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FINAL REPORT

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Azerbaijani Women and Islam: Social Change and Narratives of Women in Azerbaijan

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Research Abstract and Introduction:

Azerbaijan is characterized by a long Islamic religious history and tradition, dating back to the seventh century, which dramatically shaped women's roles. In turn, the establishment of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920 brought a redefinition of the place of religion in everyday life and a redefinition of women's roles and identity. With independence in 1991, Azerbaijani women again entered a period of transition with new freedoms, new opportunities, and new women's roles. In the present research, I focused both on social historical and on contemporary issues related to women in Azerbaijan with particular attention to the increasing public presence of Islam in Azerbaijan.

Research Goals:

Rather than testing hypotheses, my American Councils for International Education Research Scholar project entailed fieldwork research that is qualitative in nature. In this project, I expanded my previous research on issues pertaining to gender in Azerbaijan as I focused on social and ideological change related to Azerbaijani women and Islam. Given its long-established ideology of secularism and its historical Islamic ideological roots, this cultural blend

of secularism and religion makes Azerbaijan an important research site for the study of the intersection of gender, secularism, and Islam.

My fieldwork in Azerbaijan, which explored gender and the blend of Islam and secularism, focused on several broad research goals and was guided by several relevant research questions. First, what was the impact of Sovietization on Islam in Azerbaijan and how did Soviet ideology and Islamic ideology influence the everyday lives of Azerbaijani women during the Soviet era? Second, how do Azerbaijani women perceive the resurgence of Islam in present-day Azerbaijan? Third, what is the role of Islam and what is the extent of influence of Islam in the daily lives of Azerbaijani women in post-Soviet Azerbaijan? To clarify, although there are other religious groups in Azerbaijan, my research focused solely on Muslims who constitute over 93 percent of the Azerbaijani population.

Research Activities:

My current research project is built on my earlier research in Azerbaijan that examined the emergence of women's advocacy associations in the post-Soviet period and efforts at empowerment of women, as well as my research on Azerbaijani women refugees/IDPs who were forced from their homes during the Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan and who continue to be displaced. Most recently, my fieldwork shifted to issues pertaining to women and Islam, the initial findings of which were published in an article, "Gender and Ideology: Social Change and Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," in *The Journal of Third World Studies*. In turn, my American Councils for International Education project (May-July 2013) included expanding my emphasis on social historical issues and examining gender and religious issues both during the Soviet era and the post-Soviet era. As those Azerbaijani women who lived most of their lives during the Soviet period grow older, it is especially important also to conduct dialogues with these women so as to record oral histories and capture their recollections of the Soviet era.

As in my prior research, I used qualitative research methodologies. My research utilized a social constructionist theoretical framework and comparative historical analysis as I conducted in-depth, open-ended dialogues with women, both individually and in small groups. These

dialogues allowed Azerbaijani women to reflect upon and to discuss their own experiences and perspectives on Islam and on the extent of influence of Islam in their everyday lives. I selected women through referrals and a combination of snowball and quota sampling so as to include women of varying marital status, education, occupation, age, and geographic region. The dialogues took place in locations designated by the women, ranging from their homes to schools to space provided by NGOs. Although this type of data does not permit generalizing the findings to all Azerbaijani women, the dialogues do provide a greatly enhanced understanding of the dynamics of gender and Islam in Azerbaijan.

Initial Research Findings:

This research is part of a larger project that is still in progress. Therefore, this report of initial research findings is not comprehensive. Rather, I only provide an overview of some preliminary but salient observations pertaining to my research. As such, my commentary and analysis included herein should be viewed as tentative and as subject to revision and further refinement and reinterpretation during the process of continuing analysis.

To examine gender and Islam in Azerbaijan, it is useful to place gender and religion in socio-cultural and historical context: specifically, **Pre-Soviet**, **Soviet**, and **Post-Soviet**. In focusing on the *Pre-Soviet Era*, it is important to note that Azerbaijan has a lengthy multicultural history and religious tradition grounded in Islam that dates back to the seventh century. Indeed, even during the 1800s and early 1900s, while governed by Czarist Russia, Islamic religious ideology continued as a core element in Azeri culture which, together with patriarchal values, strongly influenced women's roles and identity. Traditionally, those who were literate read the Koran, whereas those who were not literate memorized Koranic verses. And given high levels of illiteracy among women during the 1800s and early 1900s, Islamic teachings typically were passed down from one generation to the next generation orally and through memorization. Despite the Azerbaijani Enlightenment Movement, originating in the mid-1800s, and the increase in social and political consciousness in the early 1900s, women's roles, overall, remained constricted by traditional patriarchal and religious doctrines that largely subordinated women to the home and heavily defined both their private roles and their public roles. Yet, the beginning of a transition in women's roles was apparent with the establishment of the Democratic Republic

of Azerbaijan (1918-1920) which included the first parliament among Muslim countries and a Constitution that gave women the right to vote.

In turn, in 1920 with the establishment of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, the *Soviet Era* and the Sovietization of Azerbaijan brought a drastic redefinition of the place of religion in society and the subsequent decline in the influence of Islamic religious ideology as the socialist ideology of egalitarianism and the Soviet “cultural revolution” redefined women’s roles. One symbolic manifestation of this shift in ideology, religion, and women’s roles is a towering statue of an Azerbaijani woman discarding her Islamic veil—referred to as Azad Qadin [Liberated Woman]—that was constructed during the Soviet era and still stands on a busy avenue across from the Nizami Metro Station and within sight of the Haji Sultanali mosque in the heart of the capital city of Baku.



Azad Qadin [Liberated Woman]
Photo: Baku, Azerbaijan. June 11, 2013.

Indeed, the Soviet system’s anti-religious socialization and emphasis on “scientific atheism” led some women to move away from religion. As one woman recalled:

“I grew up under the Soviet system. I went to school and participated in many government activities. I know about our Islamic heritage as an Azerbaijani, but I

don't pray and I don't really pay any attention to Ramadan or to any of the other religious rituals or holidays." (Interview, July 25, 2013)

The extent and forms of religious repression varied during different time-periods during the seventy-year Soviet era. Ultimately, most mosques were destroyed or otherwise ceased to function in the 1930s, whereas the government permitted some mosques to reopen during World War II. Even in communities where a mosque remained open, Azerbaijani women and men could not freely attend the mosque for fear of retribution. In this context of repression of religion, Azerbaijanis either did not practice religion or religion was mostly practiced in private. As one woman commented:

"My mother was a medical student, and she attended the mosque. But one day she was warned by authorities that she would be dismissed from the university if she continued. So, she didn't attend the mosque any more after that." (Interview, May 14, 2013)

Fearing various forms of retribution, significant numbers of Azerbaijanis who could not attend a mosque continued to practice Islam in various ways *behind closed doors in the private realm*. As one woman noted:

"No. We could not go to the mosque for fear of losing our jobs. So, we practiced rituals in our home. We closed the curtains and turned off the lights. Then with a dim candlelight that could not be seen from outside [the house], we prayed and observed the [Islamic] rituals." (Interview, June 17, 2013)

Still another woman recalled the consequences for attempting to teach religion to others.

"My father was literate in Arabic and read the Koran. For some period of time, he taught the Koran to others, but then, somehow, the authorities found out. Thank God, they did not put him in prison, but they sentenced him instead to what they called "the order of silence" so that he could not talk to others about religion or teach others the Koran. So, one day his friend drove him out of the city, and told him: 'Now you are free! You can shout and talk about religion as much as you like. There are no authorities around here.'" (Interview, May 10, 2013)

Thus, although the seventy years of Sovietization in Azerbaijan provided immense opportunities in education, employment, and community participation that had been extremely limited previously for Azerbaijani women, participation in religion remained quite restricted as women had few options for practicing religion except in the privacy of their own homes.

With the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991 as an independent *secular* state, Azerbaijan entered a ***Post-Soviet Era*** in which women's roles have again entered a period of transition. As such, this era has brought new freedoms and new opportunities for women to assume various roles. Also, it is important to note that despite severe restrictions on religion during the Soviet era, Islamic influences continued to persist as central elements of Azerbaijani culture and identity. In turn, post-Soviet social and ideological change has brought Azerbaijani women new avenues for involvement in various aspects of Azerbaijani society including enhanced opportunities for both private and public participation in Islamic religious practices.

Azerbaijan is both a secular country and also a Muslim country. Yet, it is important to emphasize that—unlike many other Muslim countries where most women wear the hijab—the vast majority of Azerbaijani women do *not* wear scarves or other Islamic attire. Nonetheless, Islam is regaining public recognition as a source of national and cultural identity in Azerbaijan as the *public practice and visibility of Islam* has increased markedly during the past decade. This public recognition and resurgence of Islam in Azerbaijan has provided women with the option to practice religion if they so choose. In the following, I indicate several important examples of the increased visibility of Islam.

First, the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan declares the Azerbaijani state to be a *secular* republic. As such, Azerbaijan is a member of Council of Europe and has strong ties with Europe and the United States, as well as with Israel as reflected, for example, by extensive trade and diplomatic relations (Dementyeva, June 3, 2013 Fiske, Gavriel, April 22, 2013; Lazaroff, April 22, 2013, Orujova, June 21, 2013). Yet, while Azerbaijani government officials emphasize that Azerbaijan is a secular state, they also emphasize that it is a secular state that is proud of its **long-standing Islamic heritage and multiculturalism and of its relations with other Islamic nations**. For example, as President Ilham Aliyev emphasized in his speech at the opening ceremony of the First South Caucasus Forum in Baku in May 2013:

“For centuries, Azerbaijan was a place where religious and ethnic groups have coexisted in peace. Ethnic, cultural and religious diversity is one of the greatest treasures of Azerbaijan. I think that one of the basic preconditions of success is the fact that Azerbaijan has a multicultural society. We very much appreciate multiculturalism” (President of Azerbaijan, May 7, 2013).

Similarly, at the opening of the Shamakhi Juma Mosque, originally built in 743 and reconstructed and reopened on May 17, 2013, President Aliyev commented that “We [Azerbaijan] are committed to our religious and national values. We are building a modern state, modern Azerbaijan on this solid foundation” (President of Azerbaijan, May 17, 2013; *News.az*, May 18, 2013). In turn, Elshad Iskandarov, the head of the Azerbaijani State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations, has emphasized “the Azerbaijani model of religious tolerance” and noted that Azerbaijani “spiritual values are inextricably connected with [Azerbaijan’s] national history and culture” (*TREND*, June 12, 2013). Furthermore, Azerbaijani Parliament First Deputy Chairman Ziyafet Asgarov, speaking at the 30th Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Parliamentary Union of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Member States on June 19, 2013, in Baku emphasized the need for cooperation among Islamic nations and noted that “Azerbaijan perceives Islam as a religion of friendship, brotherhood, and solidarity” (Jafarova, June 21-25, 2013, p.2). The perception of Islam as a major historical element in Azerbaijani culture also was expressed by many women during the course of our dialogues, with comments such as the following:

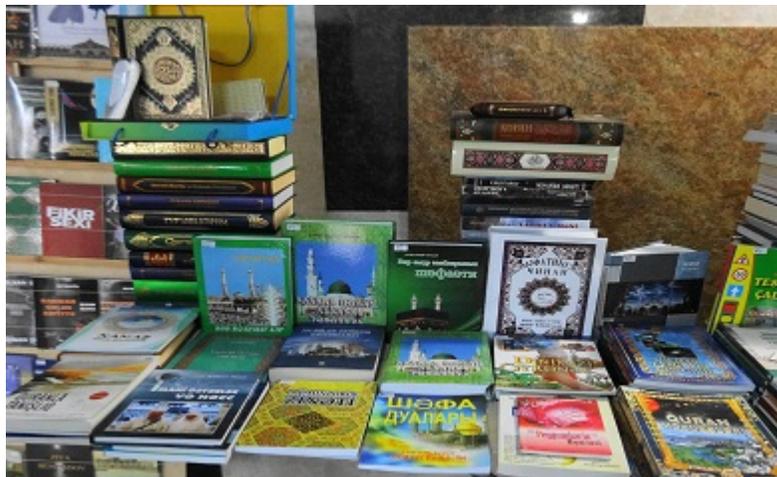
“Thank God. Now that the Soviet era is over we are free to practice our religion. Some women now wear the hijab, whereas others do not. And some women pray and observe the rituals, while others do not. But regardless, Islam has always been in our heart. It has always been part of our heritage and part of our identity as Azerbaijanis.” (Interview, July 2, 2013)

Second, whereas officially there were only 17 mosques in Azerbaijan during the Soviet period, today the number of mosques is approaching 2,000. This includes the **restoration of historic mosques and shrines and the building of new mosques.**



Shamakhi Juma Mosque
Originally built in 743. Most recent reconstruction completed
in May 2013. Photo: Shamakhi, Azerbaijan. June 28, 2013.

Of similarly fundamental importance is **the translation of the Koran from Arabic into the Azerbaijani language**, as well as the increasing availability of other religious literature (including the Islamic calendar) written or translated into Azerbaijani, which now gives Azerbaijanis—both women and men—significantly greater direct access to religious resources.



Koran and Other Religious Books in Azerbaijani Language
Now Available in Bookstores. Photo: Baku, Azerbaijan.
June 18, 2013.

Likewise, quite extensive religious educational resources are now available to Azerbaijanis on the **internet** and through **satellite television programs** originating from various Islamic countries. As one young woman commented:

“Many [young] women my age are seeking answers to questions about the meaning of life and about Islam. A few years ago, it was difficult to locate very much information or it took a lot of time and effort. Now, we have ready access to the internet, and many women also have satellite television which has a lot of channels that televise Islamic programs...channels and programs that come from many different countries. That has really been a big change. Now, there is a lot of religious information for anyone who wants to learn about Islam.” (Interview, June 5, 2013)

And an older woman compared the situation today to that of the Soviet era as follows:

“Many women say that this has become the age of knowledge in Azerbaijan, and it really is true. In the old days during the Soviet period, religion was repressed and people did not have access to religious resources like they do today. Under the Soviet system, we could only rely on religious ideas and rituals being taught to us by our parents and our grandparents in our homes. This was mostly through memorization so that we would learn short verses and prayers. Now, today, we have the Koran written in Azerbaijani, and there are also many, many other books about Islam that we can now read in our own language.” (Interview, July 10, 2013)

Third, Azerbaijan, as an emerging capitalist economy, has developed a thriving commercial sector that has sought to fulfill consumer demands for secular commercial goods. More recently, Azerbaijan has witnessed an increase in consumer demands for **religious commercial goods**. This is reflected, for example, in the increasing number of retail stores that sell **Islamic religious items** including decorative cases for displaying the Koran as well as photographs of Mecca and wall-hangings containing calligraphically engraved or printed Koranic verses and prayers. These items are sold in both small neighborhood shops and in larger up-scale stores. As one female merchant commented:

“I used to sell mainly dishes and decorative home items to women who live in this area, and I also had some pins and medals from the old Soviet Azerbaijan that I sold to tourists. But, now, look at my store. I have all these Islamic items. Why? Because my customers started asking if I knew where they could buy a decorative stand to hold their Koran, or where they could buy those Koranic verses you see engraved on these plaques. So, now, I have a lot of customers who come [to my store] to buy religious items. Sometimes, they buy something for their own home. But lots of times they buy items as gifts for their family or their friends. This is a big change. I still sell mainly regular decorative items for the home. But there are now a lot of people who want religious things.” (Interview, June 12, 2013)

Similarly, the number of retail stores that sell **religious clothing**—including **hijabs** (women’s head coverings)—also has increased.



Retail Shop Using Mannequins to Display Different Styles and Colors of Hijabs.
Photo: Baku, Azerbaijan. July 3, 2013.

The increased public presence of religion also is reflected by the observance of the **Islamic holy month of Ramadan**. Included is President Ilham Aliyev’s public participation in various events and ceremonies related to Ramadan (President of Azerbaijan, July 20, 2013; July 24, 2013a; July 24, 2013b; *News.az*. July 26, 2013). Similarly, as many Azerbaijani citizens now observe the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, many restaurants also now prepare special meals for “iftar,” the breaking of the fast each day during the month of Ramadan.



Restaurant Advertisement for Special Meal for Iftar, the Breaking of the Fast during Ramadan, Beginning July 9, 2013. Photo: Baku, Azerbaijan. July 16, 2013.

Further, the increased public presence of religion extends to the availability of **halal meat and poultry** (prepared in accordance with Islamic prescriptions) as some restaurants now display advertisements or indicate in their menus that they serve halal food. And increased numbers of businesses, restaurants, offices and other places of employment now provide space, in the form of designated areas or **prayers rooms**, for employees who practice daily prayers.

Finally, Azerbaijan has witnessed a steady increase in the number of Muslims wishing to complete the **pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj)** as part of their faith. Initially in 2013, 1,400 spaces had been allotted for Azerbaijanis for pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca. However, given the increased number of Azerbaijanis who applied for pilgrimage, the Caucasian Muslim Board increased the allotment to 3,600 (Aslanov, June 27, 2013; *News.az*. July 8, 2013; Jafarova, July 9, 2013). As one woman expressed her feelings:

“Thank God for opening the doors for us so that we can make the pilgrimage to Mecca and to other holy sites. When I was younger, the Soviet authorities

prohibited the public practice of our religion. So, we could not travel freely to other countries to visit the holy sites. We only would hear about them. Now, since independence, we are free. We have the freedom to go. In fact, I just came back from Mashhad [a holy site in the neighboring country of Iran]. (Interview, May 21, 2013)

Clearly, Azerbaijan has experienced a substantial increase in the public practice of Islam since Independence, and particularly during the past several years. However, I should emphasize that of those Azerbaijani women who practice Islam, the vast majority engage in *private religious practice*. That is, they do not wear the hijab, and rather than praying in a mosque or other public place, they instead pray and observe other religious rituals in the privacy of their own home or in the homes of other family members or close friends. As one woman stated:

“I work in an office, and I do not wear a hijab. But I am a Muslim. I pray. I fast. But, as you see, I am wearing makeup and fingernail polish, and I do not believe that wearing a particular type of veil or other clothing makes a woman a Muslim. Rather, Islam is in my heart. It is how I behave and conduct myself. I do not need a hijab to demonstrate who I am. Rather, I do it through my daily life, through how I treat other people, through the teachings of Islam.” (Interview, July 17, 2013)

Yet, increasing numbers of Azerbaijani women are engaging in *public religious practice*. That is, they are wearing the hijab and praying in a mosque or praying in designated prayer spaces in the woman’s place of employment or other public places. And from the dialogues with Azerbaijani women that I have compiled in my current research, the concept of *hijab* is very complex and carries different meanings and symbolisms. This is but one of the various issues that I will be exploring as I continue the analysis of my fieldwork data. Indeed, my discussion of “Initial Research Findings” in this American Councils Final Report represents only a very brief overview of some elements of the research that I have conducted. As I further analyze my fieldwork data, I will continue to explore and analyze pertinent issues related to various elements of women and Islam in Azerbaijan, including both the private and the public practice of Islam among Azerbaijani women.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Given its geographic location between Russia and Georgia to the north and Iran to the south, post-Soviet Azerbaijan is of major significance to the United States. Azerbaijan has been allied with the U.S. in “the war on terror,” including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it is central to the production and transportation of oil and natural gas from the Caspian Region to the West. Yet, Azerbaijan also is engaged in a delicate political balance as Azerbaijan maintains positive relations not only with the U.S. but also with both Russia and Iran.

Since independence in 1991 and the removal of Soviet restraints on religion, Azerbaijan has witnessed a gradual resurgence of Islam. Various factors have contributed to the increased visibility of Islam and its increased influence on the everyday lives of Azerbaijanis. These include the renovation of mosques and shrines and the building of new mosques; the translation of the Koran into Azeri; the increased availability of Islamic literature on the internet and in published books; the establishment of Islamic-related instruction on the university level; the liberalization of regulations for travel to Mecca and to other Islamic holy sites; and the government sponsorship of national and international Islamic conferences and government observance of Islamic religious holidays.

Yet, it is important to view this resurgence of Islam in the broader Azerbaijani *political context* and in the context of important *human rights policy issues*. Azerbaijan provides constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and Presidential and other government statements continue to emphasize religious freedom and religious tolerance and Azerbaijan’s rich Islamic heritage. Yet, the government of Azerbaijan also has imposed certain regulations by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (see, for example: Radio Free Europe, June 14, 2013; U.S. Department of State, May 20, 2013).

My current project expands my prior research and further contributes to our broader understanding of gender, religion, and secularism in Azerbaijan. Indeed, Islam is becoming increasingly significant in the daily lives of many Azerbaijanis, including young Azerbaijanis, as the vast majority of Azerbaijanis view themselves as Muslims. My research provides U.S.

analysts and practitioners with new insights and a deeper understanding of the role of Islam in the everyday lives of Azerbaijanis and particularly Azerbaijani women, as the U.S. government places major emphasis on civil society, democratic governance, and religious freedom.

Co-Curricular Activity:

During the course of my research activities in Azerbaijan, I met with officials and scholars from various Azerbaijani agencies and universities, including the Azerbaijan State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs, Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, Baku State University, Khazar University, Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Western University, Qafqaz University, and various NGOs including the Azerbaijan Women and Development Center.

Conclusion:

Azerbaijan has been—and continues to be—a prime setting in which to study the dynamics of social change and gender. My on-going research on gender and dimensions of religion focuses on both social historical and contemporary issues among Azerbaijani women. Indeed, whereas the religious and patriarchal values of the 1800s and early 1900s tended to shape Azerbaijani women's roles so as to limit their participation in the public sphere, the Soviet era emphasized the devaluation of religion as the Soviet ideology of egalitarianism stressed the de-veiling of women and the participation of women in the labor force and in other elements of the public sphere. With independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has experienced a gradual re-emergence of religion—and Islam in particular—as an important cultural element and identity marker. As such, Azerbaijani women have been presented with new options and alternatives related to religious beliefs and religious participation and women's private and public roles.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:

This project is an integral part of my larger body of research that examines gender and ideological changes that have altered women's roles and women's identity in Azerbaijani society from the Czarist period (1800s to 1900s), through the Soviet period (1920-1991), and into the

period of independence (1991 to present). My research contributes both to a more detailed understanding of gender issues in both social historical and contemporary contexts and to important policy issues as it focuses on the dynamics of gender and Islam in the post-Soviet context. I will share my research through participation in professional conferences and publications. Indeed, I already have presented papers on my prior research on Azerbaijani women and Islam at the 28th Annual Conference of the Third World Studies Association and at the 20th Annual Conference of the Global Awareness Society International, and I have published a related article in *The Journal of Third World Studies*. Furthermore, I will share my research through my teaching as a faculty member of the University of Kansas Sociology Department and as a core faculty member in the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies and the Center for Global and International Studies.

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