

It's not about ancient hatreds, it's about current policies: Islam and stability in the Caucasus

Brenda Shaffer, Harvard University

Abstract

The use of religious labels regarding the various sides to the hostilities in the Caucasus contributes little to understanding the roots of these conflicts and subsequently, finding appropriate solutions. Islam is not the primary collective identity of most of the Muslims of the Caucasus, and plays only a minor role in the conflicts afflicting the region. Not all violence perpetrated by Muslims is Islamic terror, and not all political movements involving Muslims are Islamic movements. Most of the observant Muslims in the region are not connected to Wahabbism and this label is often inappropriate. The major coalitions of states involved in the conflicts are not based on religious affinity. In terms of external actors involved in Islamic radicalism in the region, most of them originate from countries which are considered pro-Western: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey (primarily non-official groups). The activity of "Afghani Arabs" in the region is a source of instability and concern. Iran's policy in the region is based primarily on geopolitical concerns, and the propagation of Islamic fundamentalism is only a minor facet of their activity in the region.

Introduction

Many of the reports and analysis on the Caucasus often describe the conflicts as emanating from ancient hatreds, religious differences and as long-rooted. When describing the motivations and behavior of Muslims involved in the conflicts, such as Chechens and Azerbaijanis, the descriptions overwhelmingly assume that Islam is their primary collective identity, that their struggles are based on Islam, and that their religious beliefs make them prone to hate non-Muslims and to act in a violent way. For instance, Chechens are usually described as "Islamic insurgents", while the forces from Moscow are "Russian soldiers", described by their ethnic and state affiliation, but not by their religion. The conflict in Karabagh is frequently described as a dispute between Christian Armenia and Shi'i Muslim Azerbaijan, while religion plays little role in the conflict. Samuel Huntington explains the conflicts in the Caucasus as emanating from the location at a "fault line" between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, assuming that the coalitions in the area largely break down on a Christian/Muslim basis. Accepting these explanations of the origins of the conflicts assumes that the behavior of local elites and of external powers did not cause the conflicts, but that the religious differences and the history of interaction of the peoples of the Caucasus made these conflicts almost inevitable. Logical extension of this analysis of the inevitability of these conflicts is that little can be done to rectify the situation by way of changing the behavior of the external powers in the Caucasus region.

In contrast, evidence suggests that history of hatred and reasons for enmity exist almost everywhere, yet conflicts do not erupt in every region. Moreover, even in places where there is a history of positive interaction, mutual tolerance, and religious affinity, conflicts often breakout. It seems that these conflicts are not pre-determined by ancient hatred and religious differences, but shaped by current behavior and policies of local elites and regional powers. Moreover, in the case of the Caucasus, especially in the interaction between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, there is as much historical evidence of positive interaction as there is attesting to negative interplay, thus the chronicle of the relations of the two peoples has little to do with the conflict that emerged between them. Furthermore, different religious affiliations play only a small role in the conflicts currently waging in the Caucasus and specifically Islam plays no role in the Karabagh conflict with Armenia and only a minor role in the Chechnya war in Russia. In terms of the role of Islam in the conflicts in the Caucasus, a variety of assertions will be made:

- Islam is not the primary collective identity of the majority of the Muslims of the Caucasus. Especially in the case of Azerbaijan, ethno-national identity is clearly stronger than Islamic identity.
- The major coalitions of states involved in the conflicts are not based on religious affinity. For instance, the Islamic Republic of Iran has joined in cooperation with Armenia and Russia to the disadvantage of

Shi'i Azerbaijan.

- Iran's policy toward the conflicts in the Caucasus is driven by its state geo-political interests, and little by Islamic ideology. Moreover, Iran engages in Islamic propagation in the Caucasus almost exclusively when it cannot damage its strategic interests in the area, and often uses Islam manipulatively in order to advance those interests, primary vis-a-vis Russia.

Collective identity exists on a variety of levels in the Caucasus: family or clan, regional grouping, ethnic group, religion, republic and, for some, a certain "Soviet" identity. Religious affiliation is only one of the multi-layers of identity of the residents of the region, and not necessarily the primary. Various collectives perform a role in the politics of the region. For instance, traditional groupings, such as extended family networks in Azerbaijan, have filled some of the functions no longer executed by the state and thus softened the blows of the shift to market economy and the collapse of the social net previously provided by the state. Furthermore, the relative lack of violence inside states like Azerbaijan, even during heightened political upheaval, can partially be explained by the functioning of the extended family representatives as a facilitator between parts of the government and the demands of the wider public. Moreover, family ties are held with highest regard among most of the peoples of the Caucasus and greater Caspian region, and frequently there are family links between members of rival political camps, such as Heydar Aliyev and Abulfaz Elchibey in Azerbaijan. Thus, often periods of instability and political upheaval in the region, such as those in Azerbaijan, are not marked with high degrees of violence. Family ties play a role in the political processes in the region, adding a dimension to ethnic ties. For instance, they play an important part in preserving the attachment between Azerbaijanis in the republic and beyond its border in Iran, as well as between Armenians in the state and in Karabagh and Georgia. The common primary allegiance to extended family members weakens the potential allure of other collective ideologies, such as Islam, although, of course, it is also present in the region. At the same time, these strong family allegiances also serve as an impediment to state-building and fostering national solidarity, which can be sources of stability.

In neighboring Central Asia, one of the important factors contributing to the relative internal stability in the new Muslim states since the Soviet breakup is the strength of the local, traditional power structures that have survived as a bulwark against major turmoil in the region, allowing continuity in leadership and reduced influence of external, radical forces. These local power structures, such as family and regional groupings endured in the Soviet period and the Soviet-era political elites in the region were most often grounded in these traditional structures. Their survival under the Soviet Union and their duration after its demise, explain why no "vacuum" was created that could have been utilized by foreign or other radical factors.

Islam in the Caucasus

For most of the Muslims of the Caucasus, Islam serves as a component of their ethnic and regional identity, but is not their primary collective identity. Solidarity on an Islamic basis with Muslims beyond the Caucasus is minimal, although beginning to emerge among small groups in the North Caucasus. Most members of the region hold in high regard their local cultures, and they are not particularly susceptible to chief identification with the broader Muslim world. Furthermore, Islam rarely serves as a unifying ideology of primary identity uniting the Muslim residents in the region, and many conflicts prevail among members of the same religion.

Outside forces have too easily labeled mass forms of dissent in the region as "Islamic." For example, when Azerbaijanis removed border posts in December 1989 in attempt to make contacts with their co-ethnics beyond the border in Iran, Western sources tended to interpret this as their desire for ties to "Khomeinism" in Iran. More recently, activity of Chechens involved in what they view as a national struggle for independence is predominately termed in the West as "Islamic" violence and activity, despite the fact that Islam plays a quite secondary role in the conflict. Islam in and of itself is not destabilizing and not all ethnic or regional conflicts in which Muslims are involved are inherently religious. Not all acts of violence and terror perpetrated by Muslims should be seen as Islamic terror. The Islamic label and the Muslim origin of many of the peoples of the Caucasus is often manipulated for promotion of their own agendas by a variety of forces, both within and from outside the region. With Western audiences and at home, Moscow forthwith throws the

Islamic label on movements of Muslims within its border demanding political independence or autonomy in order to cast aspersion on them and to attain American sympathy and acceptance of its policies against the insurgents. In the Soviet period, pious Muslims were generally referred to by the misnomer "Wahabbists", which had a more frightening association than simply observant. Russia has continued with this labeling of Muslim activists, despite the fact that few of the Muslims in the Caucasus are actually connected to Wahabbist movements. Muslim radicals in the Middle East also like to attach the Islamic stamp to uprisings in the Caucasus and Central Asia and often grant support to political movements in this area, even if the basic goal of the movement is not Islamic in nature, although in the long run, they can gain influence in this manner. Many of the fighters in the Caucasus, such as Shamil Bashayev, like to attach the Islamic label to their struggle in order to add an air of legitimacy and respectability to their often power-based struggles and violent behavior, when in their personal habits they show little signs of religious piety.

The overwhelming majority of the Muslims of the North Caucasus are Sunni, whereas the Azerbaijanis are predominantly Shi'âi. However, the Shi'âi factor has no influence on the Azerbaijanis' political orientation or activity, and actually Azerbaijan has tense relations with its Shi'âi neighbor, Iran. In the region, Islam is predominately a cultural force, and scarcely a political force, especially in Azerbaijan. Islam forms the framework for major rites of passage, such as marking birth, death and marriages, but appears in few political contexts. In the northern Caucasus, Sufi Islam is very prominent and popular and does not traditionally aim for the formation of political or highly institutionalized frameworks, and as such can potentially contribute to fostering political moderation. Sufi Islam is as a whole highly condemned by Wahabbist ideology, and does not seem to be good breeding ground for this movement, further weakening Moscow's claims of the Wahabbist basis of the Chechen movement.

Azerbaijan declared in its Constitution clear separation between religion and state and did not grant any special status to Islam. Moreover, religious parties are illegal and clerics may not run for office in Azerbaijan. As part of their drive for clear separation between religion and state, courts in Azerbaijan have demanded that women remove head coverings for photos for their official documents. Azerbaijan has a long tradition of secularism. With their inclusion in the Russia Empire, the Azerbaijanis were among the first Muslim groups to fall under European colonial rule. In keeping with Russian colonial policy, most of the powers of the Muslim clerical establishment were usurped. Freed from the constraints of the ulema, the Azerbaijanis and other Muslims in Russia became a bridgehead of secularism and proponents of modern education in the Muslim world.

In the north Caucasus, in contrast, some of the local regional governments have granted special status to Islam. However, local identity is very strong and it does not seem likely that the universalistic Islamic identity will surpass it as the primary collective identity of the different groups in the North Caucasus.

In Azerbaijan and in the north Caucasus, official clerical hierarchies, mosques and institutions of religious learning are functioning, predominantly in the attempt to control Islam and mobilize segments of its proponents in service of the regime. The official Islamic institutions have achieved varying degrees of success. In terms of the conflicts afflicting the region, the official clerical establishment in the Caucasus tends to promote stability and is adverse to any form of Islamic radicalism and most kinds of Islamic-based political activity. Moreover, these elements are viewed by the official clerics as their rivals for power and status. In many instances, such as in Chechnya and in connection to the Karabagh conflict, the establishment Muslim clerics have promoted moderation and attempted to advance conflict resolution. Nonetheless, it must be noted that due to their collaboration with the ruling state elites in the region, most of the establishment clerics are delegitimized in the eyes of the more radical and devout Muslims in the region and subsequently they have little influence over extremist Muslims in the area, and many influential independent clerics are operating in the region.

Not having undergone Western colonialism, many residents of the area do not harbor an anti-Western orientation, and many maintain an ambivalent relationship toward Moscow. Even enthusiastic supporters of independence of the region, often are willing to recognize the contributions of the interaction with Russia played in their national development. At the same time, some residents of the region are angered by the

incursion on traditional local values and culture by the onslaught Western culture in the post-Soviet period, but it seems that Moscow is as blamed for that cultural assault as much, if not more so, than the West.

Political activity involving Muslims and the patterns of their struggles do not necessarily conform to the image of Muslim behavior associated with radical Arab movements in the Middle East. The absence of use by the Azerbaijanis of terror against civilian Armenian targets in the Karabagh conflict illustrates this point.

Religious based radical behavior seems most prevalent in the region in places where many people live outside their traditional places of residence. Affected by the alienation of new surroundings, often in large cities, without the welfare safety nets provided by their homes as well as the social constraints on their behavior, individuals are more susceptible to radical influences and prone to behavior of this type in their non-traditional settings.

In attempt to assess the extent of the hold of Islam on the population in the Caucasus region, it is important to separate between indicators of social conservatism and Islamic piety. In many parts of the region, social norms are in place, many pre-dating Islam's arrival to the region, that mandate strict behavioral codes in fields such as sexual activity and dress. Many factors such as social segregation and occupational differentialization between the sexes, modest dress and the covering of the hair among the women have been interpreted by many researchers as external signs of Islamic religiosity and identity. Many Azerbaijanis, for instance, are secular in their outlook and do not observe many explicit Islamic laws (such as the prohibitions on alcoholic drinks and eating pork), even though they observe many conservative social customs. It seems that much of this traditional behavior is rooted in practices, which the practitioners did not necessarily associate with the Islamic religion when observing them.

Close-by examples of the results of wide political violence and Islamic radicalism, such as neighboring Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and the results of the Chechen conflict, serve as constant reminders to the residents of the Caucasus of the dangers of extremism of this type and even many religious people in the region have stated that radical Islamic-based political action must be avoided so that their country doesn't become "another Afghanistan."

In terms of export of Islamic radicalism to Caucasus, the most active external forces are from countries with a Western security orientation, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, although most of the Islamic groups are not associated with the ruling governments there and many are in opposition to the regimes, especially in Turkey. Ankara is also active in fostering its official version of Islam in the region through the institutions and employees of its Ministry of Religious Affairs, although many of these may not be actually promoting the agenda that their sponsor would like. Moreover, residents of the region have remarked that even Turkey's version of non-political Islam, is more religious than that which is prevalent in the region, and thus Ankara may inadvertently be promoting Islam through these programs. Moscow's recent actions in the name of combating potential Islamic terror against "Caucasians" residing in the capital and other major cities in Russia, booting them home to the Caucasus and depriving many of their livelihood, may bolster the potential supporters for Islamic and other radical politics and add to the instability of the region.

A source of potential instability in the region emanates from the "Afghani Arabs." This term is used to refer to the Arab and other Muslim volunteers that came from outside Afghanistan and joined in the struggle in the 1980s against the Soviet Union. Service together in Afghanistan created an international network of Islamic radicals, sharing knowledge and experience in low-intensity warfare and terror. This network often offers assistance to different movements in the region and attempts to encourage them to undertake radical activity, and some of the local movements have accepted this aid. All in all, though, external elements have not been able to turn Islamic-based political activity to a major force at this juncture in the Caucasus.

Iran and the Caucasus

Iran's policy in the region is largely guided by geo-political state interests and less by ideological goals, such as promotion of Islam. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran grasped that a potentially conflict-laden zone had replaced its once stable northern border and that influences from the new states could permeate the

internal Iranian arena. From the inception of their independence, Tehran took a very sober attitude toward the establishment of the new Muslim republics, seeing in this development the dangers that emanate from the internal ethnic factor in addition to the opportunities for expanded influence:

The first ground for concern from the point of view in Tehran is the lack of political stability in the newly independent republics. The unstable conditions in those republics could be serious causes of insecurity along the lengthy borders (over 2000 kilometers) Iran shares with those countries. Already foreign hands can be felt at work in those republics, especially in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan republics, with the ultimate objective of brewing discord among the Iranian Azeris and Turkmen by instigating ethnic and nationalistic sentiments.

Iran is a multi-ethnic society in which approximately fifty percent of its citizens are of non-Persian origin. The largest minority group is the Azerbaijanis, which comprise close to a third of the population of Iran. Other major groups include the Kurds, Arabs, Baluch and Turkmen. Many of these groups are concentrated in Iran's frontier areas, and most have ties to co-ethnics in adjoining states, such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Turkey. Thus, Iran's ethnic groups are especially subject to influence by events taking place in these bordering states, and the ethnic question is not merely a domestic matter. One of Tehran's chief goals in the region has been to prevent destabilization in Iranian Azerbaijan and a rise in ethnic-based activity among the Azerbaijanis in Iran.

Iran's cautious attitude toward the Caucasus is quite justified. Following the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, a flurry of activity associated with the probing of ethnic and national identity occurred among Azerbaijanis in Iran. The establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan challenged the national identity of co-ethnics beyond the borders of the new state and served as a stimulant for many Azerbaijanis in Iran to identify with the Azerbaijani ethnic group though not necessarily with the new state itself. In the early 1990s, a significant rise in expressions of Azerbaijani ethnic identity in Iran has been observed, as well as important political manifestations of that identity. This rising Azerbaijani identity has generated few calls for the Azerbaijani provinces to secede from Iran and join the new republic, but rather for increased cultural rights within Iran.

Its close relations with Armenia illustrate the non-ideological nature of Iran's policy toward the region. Despite its rhetoric of neutrality in the Karabagh conflict, in and of itself inconsistent with the official ideology of a state that portrays itself as the protector and champion of the Shi'â in the world, throughout most of the post-independence period, Iran cooperated with Armenia despite its struggle with Shi'â Azerbaijan for control of Karabagh, evidently preferring overall that the Republic of Azerbaijan remain involved in a conflict, making it less attractive to Iran's Azerbaijanis and unable to allocate resources to stir-up South Azerbaijan. Tehran adopted anti-Armenian rhetoric only at times when the results of the conflict directly threatened Iranian state interests. Yet, the non-ideological nature of Iran's policy toward the Karabagh conflict, for instance, has not strengthened the stability in the region. Rather, Iran's cooperation with Armenia and its tacit support in the conflict with Azerbaijan over Karabagh strengthened Yerevan's actual and perceived power and consequently may have lessened its sense of urgency to resolve the conflict. Moreover, Iran's perception of fear of the Republic of Azerbaijan serving as a model for rising ethnic-based identity of its own Azerbaijani community has led it to have an interest in prolonging the Karabagh conflict, albeit on a low level of intensity. Iran has come to share an interest with Russia in protracting the strife; thus this factor has contributed to the cementing of Russian-Iranian cooperation in the Caucasus, additionally complicating conflict resolution here. Russia is interested in sustaining the conflict since it provides a means of influence and manipulation to promote Moscow's strategic, economic and political interests in the Caucasus, an area which it still considers a zone of highest importance, especially in the military and economic spheres. Moreover, the perpetuation of the conflict provides a means to preserve Yerevan's dependence on Moscow and thus its acquiescence to the stationing of Russian troops in its territory. External involvement and manipulation has been a major factor that has aggravated the Karabagh conflict and contributed to its protraction and escalation.

Moreover, the dispute over the rights of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran and Baku's often irredentist activities serve as a major factor of tension in the relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran

which have led to an increase in Baku's sense of isolation and vulnerability. This tension has impeded cooperation between Iran and Azerbaijan and adversely affected wider regional cooperation, while contributing to Baku's drive to seek association with western security systems, advancing the projection of Iranian-American rivalry into the already troubled Caucasus region. Advancing of Western presence in the Caspian region has reinforced Iran's threat perception from these developments in an area that borders its territory, adding an element, which contributes to instability in the region.

Tehran's policy toward the Karabagh conflict is a good example of the diversity of opinions, which contrasts with its monolithic image, evident in the foreign policy-making process in Iran. The prevailing official Iranian foreign-policy establishment promoted tacit support for Armenia in the conflict and expanding cooperation with Yerevan, evidently as a counter to potential Azerbaijani irredentism. This policy was reflected in journals such as Tehran Times. This policy, set by overriding state interests, encountered open opposition from ideological steadfasts, who advocated adopting Islamic solidarity toward the Azerbaijanis in articles in Jomhuri-ye Islami. Even with the Iranian Foreign Ministry, there seemed to be diverging opinions over the fitting policy toward the conflict. Some actors, such as Deputy Foreign Minister, Va'ezî, seemed to have an institutional interest in Iran serving as a successful sponsor of the negotiation process between the conflicting sides and thus he seemed to play a candid role in conducting them in the early 1990s. Va'ezî's criticism of Russia as a spoiling factor in the negotiations at this time contrary to the evolving trend of Tehran-Moscow rapprochement is an indication of his apparent veracity in the negotiation process on his part that may not have reflected the prevailing Iranian policy. Moreover, members of Iran's minorities- both Azerbaijanis and Armenians- lobbied and pressed for Iran's promotion of policies that favored their respective co-ethnics beyond Iran's borders and directly organized aid to their corresponding groups. This urging itself reflects that significant numbers of Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Iran identify with co-ethnics in the newly established republics, many evidently, parallel, to identifying as Iranians. The different viewpoints of various policy-making factors in Iran toward the conflict and relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia can partially explain some policy inconsistency and shifts in relating to Karabagh.

Iran's reactions to both the first and second Chechen conflicts in the 1990s illustrate the non-ideological nature of its policy toward the Caucasus. Iran attaches high importance to its relations with Russia, who has become a major political ally and an important partner for both economic and military cooperation, thus was careful not to harm its relations with Moscow. Overall, the official Iranian statements and media was quite mild in its criticism of Russia in these wars, despite the Muslim background of the Chechen rebels, and Iranian officials frequently commented that the conflict was an internal Russian matter. Official Iranian condemnation was only aired at times that other issues in the state-to-state relations between Iran and Russia were in conflict over other issues. Moreover, Iran's complaisance on the Chechen issue was often rewarded by Moscow by a reaffirmation of its commitment to supply Tehran with its strongly sought after nuclear reactors.

Conclusions

The conflicts in the Caucasus have created interesting bedfellows, beyond the cooperation between Iran, Armenia and Russia, diverging from nominal lines of religious or "civilizational" affinity. For instance, Chechen activists assisted Moscow in aiding the Abkhaz in its struggle with Georgia. Furthermore, initially after the Soviet break-up, transports of food supplies to Armenia went through Turkish territory, often to the chagrin of Baku.

The use of religious labels to categorize the various sides to the hostilities in the Caucasus contributes little to understanding the roots of these conflicts and subsequently, finding appropriate solutions. Western relative lack of a business-like approach to the grievances of the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus and their assumptions concerning their motivations in the struggles can act like a self-fulfilling prophesy and push many of the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus into radical Muslim arms.