

AZERBAIJAN: IRANIAN VECTOR OF RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

Elmir KULIEV

*Chief Consultant,
State Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan
for Work with Religious Associations
(Baku, Azerbaijan)*

Together with independence, the peoples of Azerbaijan acquired the freedom of worship envisaged in the republic's constitution, which serves as the legal basis of religious resurrection in the country. The upsurge of religious feelings is partly explained by what a casual observer may take for a paradox. I have in mind the lack of spirituality caused, among other things, by the absence of religious continuity among the younger generation, which is willingly embracing Islam. Islamic religious and philosophical thought in Azerbaijan is struggling through an ideological fog to bring the nation back to its traditional moral and spiritual values. The traditional clergy and religious radicals exploiting the ideological vacuum left by socialism are little interested in the resurging interest in Islam and its potential contribution to the country's rebirth.

In fact the clergy, which betrayed its inability to meet the current challenges, has become a serious obstacle for those who wanted to reach religious perfection: many of them cannot accept the archaic and even anti-social tradition which imposes ideological limitations and bans free thinking. Those members of the clergy who have retained their former role as Islam's social-historical sheath allegedly designed to shape the religion's environment are rejected together with the fossilized traditions. We should admit, however, that it was thanks to the conservative-minded clergy that religious resurrection in Azerbaijan did not acquire political hues. However, this should not be taken to mean that the clergy is not responsible for the deep internal and external crisis of religion in Azerbaijan.

Today, the revivalist movement, which has already acquired a fairly wide scope, stands opposed to the traditional religious leaders. It has failed so far to grasp the meaning of the key tasks civil soci-

ety should address on its road toward democracy. The revivalists passionately desire to cleanse religion of communist impurities; they cherish its spiritual harmony, while their approach to reforming Islamic rituals deserves attention. They have not accumulated enough internal resources so far to use religion to deal with the country's major social problems.

In the current context of rapidly developing science and technology, as well as of rapidly progressing social and political thought, it is vitally important to encourage the creative momentum in religious thinking that channels spiritual energy into creation and reformation. We should bear in mind, however, that this may proliferate dangerous radical ideas willingly accepted in the context of weakened traditional religious bonds. In one of his articles, L. Medvedko wrote that it is the oligarchs who often place their stakes on the Islamic card and who spread their influence to the media to promote their selfish interests. This is where religious extremism may find its breeding ground. The author pointed out that everywhere across the post-Soviet expanse confessions are too weak to meet the steadily increasing social demand for spirituality, peace, and stability. The state and science should help religion restore its potential as a spiritual leader.¹

To strengthen its statehood and legal system, the state should learn to tap Islam's positive spiritual, moral, cultural, and intellectual potential in the interests of society. In fact, the absence of strict control by the state triggered the process of proliferation of extremism among the Muslims in some of the countries of what is called the Greater Middle East.

So far experts are unable to agree on the sources of Islamic radicalism. According to Russian academic Alexey Malashenko, the blend of politics and religion in Islamic radicalism was not caused by the geopolitical realities of today. This synthesis, he argues, is rooted in Islamic tradition.² American Orientalist N. Keddie does not fully agree with those who believe that all aspects of everyday life of the faithful are completely regulated by Islam, thus bringing together religion and politics. He argues that the way of life of any social group is determined not so much by its religious convictions as by the forms of economic and social organization.³ Mahmud A. Faksh agrees that the Islamists are not devoted to the Muslim tradition; they are a product of the urban life style and consumer society: "They desire consumer goods and services, but are frustrated by being unable to obtain them. Indeed, the failure of the social and economic modernization policies in the Middle East is partly responsible for the surge of fundamentalism. The out-of-reach modern accoutrements are a principal cause of the people's deep anger toward and resentment of their rulers and the West in general, whom they see as the authors of their misfortunes."⁴

Ahmad S. Moussalli, in turn, has aptly remarked that the call for a revolution is sure evidence of the Islamic extremists' non-traditional political orientation: "Muslims have traditionally accepted more or less unjust rulers who nominally adhered to Islamic law. Great jurists and theologians such as Ibn Taymiyya, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Jama'a demanded yielding to unjust rulers because the scourges of revolutions outweighed their possible benefits. The fundamentalists now view revolting against unjust and unelected rulers not only as a political doctrine, but also as an ethical obligation."⁵

The problem is obviously rooted in the specific forms of Islam's politicization, rather than in its basic tenets. The radical movements pursue concrete aims and as a rule are mere instruments of the global or regional actors (not infrequently this role belongs to the countries in which religion is part

¹ See: L.I. Medvedko, "Rossia, Zapad, Islam: 'stolknovenie tsivilizatsiy'?" *Miry v mirovykh i "drugikh" voynakh na razlome epokh*, Kuchkovo pole Publishers, Moscow, 2003, pp. 418-419.

² See: A. Malashenko, "Dva lika islamskogo radikalizma," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 15 April, 2003.

³ See: M.V. Riabov, "Vliianie sistemoobrazuiushchikh faktorov sotsiuma na religioznuuu situatsiiu v rayonakh traditsionnogo rasprostraneniya islama," *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost*, No. 3, 1996, p. 125.

⁴ M.A. Faksh, *The Future of Islam in the Middle East: Fundamentalism in Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, 1997, p. 114.

⁵ A.S. Moussalli, *Moderate and Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Quest for Modernity, Legitimacy, and the Islamic State*, University Press of Florida, 1999, p. 36.

of the state ideology). The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is the best example of this: it claims the role of the leader of the Muslim world and is actively promoting the idea of an Islamic revolution.

In Azerbaijan, which during the past ten years has been engaged in fighting religious extremism known as Wahhabism, which turned the Northern Caucasus into a hot spot, the radical Shi'a movements have been developing unnoticed. According to American researcher Tadeus Swietochowski, official statements never mentioned the danger of Shi'a fundamentalism since Iranian theocracy was at no time regarded as a direct threat to the Azerbaijanian Republic's stability.⁶

At the same time, according to recent statements by the leaders of Egypt and Algeria, as well as documents issued by the U.S. State Department and the CIA, the Iranian ruling regime is determined to export religious extremism to Islamic and Arab countries as part of its foreign policy. In the past few years, the IRI leaders have been holding forth about their intention to extend the area of the Islamic revolution. During his visit to Khartoum in December 1991, Iran's President Rafsanjani declared: "The Islamic revolution of Sudan, alongside Iran's pioneer revolution, can doubtless be a source of movement and revolution throughout the Islamic world."⁷

As soon as they came to power, the Iranian clerics felt an urge to pass the revolutionary baton on to other nations: they all agreed that the revolution could be exported by promoting the Iranian model of power, but could not agree on how to do this. Some of them said that material and technical assistance to the oppressed Muslims in other countries was not needed for the simple fact that they would rise against the "Western-oriented, corrupt and repressive dictatorial governments" on their own. Others were convinced that export of revolution could not and should not be limited to propaganda—it should be supported by material and technical assistance in the form of charities, new buildings of madrasahs and clinics, financial support of religious political parties, etc. This was what Ali Khamenei and Rafsanjani were saying.⁸

Between September 1991 and February 1992, Rafsanjani's government "spent more than \$500 million and sent out 1,300 Islamic fundamentalist preachers to influence the newly independent Muslim republics of Central Asia." On average, the mullahs have spent \$100 million annually in recent years to reinforce and maintain their operatives in Lebanon.⁹

Azerbaijan obviously belongs to Iran's sphere of interests, not only because the clerics would like to control the Caspian hydrocarbon reserves, but also because at least over 20 million Iranian citizens are Azeris. This is what brings the two neighboring countries closer together and what creates the differences in their relations.

Today, Iran is the only country demonstrating sustainable development: according to the CIA, between 1992 and 2002, its annual average GDP increased by 4.15 percent, the figure for 2002 being 7.6 percent. It should be said that in recent years the GDP growth rate of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has been steadily dropping. In 2002, it was slightly over 2 percent in Pakistan and only 0.6 percent in Saudi Arabia. The relatively high literacy level in Iran is one of the factors of its economic success: in 2002, it was 81.9 percent, while in Pakistan only 45.7 percent of adult population could read and write.¹⁰

The high diplomatic activity of the IRI leaders adds to Iran's political weight in the region. The same can be said about its close ties with the Russian Federation, in the nuclear sphere among other things, and, strange as it may seem, America's foreign policy. On the one hand, the U.S. is striving to undermine Russia's influence in the Southern Caucasus, while on the other, it wants a stronger Shi'a community in

⁶ See: T. Swietochowski, "Islam i natsional'noe samosoznanie na pogranichnykh territoriiakh: Azerbaijan," in: *Religia i politika na Kavkaze. Materialy mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii*, KISMI, Erevan, 2004, p. 29.

⁷ M. Mohaddessin, *Islamic Fundamentalism: The New Global Threat*, Seven Locks Press, Washington, 1993, p. 39.

⁸ See: M. Ganji, *Defying the Iranian Revolution: From a Minister to the Shah to a Leader of Resistance*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, 2002, p. 131.

⁹ See: M. Mohaddessin, op. cit., p. 48.

¹⁰ See: D.V. Suslov, "Iranskiy kluch k mirovoi stabil'nosti," *Globalaffairs.ru*, 16 February, 2005.

Iraq. The June 2005 victory of conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the presidential elections in Iran is the Iranians' response to the harsh statements coming from the American administration.

To translate into practice the idea of a single Iranian nation, the clergy is skillfully exploiting the Shi'a doctrine. What is more, the Shi'as in other countries are absolutely convinced that it is Iran that guards and develops the original Islamic tradition; they worship the Shi'a preachers. It looks as if the dissemination of the revolutionary ideas is intended to make IRI a strongpoint of Islam in the eyes of the faithful. Later the regime may become an uncontested religious authority or even acquire immunity of sorts.

So far nobody would call the advance of the Islamic (read Iranian) revolution across the Muslim world a triumph: it failed everywhere except Afghanistan (where it won at a certain stage of its development) and Sudan. The revolutionary idea lost its glamour because of poverty, corruption, human rights violations, support of terrorist movements abroad, and other ugly features of the Iranian clerics' internal and external policies. The Iranian propagandists do not despair—this is amply illustrated by what is going on in Azerbaijan.

An Iranian Cultural Center in Azerbaijan promotes Islam and enjoys popularity among the local people. The local press writes time and again that its head, Ojag Nijat, proliferates "Khomeinism."¹¹ Since 1993, the Republican branch of the Imdad Charitable Committee named after leader of the Islamic revolution Khomeini has been working in Azerbaijan. According to information supplied by the bulletin published by the IRI embassy in Baku, by December 2002, 19,000 Azerbaijanian citizens (not counting 8,000 students) have been receiving aid from the Committee's offices in nineteen cities of our country.

According to Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the IRI to the Azerbaijanian Republic Afshar Suleimani, the Committee's humanitarian aid to Azerbaijan amounted to \$25 million. It was addressed to the refugees and forced migrants, as well as to poor young men. The local people may count on loans or donations to start small businesses.¹²

Iranian influence is especially strong in the south of Azerbaijan: nearly a third of the functioning mosques are found there, as well as in Baku, Gäncä, and Nakhichevan. The Iranian propagandists working there spare no efforts to draw small and medium businessmen, as well as the youth to their side. They pay special attention to the activists courting Western countries and important international organizations and to those who seek the reputation of human rights activists and supporters of democratic changes.

This was what spiritual leader of the Iranian Shi'as Ayatollah Khomeini was trying to accomplish in the mid-1970s when in exile in Paris. He managed to win the Western media over to his cause by promising to respect human rights, guarantee democratic freedoms, put an end to the discrimination of women, and uproot corruption. This was very different from what the Shah was saying.¹³

His true aim—a theocratic state in Iran—became absolutely clear several months after the revolution had finally triumphed in Iran in 1979. The Iranian and world public learned that from that time on the state would be ruled according to the vilaiat-i-fakih principle (a Muslim theologian ruling in place of the "Hidden" twelfth Imam).

In 1990, speaking at a party conference in Baku one of the leaders of the Iranian Tudeh party, Amir Ali Lakhrudi, admitted that the revolution of 1979 had come unexpectedly. Iraj Iskandari, who at one time headed the Central Committee of Tudeh, a pro-Soviet party, was much more apprehensive about the frantic activities of leftist Muslims, rather than of Khomeini supporters, whom he dismissed as a handful of obscurantists.¹⁴

¹¹ See, for example: *525-ci qaxet*, 5 August, 2003.

¹² See: *525-ci qaxet*, 27 April, 2005.

¹³ See: M. Ganji, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

¹⁴ See: M.I. Krutikhin, "Iranskie ocherki. Chast 8. 'Odnostoronniy soiuz,' ili kak partiya 'Tudeh' uchastvovala v revoliutsii," *RusEnergy.com*, 8 December, 2001.

As a result, the Iranians, instead of democracy, received a cruel suppressive regime aimed equally against the rightist political forces of the bourgeoisie and against those who had been fighting side by side with the clerics against monarchy. In his *Defying the Iranian Revolution*, M. Ganji supplied a detailed account of mysterious disappearances and deaths of many influential religious and political figures who refused to accept Khomeini's political course: Defense Minister Mostafa Chamran, Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Taleghani, Admiral Ahmad Madani, and Hossein Ali Montazeri. According to certain sources, nearly 20,000 of the young revolutionaries who took up arms against the ruling Akhonds were executed.¹⁵ The clergy limited its political pluralism to one opposition organization—The Freedom Movement of Iran headed by Mehdi Bazargan.¹⁶

To correctly analyze the phenomenon of the Iranian revolution, we should try to understand why the religious radicals won.

- First, they were promoting their convictions among the Shi'a Muslims, whose religious doctrine allowed them to act against unfair rulers. The traditional Sunni theologians, on the other hand, flatly ban similar actions. For example, Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya, a Muslim jurist of the 13th century and cherished today as one of the ideologists of radical Islam, asserted that it was much better to live under a despotic sultan than to live without any ruler and added: they say that sixty years with a despotic ruler is better than one night without a ruler.¹⁷ The reactionary ideas of the Kharijites, which in the 20th century acquired new political and ideological hues, were also popular to some extent among the Sunni Muslims. In this way in Iran Islam was associated with the struggle against dictatorship. For the majority of the local population, its religion was tied to the name of Imam Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The traditional story says that he rebelled against an unfair ruler and perished when fighting against vastly superior forces in the city of Karbala. People readily embraced the idea of a revolutionary struggle against tyranny and oppression: for many centuries they have commemorated him by pouring into the streets on the anniversary of his death to follow a white war-horse led out of the city. During the years of the anti-monarchic revolution, millions of Iranians—the faithful Muslims, and secular intellectuals alike who lauded his fight against despotism in their works—accepted the Hussein-led rebellion as an example to be followed.
- Second, the Shah regime which came to power as a result of the state coup of August 1953 banned many of the political parties and public movements, thus liquidating the democratic freedoms the nation had fought for and won after 1941. In 1957, the SAVAK secret police was set up with the active assistance of American and Israeli intelligence structures. "The shah's secret police, SAVAK, brutally suppressed in the 1960s and '70s all active opposition groups, notably the People's Mojahedin. When the shah reluctantly eased the repression and restricted the powers of SAVAK in the mid-1970s, the Khomeini-led clerical network was the only entity outside the government capable of acting as a cohesive political alternative."¹⁸ In his antigovernment propaganda Khomeini relied on the discontent of the broad popular masses, including the middle class, displeased with the social and economic problems, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the regime's repressive methods of government. The monarchy had practically no social basis to speak of.
- Third, the last period of the Shah's rule was marked by a search for and elaboration of the conception of the country's historical and cultural specificity. The culturological discourse

¹⁵ See: M. Ganji, op. cit., pp. 109-110.

¹⁶ See: A. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic*, Routledge Publishers, London, 1995, p. 216.

¹⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhajj as-Sunna-an-Nabaviyya*, Vol. 1, Cairo, 1962, p. 371.

¹⁸ M. Mohaddessin, op. cit., p. 20.

revealed that culture was socially conditioned and closely connected with the sociopolitical processes; it could express the antagonistic positions of various social groups. Such prominent public figures and thinkers as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ale Ahmed, Mehdi Bazargan, and Ali Shariati were deeply concerned with the way the country looked at Western culture and market relations. By the late 1970s, the nation had accumulated dissatisfaction with the Western cultural influence. In one of his articles, film producer Ali Abbasi wrote that he was no retrograde to oppose importing good foreign films of high artistic value. Yet, he added, the imported commodity for which the country paid was inferior films about millionaires or about adventures full of sex and cruelty. Being no much better than the vulgar and weak locally produced films, they debased the Iranian film industry even more.¹⁹

Khomeini and his supporters exploited the dislike of the Shah and his entourage shared by the ordinary people and intellectuals for their open flouting of the traditional values. Even though many were attracted by the simplicity of the Western mass culture, it had no philosophical and ethical basis to compete with the fundamental moral and ethical conception of Islam. For this reason, the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979 attracted the popular masses on a much larger scale than any other revolution of the 20th century.

This suggests that the revolution in Iran started as an anti-imperialist movement rather than a theocratic coup. Certain influential circles in the West deluded by the religious radicals' democratic slogans and high-flown statements encouraged them and approved of their propaganda efforts. For certain reasons the attempts of the Shah's regime to promote Islam mainly among the youth and illiterate villagers turned against the regime itself. The country was flooded with "masterpieces" of mass culture that destroyed culture as an instrument of spiritual improvement and created fertile soil for religious radicalism. It could only be expected because Islam is an instrument of self-identity for the Muslim nations.

The current social and political situation in Azerbaijan is very different from what was going on in Iran on the eve of the revolution. There are certain signs, however, that call for the close attention of our academic community and a careful analysis. It is only under the conditions of natural (evolutionary) development and promotion of Islamic thought, rather than through synthetic (revolutionary) methods, that the Muslim faith can preserve its purity and meet the spiritual requirements of its adepts.

¹⁹ See: *Iranskaia revolutsia 1978-1979 gg. Prichiny i uroki*, ed. by A.Z. Arabajan, Nauka Publishers, Main Department of Oriental Literature, Moscow, 1989, p. 96.