. Some older villagers speak of Kadyrov, who is simultaneously promoting a 'sufi revival'⁹³ with admiration; others assert that "his hands and arms are covered in the blood of his own people."⁹⁴

There is also a widely held perception amongst Kist villagers that the local Georgian authorities turn a blind eye to Salafism in Pankisi. Rumours persist that the local authorities collaborate with and receive money from the Salafis, though these reports remain uncorroborated. One government official responded to this, saying: "Why should the government do anything [to control Salafism in Pankisi]? There is religious freedom in Georgia; people are completely free to choose how they practise their faith."⁹⁵ The 16 September arrest of Shoren Khangoshvili, an English teacher at the Roddy Scott Foundation School in Duisi, for "possession of drugs,"⁹⁶ although probably not linked with Salafism, nevertheless raises fresh questions about the authorities' role in Pankisi.⁹⁷ Following days of protests by local villagers, Khangoshvili was released on a bail of GEL 5,000 (approximately EUR 2,330). Trained as a journalist, Khangoshvili had closely covered events in Pankisi in recent years while her work at the school was amongst

the few initiatives which may help curb Salafi influence in the area.

In Akhmeta, the Kakheti Regional Development Fund (KRDF) also runs educational programmes in Pankisi, teaching English and computers, as well as a 'women's club' which provides local women with training sessions and access to lawyers and psychologists. They also provide grants for people trying to set up small businesses, such as shops. Several other Kists are actively trying to counter the influence of Salafism in their community. Leyla Achishvili, a local community activist from Jokolo village, set up a small arts and crafts school for local children and teenagers with the help of Mtvrisa Joyce, an art teacher from Tbilisi. Here, some 140 children and young people learn painting, pottery and other arts and crafts.⁹⁸ For many local children it is the only opportunity they have to participate in such activities. As well as learning useful and enjoyable skills, it also allows the teachers to show another side of life besides Salafism.⁹⁹

Amongst the Azeri population, ECMI has identified three main centres of Salafi activity outside Pankisi. In the Tbilisi suburb, Ponichala, there are some 50 Salafis, whom Ulvi Mamedov is said to 'lead'. Some of these are said to have links with Salafis in Baku.¹⁰⁰ In Kvemo Kartli there is a Salafi mosque in the town of Keshalo, in Marneuli district, whose head studied in the holy city of Medina in Saudi Arabia. In the Telavi town of Karajala, there is a similar mosque whose head also studied in Medina. Both these mosques are said to be popular and strong. By contrast, in the town of Marneuli, Salafism is relatively weak. Here, a traditional mosque was already established and Ahl ul-Bayt has been organising religious classes for almost a decade. There is also the Azerbaijani cultural centre. These factors, Ahl ul-Bayt believes, have made it harder for Salafis to gain a foothold in the town as young people are better educated in religious issues and are more aware of the influence of Salafism.

⁹¹ The Kremlin's new strategy: Using "Islam" to combat insurgency, The Jamestown Foundation, August 18, 2005. [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[t_news\]=30811](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[t_news]=30811).

⁹² ECMI Interviews with Kist villagers, Jokolo, June 2011.

⁹³ See for example: The battle for the soul of Chechnya, The Guardian Online, 22 November 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/nov/22/chechnya.to.mparfitt>.

⁹⁴ ECMI Interview with Kist government official, Tbilisi, October 2011.

⁹⁵ ECMI Interview with government officials, Tbilisi and Telavi, June-July 2011.

⁹⁶ Arrested in Akhmeta, local eyewitnesses report that the bag in question was checked after her arrest, not before.

⁹⁷ See, for example: Pankisi is a Breeding Ground for Radicalism, The Moscow Times, 3 October 2011, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/pankisi-is-a-breeding-ground-for-radicalism/444685.html>.

⁹⁸ In a follow-up interview in October 2011, Leyla Achishvili said that the number of children going to the school was getting smaller as Wahhabi parents disagreed with the drawing of living forms.

⁹⁹ Similarly in Pankisi's largest village, Duisi, there is a school run by the Roddy Scot Foundation. Here, the head English teacher is Shoren Khangoshvili. A journalist by profession, she graduated from a US Department of State Masters programme at the Georgian Institute of Public Administration in Tbilisi.

¹⁰⁰ ECMI Interview with Ahl ul-Bayt, Marneuli, July 2011.



These examples emphasise the importance of education in any attempt to prevent a continued growth of fundamentalist Islam in Georgia. One Kist states that there is “no place [in Pankisi] where children can learn about religion normally.” Educational programmes should be combined with programmes that help provide young people in these regions with more opportunities to secure employment and a livelihood. It is also important to create and develop political and social institutions, as well as religious ones, in which Georgia’s Muslims can participate more fully in country as a whole, and forge an identity which is not only based on Islam.

Influences (iii) Azerbaijan and the Caucasus Board of Muslims

The Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM) manages official Islam in Azerbaijan and, until the creation of the Administration of Georgian Muslims, was also the de jure governing body for Georgia’s Muslim community. Created in 1943 and renamed the Caucasus Board of Muslims in 1991, its long-time Shiite head, Sheikh ul-Islam, Haji Allahshukur Pashazade,¹⁰¹ was appointed in 1980. His deputy, Mufti Haji Alaskar Musayev, is Sunni. CBM’s representative in Georgia was Haji Ali Aliyev, an ethnic-Azeri Georgian whose office was based in Tbilisi’s Juma mosque.

In recent years CBM’s international role has increased in tandem with Azerbaijan’s expanding diplomatic role in the Muslim world. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has placed increasing confidence in Haji Pashazade in particular as a bridge between the secular Azerbaijani state and Azerbaijan’s own Muslim population at home and between Baku and Muslims abroad. Haji Pashazade has thus become increasingly active hosting international religious conferences in Baku, meeting with leaders of Muslim states in Baku, and travelling throughout the Islamic world. In a July 2011 visit to Turkey for example, he held meetings with Turkish President Abdullah G 1 and Prime Minister Recep Tayyin Erdo an and signed a protocol of mutual understanding and cooperation with Turkey’s Presidency of Religious Affairs.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Haji Pashazade is an ethnic Talysh from the village of Gil in southern Azerbaijan and a large proportion of clergy practicing officially-sanctioned Islam through the Spiritual Board are appointed from this region.

¹⁰² “Religious bodies of Azerbaijan, Turkey set to cooperate,” News.az, 21 July 2011, <http://news.az/articles/society/40968>.

CBM controls a network of mosques in Azerbaijan, supervising the appointment of mullahs, Islamic education and clerical salaries. It also has a monopoly on the organisation of pilgrimages (hajj) to Mecca and Medina. Although CBM has been described as semi-independent,¹⁰³ its close association with the Azerbaijani government means its legitimacy at home is questioned.¹⁰⁴ Experts argue that the loyalty of the official clergy is bought through control over donations and gifts made by visitors to the mosques under CBM’s control,¹⁰⁵ meaning that official mullahs’ popular support is limited. CBM’s monopoly on the organisation of the hajj has also led many to consider it corrupt.¹⁰⁶ According to one Baku-based independent imam, “CBM is not a religious organisation, it deals with business.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, CBM is perceived as doing little to assist mosques and religious communities meaning that, despite the fact that it has considerable funds, most mosques in Azerbaijan have been rehabilitated through community self-help schemes or with foreign assistance.¹⁰⁸ This lack of legitimacy has contributed to the appearance and growth of independent Shiite and

¹⁰³ One observer said, “CBM? It is the government.” ECMI Interview with Hema Kotecha, EUMM official and former OSCE Azerbaijan researcher, Tbilisi, October 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group writes that between October and November 2007 it observed that in the offices of all CBM clerics there was a portrait of President Aliyev.

¹⁰⁵ The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan, Svante E. Cornell, Silk Road Paper, October 2006. Available at: http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=the%20politicization%20of%20islam%20in%20azerbaijan&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBcQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.silkroadstudies.org%2Fnew%2Fdocs%2FSilkroadpapers%2F0610Azer.pdf&ei=3XCETp77DaG50QXfpI33Dw&usq=AFQjCNGzOD1k5REFFefPvsMYIA_AUOuxGA&cad=rja.

¹⁰⁶ The Saudi Ministry of the Hajj gives a set quota of hajj visas to each country or governing authority, in this case CBM. CBM’s pilgrim quota for Azerbaijan and Georgia was 2,500. Would-be pilgrims thus had to receive an endorsement from CBM in order to obtain the required visa. A 2005 incident highlights this monopoly. More information available at: Saudi Arabia Criticises Azerbaijani Government Official over Hajj Problems, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 18 January 2005, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/2751>.

¹⁰⁷ Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State, Europe Report N°191, 25 March 2008. Available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/191_azerbaijan_independent_islam_and_the_state.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State, Europe Report N°191, 25 March 2008. Available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/191_azerbaijan_independent_islam_and_the_state.pdf.



Sunni groups which refuse the spiritual authority of the official clergy. In recent years, these have grown more rapidly than official mosques. Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, an Azerbaijani independent Shia leader states: “When I began to take an interest in Islam, I couldn't find a single person to give proper answers to my questions. I wasn't satisfied by the answers of the ‘red mullahs’ who worked here in Soviet times. A lot of things about Islam remained unclear for me.”¹⁰⁹ Like in Georgia, many groups have links abroad, in particular with Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Two main independent religious communities can be identified in Baku; one headed by Ibrahimoglu, and the other Salafi, also led by a charismatic young leader, Gammet Suleymanov.¹¹⁰ Although these communities are generally not political, the Azerbaijani government is suspicious of all independent expressions of Islam in the country.

Government concerns regarding these communities and the effectiveness of CBM in dealing with them in part led to the creation in 2001 of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRO), a state body charged with controlling the religious sphere.¹¹¹ In addition, in recent years numerous amendments have been made to Azerbaijan's religious law, further restricting religious freedom. For example, all religious organisations were

required to re-register with the SCWRO before 1 January 2010 with Muslim religious groups having to obtain a letter of approval from CBM before they could be registered.¹¹² “We are picking up attempts to spread radical traditions in the country,” said Hidayat Orujov, chairman of SCWRO. “[There] are small groups, without strength of influence. We are fighting against them.”¹¹³ He said some such groups declined to register with the state committee, because they wanted to operate outside the law.¹¹⁴

Prison terms of up to five years or maximum fines of nearly nine years' official minimum wage are also set to be adopted by Azerbaijani Parliament in mid-November 2011 for groups who produce or disseminate religious literature without going through Azerbaijan's compulsory prior state censorship of all religious literature. New punishments are also planned for those who lead Muslim worship if they have gained their religious education abroad.¹¹⁵ In the last three years, several independent mosques have been shut down or demolished.¹¹⁶ Two of these, the Salafi Abu Bakr Mosque and the Turkish-built Shehidler (Martyr's) Mosque, were the two most popular and attended mosques in Baku.¹¹⁷ Along with other

¹⁰⁹ Azerbaijani young increasingly drawn to Islam, Institute for War and Peace Reporting. Available at: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch-Archive/Detail/?lng=en&id=53700>.

¹¹⁰ ECMI Interview with Hema Kotecha, EUMM official, Tbilisi, October 2011. See also: Azerbaijan: Harsh approach to Islamists may backfire, Oxford Analytica, 17 February 2011, <http://www.oxan.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB166246>.

¹¹¹ Officially, SCWRO has four main functions: to guarantee the state's secularity and separation of religion and politics; to protect and develop religious tolerance; to ensure religious education within the secular model; and to control religious literature and ensure it does not damage relations between religions or the country's stability. It was also created to help counter Iranian influence on religious life. Balci, “Islam et politique dans l'Azerbaïdjan post-soviétique”, op. cit., p. 145. Until 2006, relations between CBM and SCWRO were strained, as they each, in effect, competed for influence. See: The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan, Svante E. Cornell, Silk Road Paper, October 2006, p. 65. Available at:

http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=the%20politicization%20of%20islam%20in%20azerbaijan&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBcQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.silkroadstudies.org%2Fnew%2Fdocs%2FSilkroadpapers%2F0610Azer.pdf&ei=3XCETp77DaG50QXfpI33Dw&usq=AFQjCNGz0D1k5REFFefPvsMYIA_AUOuxGA&cad=rja.

¹¹² Under the new law, religious groups can operate only if their actions conform to Azerbaijan's constitution, and registration can be cancelled by a court at any time. The new law tightly controls their activities, for instance religious literature and objects can only be sold in special shops, which have to be cleared with the authorities.

¹¹³ Azerbaijan: Mosque Demolitions Under Way, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 26 May 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch-Archive/Detail/?lng=en&id=100612>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Azerbaijan: Up to five years' imprisonment for uncensored religious literature? Forum 18 News Service, 1 November 2011, http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1632.

¹¹⁶ For more information, see: International Religious Freedom Report (Azerbaijan) July-December 2010, US Department of State, 13 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171683.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Officials have justified the closings by saying some of the buildings were structurally unsafe and needed repairs. Others were alleged to have been built illegally, or had faulty paperwork. Some critics contend that such explanations mask the government's underlying motivation - a desire to keep free speech and freedom of conscience under close supervision. “The government gives us many different reasons for closing these mosques,” says Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, head of the Center for Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion (DEVAMM). “They won't give us one clear message, but ultimately this is about



measures, such as the unofficial ban on headscarves in schools, raids of religious bookshops to scour for banned material, and harsh treatment, such as the arbitrary detention of members of independent communities, these moves are pushing independent Islam underground and stoking radical tendencies.¹¹⁸ As one Baku-based political analyst puts it: “Once democracy loses its value, non-democratic values and resistance methods begin to prevail.”¹¹⁹

CBM’s role in Georgia was more limited. While some imams in Georgia were appointed by CBM’s representative in Tbilisi, Haji Ali Aliyev,¹²⁰ Muslim religious sources say he received little assistance from Haji Pashazade. Pashazade visited Tbilisi annually, but not Kvemo Kartli. Senior Georgian government sources argue that the CBM did not do enough in Georgia: “For Muslims to integrate [CBM] should have monitored and explained how Islam is developing [in Kvemo Kartli] and where there were problems. There should have been conferences

and meetings. There were none, nothing.”¹²¹ The head of an independent religious organisation in Tbilisi also questions CBM’s authority: “We never considered Sheikh ul-Islam our Sheikh, he did nothing for Georgian Muslims. If we had a problem, why should we go to Baku with it, our problems should be addressed here.”¹²² Allegations of corruption persisted here also. It is claimed that under CBM, donations given to Tbilisi mosque went missing; gifts, such as carpets, were sold.¹²³ CBM’s organisation of the hajj was also questioned, with trips reportedly costing as much as USD 4,000 (approximately EUR 2,800) for each person when a trip should not cost more than around USD 1,350 (EUR 1,000).

In 2005, a number of Muslim religious figures from Kvemo Kartli and Tbilisi, including leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt and the Tbilisi-based Iman Foundation, attempted to establish an independent body, separate from CBM, to manage Georgian Muslims. Pressure from CBM in Baku, however, and government concerns regarding Ahl ul-Bayt’s activities within Georgia, meant that this attempt was not supported by the Georgian government, and was effectively blocked. Nevertheless, some experts argue that while CBM has flaws and lacks legitimacy amongst more-educated Azeris, it continues to enjoy support amongst poorer, less-educated strata of society in both Georgia and Azerbaijan. In recent years the CBM has also made attempts at reform, prioritising, for example, the education of a new generation of clergy, and these have enjoyed some success. While CBM may have had limited influence and authority in Georgia, it also nevertheless both highlighted and contributed to long-standing religious and cultural ties between Georgia’s Azeri population and Azerbaijan. One local Georgian Azeri NGO leader summed up: “[Peshazade] didn’t do much for [Georgian Azeris], but he was ours.”¹²⁴ This view is indicative of a continuing bond between many Georgian Azeris and Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani government also funds a number of secular cultural organisations in Tbilisi and Kvemo Kartli which officially do not generally engage in religious issues. In Tbilisi, there is the Varliq Cultural Centre, while in Marneuli the Azerbaijani

government control.” Baku Mosque Closures Inconvenience Believers, Eurasianet.org, 18 March 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav031910.shtml>; See also: Azerbaijan: Mosques Close in Baku, “Capital of Islamic Culture, Eurasianet.org, 26 May 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav052709b.shtml>.

¹¹⁸ See, for example: Azerbaijan: Hijab Ban in Schools Fuels Debate in Baku on role of Islam, Eurasianet.org, 6 January 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62670>; Azerbaijan: Vulnerable Stability, Europe Report N°207, 3 September 2010. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/caucasus/azerbaijan/207%20Azerbaijan%20-%20Vulnerable%20Stability.pdf>. For example, the arrest of Samadov, described earlier, followed his posting of a speech on Youtube in which he criticised the president for owning property in Dubai, attacked state policies of enforced secularism, specifically the ban on hijabs in schools. It included a striking personal attack on the president, who was likened to a notorious autocratic figure in Shia history. The comparison was accompanied by a call for Aliyev’s disposition. See for example: Azerbaijan: Arrest of Islamic Party Leader Puts Religion in the Political Spotlight, Eurasianet.org, 11 January 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62692>.

¹¹⁹ Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State, Europe Report N°191, 25 March 2008. Available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/191_azerbaijan_independent_islam_and_the_state.pdf.

¹²⁰ ECMI Interviews with local NGO leaders, Marneuli and Sadakhlo, October 2011.

¹²¹ ECMI Interview and with Senior Government Official, Tbilisi, August 2011.

¹²² ECMI Interview with Haji Faig, Head of Alul Bayt (religious organisation), Tbilisi, July 2011.

¹²³ ECMI Interviews with government officials, Tbilisi, July 2011.

¹²⁴ ECMI Interview with Elbrus Mamedov, Chairman of Tolerance, Tbilisi, July 2011.



government funds a larger Azerbaijani cultural institute. It teaches some 700 students traditional Azerbaijani songs and dances, as well as organising Georgian language classes to help local Azeris to attend Georgian universities. Its director, Fazil Hasanov, states that it is his aim to create a new generation of Azeri intelligentsia, a generation which is educated and integrated into Georgian society.¹²⁵

Influences (iv) State-Minority Relations and the New Legislation on Religious Communities

The lack of a specific law on religious minorities was long a principal grievance of the Azeri community, as it was for other religious minorities. The Georgian Constitution guarantees the “complete freedom of belief and religion” but also notes the special historical status of the GOC on Georgian society. A 2002 concordat established the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) as a full subject of Georgian law and, in honour of its ‘special role’ in Georgian history, granted it a number of privileges.¹²⁶ Most significantly, religious minorities could only register as an NGO or charity organisation, thus depriving them of the status of a religious organisation and any subsequent rights. Many religious minorities, including the Muslim community, refused to register in this way, meaning they had no legal status at all. The concordat has been criticised internationally with US Helsinki Commission members arguing, for example, that it “creates an unbalanced playing field against other religious groups”.¹²⁷

The lack of legal status particularly affected the Azeri community as many of its religious centres and buildings are being restored in the country and this was complicated by the fact that they were not

officially registered as religious buildings. The Azeri community have often faced arbitrary restrictions by local authorities on the construction or renovation of prayer houses and mosques.¹²⁸ For example, on 25 January 2008, in the 100 per cent ethnic-Azeri village of Muganlo, local government authorities banned the construction of a new prayer house, while in September 2009 members of a radical Georgian Orthodox group stopped renovation work on a mosque in a traditionally ethnic-Azeri village. The group members demanded to see the villagers’ construction permit and threatened the villagers with violence if construction did not cease.¹²⁹ The fact that a few individuals were able to halt a mosque’s renovation emphasises the importance of Azeri religious buildings acquiring legal status.¹³⁰ Such issues have led many Georgian Azeris to believe that their religious rights and freedoms are not protected by Georgian law.¹³¹

It is thus significant that on 5 July 2011, President Saakashvili signed a legislative amendment to the civil code into law which has allowed religious minorities to register as legal entities of public law for the first time.¹³² The amendment, praised by the international community, triggered protests by the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and its supporters on 9-10 July 2011 when thousands of protesters, led by Orthodox priests, marched through Tbilisi carrying Georgian Orthodox icons and flags.¹³³ Giorgi Khutsishvili, director of the International Centre on Conflict and Negotiation, argues that the controversy over the amendment serves as a reminder that the separation between religion and politics in Georgia is not wide: “[I]t showed once again that religion is the most sensitive issue in Georgia,” he said. “[There] is

¹²⁵ ECMI Interview with Fazil Hasanov, Director of Azerbaijani Cultural Institute, Marneuli, August 2011.

¹²⁶ These included granting the patriarch legal immunity; granting the GOC the exclusive right to staff the military chaplaincy; exempting GOC clergymen from military service; and giving the GOC a unique consultative role in government, especially in the sphere of education. The GOC has a line item in the government budget, whereby it receives 25.3 million lari (EUR 10.6 million) in 2010, as well as tax breaks. For more information, see: International Religious Freedom Report 2010, US Department of State, 17 November 2010. Available at:

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.htm>.

¹²⁷ “US Helsinki Commission Criticises Concordat Between State and Orthodox Church,” 18 December 2002, Civil Georgia, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=2899>.

¹²⁸ Report “Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011”, Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities “MRMG”, Tbilisi, December 2011.

¹²⁹ International Religious Freedom Report 2010, US Department of State, 17 November 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.htm>.

¹³⁰ ECMI Interview with Ramilya Aliyeva, Independent journalist, Tbilisi, November 2011.

¹³¹ Report “Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011”, Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities “MRMG”, Tbilisi, December 2011.

¹³² Georgia adopts a new law on the status of religious organisations, Human Rights House Tbilisi, 26 September 2011, <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/16973.html>.

¹³³ Thousands Protest Law on Religious Minorities Legal Status, Civil Georgia, 10 July 2011, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23728>.

also [] a risk that in the future any dispute on a religious issue may easily grow into a political one.”¹³⁴ According to Beka Mindiashvili, senior expert at the Tolerance Centre at the Public Defender’s Office, the adoption of the legislation was almost the first secular constitutional decision to be made by the state independently of the GOC.¹³⁵ However, he adds that the amendment gives few tangible benefits, though it does exempt religious minorities from paying income tax.¹³⁶ Tamar Chugoshvili, head of the Georgian Lawyers Association warns that while “the law gave religious entities the opportunity to call themselves “legal entities of public law,” there is nothing beyond this.”¹³⁷ Both state that religious minorities’ actual status remains largely unchanged. It thus remains unclear what definite impact the amendment will have. On September 24, President Saakashvili said in an interview with Imedi TV that by adopting this legislative amendment the authorities have “told our citizens, that everyone is equal; we love you all equally.”¹³⁸ The newly created Administration of Georgian Muslims was the first religious organisation to be registered under the new law. It was followed by three others: the Caucasus Administration of Latin Catholics; the Chaldo-Assyrian Catholic community of Georgia and the Spiritual Assembly of Yazidis of Georgia.¹³⁹ Although representatives of these religious communities note that the new law gives few tangible benefits, they generally agree that it is a positive step which provides them with ‘moral support.’¹⁴⁰

The Azeri community in Georgia faces a number of other significant challenges. High unemployment, a lack of industrial production, poorly remunerated agriculture and decaying infrastructure

are all significant problems. Official figures show a 16.3 percent jobless rate in 2010, but unofficial figures point to levels as high as 71 percent unemployment in some areas.¹⁴¹ A recent study found that more than 40 percent of the population of Kvemo Kartli has a daily income of USD 2 (EUR 1.40) or less. Vegetable-growing is the main economic activity and potatoes is the main crop, but land plots are small (on average, between 0.1 and 0.3 hectares) and there is a perception that the region’s agricultural resources have been poorly managed and distributed unfairly.¹⁴²

Azeris are also seriously under-represented in the political system. In the 150-member parliament there are only three Azeris while in the regions of Kvemo Kartli where they comprise a majority, they have no municipal heads, but three to four deputies.¹⁴³ Few Azeris serve in law enforcement of the judiciary and local observers also point out that Georgians hold the key positions for regulating the distribution of wealth and property. Poor knowledge of the state language further impedes Azeri integration into the country’s social and political life, while the economic problems in Kvemo Kartli exacerbate feelings of alienation.¹⁴⁴

III. SECTION 2: THE RESPONSE: GEORGIA’S MUSLIMS AND THE STATE

This section will examine the Georgian government’s response to this complex and evolving situation, analysing both its strengths and shortcomings and suggesting how it can be made more effective and responsive to the situation on the ground. While the situation in the region remains peaceful, it nevertheless has the potential to escalate.

(i) The Administration of Georgian Muslims

¹⁴¹ Most of these are officially labelled as self-employed but this is essentially a euphemism for under-employment.

¹⁴² “Peace, Security and Stability in Kvemo Kartli,” The Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD), February 2011. Available at: http://www.cipdd.org/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=40&info_id=532.

¹⁴³ Georgia’s Armenian and Azeri Minorities, International Crisis Group Europe Report N°178, 22 November 2006. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/caucasus/georgia/178-georgias-armenian-and-azeri-minorities.aspx>.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Georgia: Church-State Dispute in Tbilisi Exposes Anti-Armenian Undertones, Eurasianet.org, 15 July 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63889>.

¹³⁵ Registration of Religious Organisations as Legal Entities of Public Law, Heinrich Boll Stiftung, Available at: <http://georgien.boell-net.de/web/115-1097.html>.

¹³⁶ ECMI Interview with Beka Mindiashvili, Head of the Tolerance Centre at the Public Defender’s Office, Tbilisi, November 2011.

¹³⁷ Tamar Chugoshvili’s remarks at a public discussion, Registration of Religious Organisations as Legal Entities of Public Law. For more, see: <http://georgien.boell-net.de/web/115-1097.html>.

¹³⁸ Four Groups Registered For Now Under New Law of Legal Status of Religious Minorities, Civil Georgia, 28 September 2011, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23974>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ ECMI Interviews with representatives of religious minorities, Tbilisi, November 2011.



The establishment of an Administration of Georgian Muslims (AGM) marks a significant development and constitutes the Georgian government's primary response to challenges facing Georgia's Muslim community. Although AGM is officially independent of the government, its primary founders were three ethnic-Azeri government officials: Hussein Yusupov, deputy head of the Kvemo Kartli region; Emil Ojakhguliev, current advisor to the Minister for Agriculture and previously representative of the Public Defender's Office in Kvemo Kartli; and Azer Suleimanov, a member of Georgia's parliament. All three originate from the Kvemo Kartli region. In July 2011 AGM became the first religious minority to obtain full legal status as a religious organisation under the new religious law, meaning it became a full subject of public law and, according to Hussein Yusupov, officially "a part of the state(hood) []"¹⁴⁵

Its founders state that the idea for a separate Georgian Muslim organisation had been germinating for several years.¹⁴⁶ Hussein Yusupov has declared that in recent years the religious situation of the Muslim community in Georgia was so bad, with "everything but religious matters" taking place¹⁴⁷ that just seeing this situation prompted him to found such an organisation, despite the fact that he knew it could put his position "at risk."¹⁴⁸ He also argues that as Georgia is now an independent state, it follows naturally that it should have its own Muslim administration body as have most other countries with Muslim populations.¹⁴⁹ According to Yusupov, government consultations with religious figures took place over the course of three to four months, starting in January 2011.¹⁵⁰ He says he personally met such figures "from all over Kvemo

Kartli every day," arguing that "there was overwhelming support for [the administration's] creation."¹⁵¹ He emphasises that the structure is completely independent of the government and that he and the other co-founders merely created it, then stepped back and left it to religious figures to organise: "There is no, and there will be no, government interference in this organisation's activities."¹⁵² He admits that he and other government officials have joined the organisation, but only as "Muslims and believers."¹⁵³

Following its creation, elections were held for leadership positions in the administration. Thirty-three delegates, "selected by ahunds (leaders of mosques) from mosques all over Georgia," voted on 12 June 2011.¹⁵⁴ The ethnic-Azeri mullah of Tbilisi, Vagiph Akberov, was elected chief sheikh; Jamal Bagshadze chief mufti, and Yasin Aliyev imam. Terms are for ten years.¹⁵⁵ On 29 June 2011, an inaugural convention was held at Nodar Dumbadze Theatre in Tbilisi, with several high level government officials in attendance. Demonstrating popular support for the new department, Yusupov says that not only was the building full, but the theatre's garden also with seventy per cent of the attendees from Kvemo Kartli and "almost every village represented."¹⁵⁶ Outside observers report, however, that religious and local leaders from Muslim-populated areas were not in attendance.¹⁵⁷

The newly-appointed sheikh, Vagiph Akperov, in a July 2011 interview with ECMI, stated that "before [the creation of AGM] Georgia's Muslims submitted to another government [Azerbaijan]. Now Georgia's Muslims have their own department; it has been created through democratic processes and without government interference."¹⁵⁸ He says the department is presently working with the Ministry of Justice to register mosques throughout Kvemo Kartli. Sheikh Vagiph also wishes to build relationships and

¹⁴⁵ ECMI Interview with Hussein Yusupov, Deputy Governor of Kvemo Kartli, Tbilisi, October 2011. Since then three other religious minorities have also obtained this status: Caucasus Administration of Latin Catholics; Chaldo-Assyrian Catholic community of Georgia and Spiritual Assembly of Yazidis of Georgia.

¹⁴⁶ ECMI Interviews with Hussein Yusupov and other government officials, Tbilisi, July-August 2011.

¹⁴⁷ By this he is referring to the "political influences" which he says he saw at work in the region.

¹⁴⁸ By risk he says he means that he knew he would come under pressure from CBM in Baku. ECMI Interview with Hussein Yusupov, Tbilisi, October 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Report "Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011", Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities "MRMG", December 2011.

¹⁵⁰ However, the organisation was officially registered as an NGO on 5 January 2011.

¹⁵¹ ECMI Interviews with Hussein Yusupov and other government officials, Tbilisi, July-August 2011.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ ECMI Interviews with Hussein Yusupov and other government officials, Tbilisi, July-August 2011.

¹⁵⁵ ECMI Interview with Hussein Yusupov, Tbilisi, October 2011.

¹⁵⁶ ECMI Interviews with vice-founder of Administration for Georgian Muslims, Tbilisi, July 2011.

¹⁵⁷ Report "Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011", Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities "MRMG", December 2011.

¹⁵⁸ ECMI Interview with Head Sheikh of the Administration of Georgian Muslims, Tbilisi, July 2011.



hold joint-conferences with religious organisations and governments abroad, especially in Europe.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, the Georgian ambassador to Saudi Arabia is liaising with the Saudi Ministry of the Hajj to obtain a separate quota of hajj visas for Georgia's Muslims and expects to get a quota of around 50 visas, for which AGM says it will not charge pilgrims. He states that the Georgian government does not provide money for AGM and that financing comes from private donations. "But this is not enough," he says. "There is not enough money."¹⁶⁰

Interviews conducted by ECMI in Kvemo Kartli have found substantial and genuine distrust and dissatisfaction with the new administration. While there is general agreement that an independent Georgian administration is a favourable development, it is the form and way in which it has been created that has created opposition. Ahl ul-Bayt states: "The creation of AGM without the knowledge or consent of community spiritual leaders, religious leaders, the intelligentsia, and public has very much disappointed the people [of Kvemo Kartli]."¹⁶¹ Although Ahl ul-Bayt agrees that they and other religious leaders in Kvemo Kartli were consulted in the months leading up to the organisation's creation, and also asked to propose amendments to its draft charter, they say their concerns and amendments were later completely ignored.¹⁶² According to Ahl ul-Bayt, the new administration "was supposed to solve problems, but instead it will create new ones".¹⁶³

There is particular dissatisfaction that the administration's founders were government officials and not religious figures, which has led it to be viewed by the many religious figures and some ordinary Azeris in Kvemo Kartli as government interference.¹⁶⁴ Vagiph Akberov's election as sheikh has also been particularly controversial. Religious figures in Kvemo Kartli claim he is "the government's choice; not the people's, and not theirs".¹⁶⁵ Although they say they respect him as a mullah, in their view he is unsuitable

for the role of sheikh, as he lacks a higher religious education and, they say, the talent for oratory and leadership necessary for the position of chief sheikh. They claim he has a criminal past and lacks the legitimacy and respect of the Muslim community. "He cannot direct the Muslim community on the right path,"¹⁶⁶ they conclude. Moreover, they claim that in the days leading up to the elections, they, and other religious figures in the region, received calls from the government and police 'advising' them to vote for Akberov.¹⁶⁷

Co-ordinator of the Council of National Minorities (CNM) at the Public Defender's Office, Koba Chopliani, sees political motivation behind these arguments: "While Sheikh Akberov does not have a formal religious education, he has 10 years of experience as mullah of Tbilisi. He is widely respected amongst Azeris [in Tbilisi] and is one of the best in terms of religious knowledge."¹⁶⁸ While Chopliani confirms that the Sheikh did spend a short amount of time in prison when he was young, this, he states, was for a minor issue and was a long time ago: "If anything, this increases his legitimacy, as he reformed and became mullah of Tbilisi. Nobody cared about his criminal conviction all these years, it is only now, and I believe it is politically motivated."¹⁶⁹

The government also dismisses the argument. One senior government official states that "[religious figures in Marneuli] believe they are the 'blue blood' of Georgian Azeris and Marneuli is their capital. They believe that they should be in the leadership [of the new administration] and all problems stem from this." He also believes Akberov is a good choice: "He speaks seven languages; some [of the leaders of Ahl ul-Bayt] speak only Azeri. How can they lead the Muslim community?" He states that it is a matter of national security and that such "religious figures [such as Ahl ul-Bayt] had a lot freedom in the past." Nevertheless, he adds: Either Rasim Mamedov or Haji Ali Aliyev could have put their names forward to become sheikh. But they didn't because they knew that if they became sheikh they could not retain their respective links with Iran or Azerbaijan. Ahl ul-Bayt has already received so

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. Nevertheless, Sheikh Vagiph stated that in 2010 he undertook the hajj himself. Travelling business class via Istanbul, he paid USD 4500 (approximately EUR 3300).

¹⁶¹ ECMI Interview with leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt, Marneuli, July 2011.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Report "Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011", Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities "MRMG", December 2011.

¹⁶⁵ ECMI Interview with religious figures, Marneuli, July and October 2011.

¹⁶⁶ ECMI Interview with leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt, Marneuli, July 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ ECMI Phone Interview with Koba Chopliani, Coordinator of the Council of National Minorities of the Ombudsman's Office, July 2011.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.



much money from Iran they it cannot break the link; same with Aliyev and Pashazade.¹⁷⁰

In July 2011, thirty-three members of a “Spiritual Council of Georgian Muslims” from throughout Kvemo Kartli, including the leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt and ahunds from several mosques, wrote and signed a letter of protest to President Saakashvili expressing their grave concerns about the new administration. They wrote:

“Although we greet the creation of the Administration of Georgian Muslims with joy, mistakes made in its charter and the fact that our suggestions were not taken into account lessen this joy. The exclusion of authoritative figures [from Kvemo Kartli] and the rejection of democratic norms [in its creation] have destroyed all the hope and trust that we initially had towards this organisation. It is our opinion that the form in which this organisation has been created, instead of solving problems, will create new ones.”

Ahl ul-Bayt also collected some 8,000 signatures of protest against the organisation from ordinary citizens of Kvemo Kartli, demonstrating that opposition to the organisation is not limited to religious figures. Members of Ahl ul-Bayt, the Iman Foundation, and other religious organisations held a series of meetings in Kvemo Kartli and Tbilisi. The meetings were attended “by some 60 religious figures and madrassah teachers.”¹⁷¹ At these meetings 15 members were elected to be part of a new independent organisation, the ‘Supreme Religious Council.’ These members drew up a charter in which they outlined their ideas on how the Georgian Muslim community

¹⁷⁰ In a later correspondence, the source wrote: “Religious leaders who promote radical Shiism in Georgia also had the opportunity to put forward their candidature for the position of Sheikh but the categorically refused to do so. Instead they privately put forward their supporters. These candidates did not receive enough votes and were thus defeated in the elections. The leaders did not put themselves forward for one reason,; if they were elected they would no longer be able to promote their version of Islam If one of their supporters had become Sheikh, however, they would have been able to easily and furtively promote Iranian religious ideology in Georgia.” ECMI Interview and Correspondence with Senior Government Official, Tbilisi, August and December 2011.

¹⁷¹ Report “Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011”, Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities “MRMG”, December 2011.

should be structured and how it should operate. The creation of two such opposing structures creates a split which did not previously exist in the Muslim community and increases the risk of future tension and conflict within this community.¹⁷²

(ii) Analysis

A number of significant changes have taken place in Georgia’s non-Georgian Muslim communities in the 20 years since Georgia attained independence. There is not one single trend of development, rather there are several, even within single religious groupings and communities. The nuances of these trends must be taken into account and must also be understood in the context of the minority communities in which they have taken place.

As outlined in section one, Georgia’s Muslim community is far from united. While on the surface it is not immediately clear, within it there are numerous lines of division and distrust. This is made more difficult to investigate by the fact that many of those interviewed when asked about the situation initially reply that there are no problems. Some then explain that “as Muslims we don’t complain, and we shouldn’t speak badly of other Muslims to outsiders, even if we feel that they are doing something wrong.”¹⁷³

The International Crisis Group has written that “superficially the situation in Kvemo Kartli seems less volatile [than in Samtskhe-Javakheti].” This may be because ethnic Azeris are “amongst the least politically active groups in Georgia. [But] their silence may be caused by fear due to pressures from both Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities. They prefer to remain quiet or deny they have problems [however, they] become outspoken with ordinary Azeris.”¹⁷⁴ One EU official states that the Azeri community is “more passive, more traditional, and more self-reliant [than other minority communities in Georgia].”¹⁷⁵ He speaks of an unspoken agreement, whereby the Azeri community provides its vote in return for a policy of non-interference on the government’s part.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Report “Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011”, Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities “MRMG”, December 2011.

¹⁷³ ECMI Interviews with local Muslims, June-August 2011.

¹⁷⁴ Georgia’s Armenian and Azeri Minorities, Crisis Group Report No.178, 22 November 2006. Available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/178_georgia_s_armenian_and_azeri_minorities.pdf.

¹⁷⁵ ECMI Interview with EU official, Tbilisi, November 2011.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.



One regional expert argues that the very notion of spiritual directorates, such as the CBM and the new Georgian administration, are political constructs with no basis in Islam.¹⁷⁷ He views the split between Georgian Muslims and the CBM as part of a broader post-Soviet trend to bring the spiritual directorates into line with current national borders. They are “inherently un-Islamic entities, a vestigial relic of the Soviet period,” he says, and the extent to which they can be effective or sustainable is questionable: “You can create [an Administration of Georgian Muslims] but it doesn’t mean Muslim communities will submit to its authority.”¹⁷⁸ The extent to which this will happen depends inherently on the extent to which the administration is considered legitimate and representative.

Many view the creation of AGM as an attempt by the government to impose control, particularly on the Azeri community. Opposition to the top-down form in which the administration has been created is not limited to a small group of religious leaders, although it is concentrated in Marneuli. Some observers have pointed out that many people in the wider Kvemo Kartli region (and even in Adjara) have greater trust in religious leaders in Marneuli than in Sheikh Akberov or the AGM.¹⁷⁹ If AGM continues to be seen as very closely associated with the government and remains unresponsive to local concerns and grievances, the perception that it is government interference is unlikely to change. However, some local Azeris who were initially against the new administration have, on learning more about it and the government’s motivation to reduce Iranian influence in the country, decided that it is a positive development.¹⁸⁰ This emphasises the need for increased dialogue and communication between all sides.

Although government officials argue that one of the main reasons for the creation of such a structure is concern over the extent of foreign influence, in particular from Iran and Azerbaijan, in the region, the new administration lacks a clear strategy for tackling this issue. As this paper has demonstrated, the influence of such ideas remains limited. Critically, by excluding key groups, the new administration risks exacerbating the situation and producing a counter-

productive increase in support for regional religious leaders, and thus the influence of their ideas, amongst the local Muslim population, the very thing the government wishes to avoid. As one local expert puts it: “AGM will continue with its visible, but utterly superficial activities, while regional ‘Iranian’ actors will retreat to the shadows. The Georgian government intention of controlling their activities will [then] hit a wall of opposition from Azeri Muslims.”¹⁸¹ The appearance of two, in essence, rival organisations also risks creating situation akin to the rivalry that existed between SCWRO and CBM in Azerbaijan which, according to one respected regional expert, was an important impediment in the Azerbaijani government’s attempts to regulate the religious sphere.¹⁸²

AGM is unlikely to adversely affect Georgian-Azerbaijani relations. While the move has been strongly criticised by the leadership of the CBM, the Azerbaijani government itself has been reticent to comment. Georgian-Azerbaijani relations are both traditionally strong and vital to both countries and the Azerbaijani government will be keen to maintain this. For example, both the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) and BTE (Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum) oil and gas pipelines flow through Georgia (and Kvemo Kartli). Close to one million barrels of oil flows through the BTC pipeline every day, while Azerbaijan’s exports through the BTE line are expected to climb to around 20 billion cubic metres (BCM) per year in 2016-17.

As recently as 1 August 2011, President Saakashvili spoke of the importance of the long-standing ‘strategic partnership’ between the two countries. Azerbaijani foreign minister, Elmar Mammadyarov, during a 14 June visit to Marneuli, commented that every time he came he saw “less and less problems for Georgia’s Azeris.”¹⁸³ He said that he had raised the issue of the AGM with Georgian foreign minister, Grigol Vashadze, speaking of the possibility of “unpleasant results, as religion is such a delicate issue.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁷ ECMI Phone Interview with Paul Goble, Regional Expert, July 2011.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ ECMI Interview with independent observers, Tbilisi, November 2011.

¹⁸⁰ ECMI Interviews with ethnic-Azeri NGO leaders, Marneuli and Sadakhlo, October 2011.

¹⁸¹ Report “Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011”, Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic minorities “MRMG”, December 2011.

¹⁸² The Politicisation of Islam in Azerbaijan, Silk Road Paper, Svante Cornell, October 2006. Available at: <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0610Azer.pdf>.

¹⁸³ “Azerbaijani Minister Discusses Economic, Ethnic Issues in Georgia,” Trend News, 14 June 2011, <http://www.news.az/articles/georgia/38433>.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.



IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As this paper has indicated, the Muslim community in Georgia is far from united. Even within single communities there are multiple trends of development and some of these have grown in opposition to each other. However, while there are numerous lines of distrust and even division, the situation remains largely peaceful. Importantly, all the main groupings still retain a level of trust in the Georgian government. That the situation now be dealt with in a nuanced, open and inclusive way by the Georgian government is of vital importance. Emphasis should be given to bringing all major groups together to increase open dialogue, trust, and ties between them.

The creation of a new and separate Administration of Georgian Muslims is in principle a positive development and an idea which is supported by the majority of religious figures in the country. It is understandable and positive that the Georgian government should want to place some control and monitoring on the activities and development of the Muslim community which has changed considerably in recent years. There is also general consensus that CBM did little for Georgia's Muslims and thus the criticisms of Haji Pashazade and other religious figures in Baku are less important than the concerns of Georgian Muslims.

The extent to which such an administration will be effective and successful inherently depends on the extent to which it is accepted and viewed as legitimate by Muslim communities throughout Georgia. To be viewed as legitimate, it must be representative of the whole community. As numerous observers have pointed out, it is in Marneuli and Kvemo Kartli that the mass of Azeris live. It should thus include, not exclude, them. It is vital that the government takes head of local concerns, whether or not it views them to be legitimate. The organisation otherwise risks becoming merely a symbolic authority, devoid of the power or ability to effect change where it is needed. It also risks creating and exacerbating splits within the Muslim community, and in a worst case scenario, it risks pushing the 'unfavourable activities' which the Georgian government wishes to control underground, where they will be much harder to monitor or control.

Specifically, ECMI recommends that the Georgian government opens discussions with the newly created Supreme Religious Council, with third party mediation if necessary. The Georgian government should also look at how elections for

leadership positions in the administration are held. Sheikh Vagiph's election remains one of the most contentious issues of the administration. A clear term should be set out and the timeline for the next round of elections should be made clear. In this situation, a 10 year term is too long. Every effort should be made to making the next elections as transparent and fair as possible, thus allowing all religious figures a fair say in the decision making process. Meanwhile, the government should make clear its level of involvement in the new administration, what the aims of the organisation will be, and how it will achieve these aims.

Ahl ul-Bayt and other independent religious organisations, for their part, should also be prepared to compromise where possible and every effort should be made to bring the parties together and to increase dialogue between them. The government can help to facilitate this by making it clear that it will not discriminate against Ahl ul-Bayt and that they can have a role in the organisation. Ahl ul-Bayt should understand the reasonable concerns of the Georgian government and attempt to reach a compromise. Specifically, it should be as open about its activities as possible and upfront about their motives and sources of funding. In order to garner local public support in Marneuli a moderate approach on behalf of Ahl ul-Bayt is both the most favourable and the most practical. It is in their interest; the local population of Kvemo Kartli does not show support for Iranian influence in their community, yet they respect the leadership of Ahl ul-Bayt and many continue to question the new administration.

It is vital that Tbilisi applies a constructive approach to the Azeri community, takes head of local concerns, and looks at how the administration of Georgian Muslims can be made more representative and thus more effective. The current situation represents not only a challenge, but an opportunity for the Georgian government, to act and be seen as a fair broker, to take steps to guarantee that Georgia's Azeris feel fully integrated in Georgia and thus to build confidence with local leaders and engender an increased sense of loyalty towards the state amongst them. It would also help provide an example of respect for minority rights in a region where minorities who feel discriminated against have too often been ignored.



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