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## RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

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## The Slavic-Orthodox Community in Azerbaijan: The Identity and Social Position of a Once-Dominant Minority

Bruno De Cordier, Ghent

### Abstract

Based on recent empirical findings and field observations, this article examines the Slavic-Orthodox community in Azerbaijan. Nowadays numbering about one and a half percent of the population, the main threat to its continuity is not persecution nor pressure to assimilate, but an ageing ethnic-demographic base which is not going to be kept up to level by either natural replacement or new adherents. Orthodox Christianity will nonetheless keep a presence in the country, yet its base of adherents will unavoidably become more heterogeneous.

### Social Geography in Historical Perspective

Within the official contours of Azerbaijan, Slavic Orthodox Christians form the largest Christian minority in the country alongside the adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Since the latter are nowadays mainly concentrated in occupied Nagorno-Karabakh, they are cut off from the country's wider society however. Often colloquially called 'the Russians', the Slavic-Orthodox community, now around one and a half percent of the population, basically consists of three ethnic-social categories the limits between which are often fluid. First, of course, there are the citizens of Slavic background, more specifically Azerbaijan's some 140,000 ethnic Russians including some 1,500 of Cossack ancestry, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, among all of whom a form of Orthodox Christianity is historically and at least nominally part of their ethno-cultural identity. Second come the 3,000 or so Molokans. Although officially, these are usually considered Russians, their distinctive identity and lifestyle centered around a sixteenth-century breakaway sect of Orthodox Christianity—reminiscent somehow of an Orthodox version of the Quakers—and a presence in the country that predates that of most of Azerbaijan's present-day Slavic groups, mean that they are locally often seen as a separate group.

And third, there are the people of mixed Slavic-Azerbaijani origin who identify to one or another degree with Orthodox Christianity and who are also often counted in censuses as Russians. What these have in common is the use of Russian as their primary language.<sup>1</sup> By far the largest portion of the country's Orthodox Slavs, and here we talk about around ninety percent, nowadays live in Baku and within a radius of thirty kilometers around the city. Beyond that, there are much smaller Slavic communities in Ganja, Mingaçevir as well as in rural districts like Ismaili

(where the majority of the Molokans live), Xaçmaz (where there is a concentration of people of Belarussian and Cossack origin), Lenkoran and also some districts along the Azerbaijani-Georgian border. They do not form a majority in any district. Figure 1 on p. 6 below offers a historical overview of the shifting demographic share of Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians) in Azerbaijan between 1897 and the last national population census in 2009. As one can see, this minority's present population share is a fraction of previous levels including that of 1989. Historically, Azerbaijan's Orthodox Slavic community consists of several layers.

The permanent Orthodox Slav presence in what is now Azerbaijan goes back as far as the 1795–1826 period, when Cossacks and religious dissidents like the Molokans settled in the Mugan steppe and along the southern Caspian coast. Later, from 1860 onwards, an increasing number of Slavic peasant communities came into being in what were then the Baku and Elisabethpol governorates.<sup>2</sup> The industrialization drives which came with the first Baku oil boom (1870–90, up to 1910) and with the economic modernization and social transformation that took place in the Azerbaijani SSR (1930–60) formed further major channels of Slavic settlement in the country up to a zenith of more than 17 percent of the population in the year 1939. This gradually decreased due to higher birth rates among the majority groups and resettlement moratoriums after 1959, yet the most dramatic plunge came after 1989. The ethnically Orthodox Slavs, as a dominant minority in the republic, were not specifically targeted during the heavy political turmoil preceding and following independence in summer 1991.<sup>3</sup> The

1 This also includes ethnic Ukrainians and Belarussians who designate their respective national languages as their mother tongue in censuses and surveys, but who use Russian in everyday practice partly due to a lack of a critical mass of speakers of their national language in their surroundings.

2 For a more detailed account, see Sudaba Zeinalova (Судабэ Зейналова), 'Этнодемографические изменения на Кавказе: формирование европейских этнических общин (XIX – начало XX вв.)', *Кавказ и глобализация*, 3(4), 2009: 108–121.

3 Between early 1988 and autumn 1993, the Azerbaijani SSR and independent Azerbaijan were affected by communal unrest in and around Baku and the 1990 Black January crackdown, the Nagorno-

disintegration of a USSR with which they strongly identified, the perspective of long-term chaos, and the rapid decline of the industries and social institutions in which they were economically active, were, however, perceived to be an existential threat.

The subsequent mass exodus which followed now seems to be more or less stabilized. In fact, 58 percent of the respondents declared not to want to leave Azerbaijan at all, while 3.7 percent decided to do so for good and 11.7 percent was in doubt. Either case, the community that remains today has a number of protruding social characteristics. First, although there are officially no separate population pyramids for minorities in Azerbaijan, observations and interaction with the community under examination as well as local academic sources suggest that, due to both the emigration of a sizeable part of its younger strata after 1988–93 and smaller families than those among Azerbaijan's Muslim majority, perhaps up to two-thirds of this community is over forty. Slightly over 28 percent in our research declared to be pensioners, which is more than double the national average.<sup>4</sup> In turn, this top-heavy age structure explains, be it in part, the second characteristic, namely the disproportional portion of women as compared to that in the general, national population pyramid.

Here again, observation and interaction, as well as some literature sources, suggest that up to two-thirds of the Orthodox Slav population in Azerbaijan is female, which is again in sharp contrast to the national average which shows a slight surplus of men.<sup>5</sup> Other explanatory factors related to the latter are, first, the higher longevity among women and, second, the number of women of Slav origin who came to Azerbaijan or stayed there after 1988–93 because of a mixed marriage, often concluded during the latter USSR era, with an Azerbaijani husband. Among our respondents, 23.3 percent declared to belong to this category. As a matter of fact, both of these social characteristics of the Orthodox community were quite visible to this author when he observed how the audience of liturgies and the active parishioners in Baku and Xaçmaz were overwhelmingly female and over fifty.

Karabakh War, a secession attempt in the south, and finally a factional coup in Ganja.

4 The survey was conducted among 300 respondents in Baku, Sumgait and Ganja in autumn 2015. For details on Azerbaijan's demographics, see The World Bank, 'Azerbaijan's demographic change. Implications for social policy and poverty', Human Development Sector Unit, South Caucasus Country Department, №63155-AZ, 2011: 17.

5 Silvia Serrano, 'Les Russes du Caucase du Sud: du malheur d'avoir un empire (et de le perdre)', *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 39, 2008, №1: 127 and Christophe Guilmoto, 'La masculinisation des naissances. État des lieux et des connaissances', *Population*, 70(2), 2015: 201–202.

Third, in terms of social position and occupation, besides a disproportionately large portion of pensioners, 23.7 percent of the respondents declared to be active in the private sector or self-employed and 16.3 percent declared to work in technical or so-called liberal professions. Russian companies and educational institutions and faculties where Russian is the language of instruction form specific employment niches, while Molokans are predominantly active in agriculture to an extent that some of their products lately obtained some sort of branding status as ecologically pure food. Finally, although some Orthodox Slavs do work for government institutions, their presence in that sphere is limited. This is due, first, to the requirement of fluency in Azerbaijani and, second and more importantly, because they have fewer connections among the patronage networks that are necessary to obtain positions in the state bureaucracy.<sup>6</sup>

### Current Identity Characteristics

As one can see in Figure 2 on p. 7, an insignificant share of the respondents in our research identify themselves primarily in terms of their traditional faith, that is, as an Orthodox Christian. The majority consider themselves *in the first place* to be either Russian, Azerbaijani citizen of Russian origin or of mixed Slavic-Azerbaijani background. Again, the Molokans form an exception since the communal identity that sets them apart from Russians in general is defined in terms of faith. At the same time, three-quarters of the respondents declared to be followers of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. So, although active religiosity and regular practicing are definitely low in this community—3.7% said that they attend church on a weekly basis or more, 10.3 non-regularly and 37.3 percent occasionally, that is on major holidays or for life rituals—adherence to Orthodoxy is considered by many to be an essential part of a larger Russian identity, along with the Russian language and a strong association with the Russian greater space.

Belonging to the latter is defined, first of all, by the Russian language. Second, there are the predominantly positive to very positive memories of the USSR, prevalent among 63 percent of the respondents, either through direct personal experience, idealized memories or intergenerational lore. Third, there are the ties and interaction with relatives in Russia which 45.3 percent report to have. And fourth, there is the influence of information channels from Russia which 44 percent declared to have as their main source of information. Slightly over 90 percent has a very or rather positive view of Russia as a coun-

6 In a de facto arrangement of representation of ethnic and religious minorities, the Slavic-Orthodox community has one representative in the national parliament, who seats for the presidential party.

try and society and 64.7 percent strongly support a close association if not union between Azerbaijan and Russia.<sup>7</sup> A further characteristic in the identity pattern of Baku's Slavic community is, that a sizeable part sees itself, as does the Russianized Azerbaijani intelligentsia, as a component of a long-standing, multi-ethnic Baku identity. This identity is felt to be under threat with the departure of a large portion of the minorities and of Slavs and Armenians after 1988–91 in particular and the arrival of IDPs from Nagorno-Karabakh and internal migrants from the provinces.

Even if the near-disappearance of the Russian language from the public sphere and the predominance of the Azerbaijani language, which now 53 percent pretends to speak and write fluently or rather well and 41.7 percent in a limited way, remain issues, there is little perception among Orthodox Slavs that they are persecuted, or under pressure to culturally assimilate or to convert to either Shia or Sunni Islam. As Figure 3 on p. 7 reflects, the main societal challenges and threats identified by the Orthodox Slavs, not seldomly on the basis of personal confirmation in everyday life, are similar to those that generally come forward when one asks the same question to the Muslim majority population of Azerbaijan: unemployment, corruption including economic monopolies, the state of health care and education and, perhaps surprisingly to some, the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, especially because of the potential that the conflict may flare up again.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, one-sixth of the population of interest said that it followed other churches. This basically includes two categories. First, there are those who belong to other eastern churches, like Ukrainian Greek Catholics, Georgian Orthodox and followers of the Udi-Albanian Church, who turn to Orthodox parishes because their own denomination has no institutions or clergy in the place where they

live.<sup>9</sup> And second, and more importantly, there are the adherents of the various Protestant and charismatic-Pentecostal denominations who came to Azerbaijan during the 1990s. Due to a number of circumstances and sociological reasons, they clearly attracted some following among the Slav minority and among métis in urban areas. Although their activity and growth seems to have stabilized if not stagnated in the recent 7 or 8 years, the Orthodox eparchy of Baku actively watches Protestant and Pentecostal groups. Individual priests also told me that countering the influence of non-traditional sects among the historically Orthodox population remains one of the tasks and *raison d'être* of their ecclesiastical work.<sup>10</sup>

### The Slavic-Orthodox and the Azerbaijani State

Since 2011, after the eparchy of Baku and the Cis-Caspian which encompassed Azerbaijan and Dagestan was reorganized, the Orthodox church in the country reports under the eparchy of Baku which is only responsible for Azerbaijan.<sup>11</sup> Headed since 1999 by Archbishop Alexander, a native of Yaroslavl who served in North Ossetia before, the Orthodox church has six registered cathedral churches and one chapel in the country. Four of these parishes are in Baku, one in Sumgait and one each in Ganja and Xaçmaz. A new parish is planned to be set up in the southern Caspian town of Lenkoran in 2016 or 2017. Inversely proportional to much of the followers' base—and compared to their Roman Catholic counterparts in Western Europe—the Orthodox clergy, which country-wide had some 30 ordained priests at the time of this research, is predominantly young, generally in its early thirties to mid-forties. Most of the priests are Azerbaijani citizens and have been trained, for lack of a seminary in Azerbaijan itself, at theological colleges in Saratov and Stavropol.

Rather than evangelizing, the Orthodox church's claimed mission is to support its existing historical community and to preserve the ancient Christian heritage in

7 In terms of very positive to rather positive views, Russia is followed by Georgia with 79.6 percent and Turkey with 73 percent which is surprisingly close to attitudes towards Turkey among Azerbaijani opinion in general. The survey was taken before the downing of a Russian warplane by the Turkish air force near Yamadi on the Syrian–Turkish border though. So it is not clear whether this has starkly affected public attitudes among the Slavic minority vis-à-vis Turkey, as it did in Russia itself.

8 One opinion that came up several times during the conversations was, that Slavs were also negatively affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh War, more specifically the Molokan villages in the area which were shelled (some of the inhabitants of which now live near Baku) and Stepankert's small Slavic-Orthodox population which had to flee during the hostilities. Despite the assistance by Russian units or at least individual commanders to Armenian separatists at the time, only 2.6% of our respondents felt that Orthodox Slavs are perceived as pro-Armenian. A joint 65 percent of those questioned have a rather or very negative feeling vis-à-vis Armenia as a state.

9 Founded in 488, the Apostolic Church of Caucasian Albania, which has some 3,800 adherents, primarily among the Udi minority in Gabala, is the oldest surviving and officially recognized church in present-day Azerbaijan.

10 This actually fits into a historical pattern in which the Orthodox hierarchy in Moscow and the eparchy of the Trans-Caucasus considered the establishment of parishes among the Slavic settlers vital to counter the influence of schismatic Orthodox sects and Baptism. Fuad Ağayev (Фуад Агаев), 'Строительство православных церквей в рамках переселенческой политики царизма в северном Азербайджане в конце XIX – начале XX вв.', *Вакі Университетинин Хəбərləri*, №2, 2012: 153

11 An eparchy is the Orthodox equivalent of a diocese in Roman Catholicism. Officially, the eparchy of Baku and the Cis-Caspian which was founded in 1998, was reorganized and split-up for practical-organizational reasons. The government's unease toward supra-national confessional entities might also have played though.

Azerbaijan. As per survey results, 9 percent among the Orthodox Slavic community, its main social base, seem to have a high level of trust in the church and its clergy. Although in the minority, this is far superior to the shares, amounting to an average of about one percent, who allot a high level of trust to political parties, local as well as international NGOs, and to judicial courts for example. An additional 23 percent has a rather high level of trust, 36 percent has a neutral stance, and a joint 24 percent a rather low level or no trust in the clergy and the church at all. Only a limited portion, slightly less than 7 percent, consider the Orthodox church to be an intermediary between themselves, the state and other ethnic-confessional communities.

Besides ecclesiastical work, through its social wing, it is involved in a number of charitable activities. Its clergy and volunteers thus organize administrative help, food packages and the facilitation of medical support for isolated pensioners, the ill and marginalized households. Other social activities include Sunday schools, the organization of 'open tables' on major Orthodox holidays like Easter, Trinity Sunday, Orthodox Christmas, the Epiphany and the Old New Year, and the organization of courses in the Azerbaijani language to promote bilingualism. Officially, the eparchy of Baku and its parishes and clergy are not funded by either the Moscow Patriarchate or the Russian government. They mainly depend on various kinds of private donations, elite philanthropy, in-kind support like the free availability of real estate, the return on own investments, a favorable fiscal regime and exemptions of payment for utilities.

The Orthodox church, in line with the official, secular community organizations and national-cultural centers, clearly keeps a legitimist stance vis-à-vis the state, the incumbent oligarchies and in the political realm in general, whereas among the grassroots, there is a relative acquiescence and political disengagement if not cynicism toward the latter. Both attitude patterns are not necessarily a reflection of ideological or personal sympathy with the current power elites. It rather reflects that these, shaped and partly Russianized as they were in the mold of the USSR and its policies of indigenization of the communist structures, are seen to embody some continuity with the USSR.<sup>12</sup> There is also a rather strong feeling, reinvigorated more recently by the psychological impact of the war in southeastern Ukraine and the predicament of Assyrian and Coptic Christians in crisis areas in the Arab sphere, that for all its ills, the secularist regime and the stability that it is seen to bring, at least leave room for the survival of an Orthodox Christian community

in the country. Lastly, the presence and maintenance of an Orthodox community is an important element in the Azerbaijani government's diplomacy with Russia of course but also with Serbia and Belarus, and in its efforts to keep up the image of religious tolerance that is lately promoted in the regime's international public relations.

### Concluding Remarks

Due to its size and population share, the Slavic-Orthodox community in Azerbaijan represents a paradigm quite different from that in, say, Latvia and Kazakhstan, where Orthodox Slavs form up to a quarter of the population. This is too small to form a real voting bloc or a base for a communal political movement. As can be seen in Figure 4 on p. 8, in the current conditions and despite its near-insignificant population share, Azerbaijan's Slavic-Orthodox community, especially in Baku where the critical mass of active Russian speakers remains much larger than in Ganja, for instance, feels that it can somehow sufficiently preserve its individuality. For its preservation, it moves in a space defined by a long historical presence in the country dating back generations, by the opportunities created during the years of economic growth, and by the modalities and conditions created by the official interpretation and practice of secularism and inter-ethnic and religious tolerance.

The presence of traditional eastern Christianity is not resented among Azerbaijan's Shia and Sunni Muslim majority, contrary to the activities of non-traditional Christian currents like Pentecostalism who also proselytize among Muslims. Also, Slavs are not popularly seen to be particularly privileged nor to control certain sectors of the economy or economic monopolies. And the fact that there is no Slavic concentration in a geographic area bordering Russia means that they are not considered potentially separatist or a threat to national unity either. The main existential threat to the Slavic population and hence Russian Orthodoxy in the country nowadays, is not persecution nor pressure to convert to the majority faith. It is an ageing ethnic-demographic base which is not going to be adequately replaced, especially not outside of Baku, by either natural replacement or new followers. One of the factors that retains its acceptance by the majority culture, that it does not actively try to gain converts or reverts beyond its traditional Slavic following, thus stunts its future presence in the country.

As for the Molokans, it remains to be seen whether the group can perpetuate its endogamous social order without compromising its identity. Russian Orthodoxy will not disappear. Even if in the future, Islam, moreover Shiism, could, and likely will, play a stronger role in both society and governance, this should not be an impediment for the perpetuation of an Orthodox community in the

12 Viatcheslav Avioutskii, 'Les clans en Azerbaïdjan', *Le Courrier des pays de l'Est*, 2007/5 N°1063: 67-79.

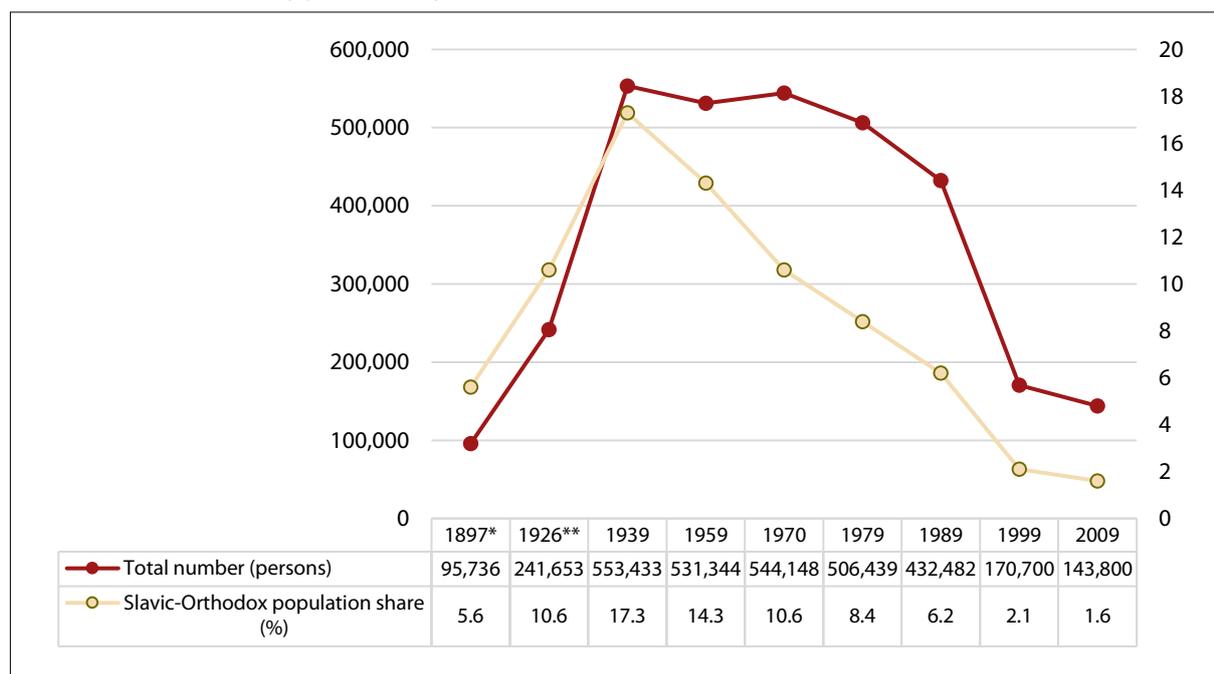
country. But its base will unavoidably become more heterogeneous if it is to perpetuate itself, not only consisting of the numerically smaller segments of younger Slavs, but also of expatriate Russians, of people of mixed origin or

unclear ethnic-confessional identity—who might even become its most active adherents and advocates—and of adherents of smaller traditional-Christian groups which could be absorbed.

#### About the Author

Bruno De Cordier is a professor at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies under the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of Ghent University. Before that, he worked for the international humanitarian aid sector, mostly for specialized bodies of the UN. He wrote his doctoral thesis on Islamic charities. Bruno De Cordier's thematic interests related to the Caspian-Central Asian space include social history, identity and social mobility, the social impact of globalization, the aid economy, and the social role and position of Islam, Christianity and of religious actors in general. He lived in Central Asia for several years.

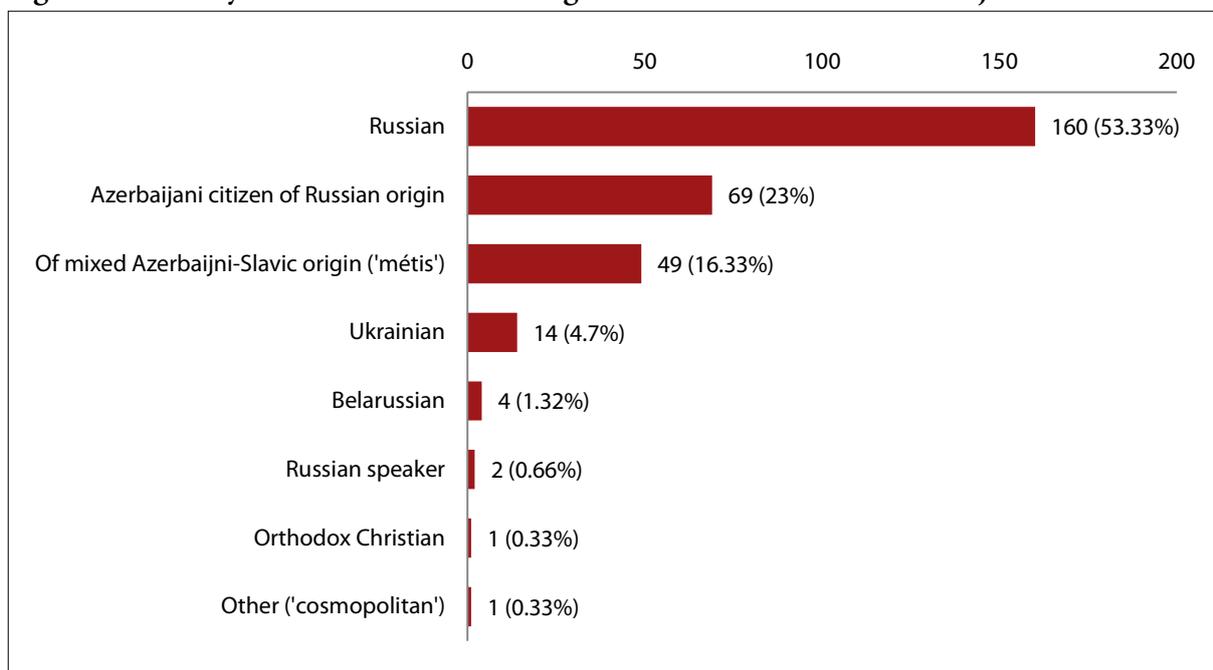
**Figure 1: The Evolution of the Number and Percentage of the Population of Slavs in Azerbaijan Between 1897 and 2009**



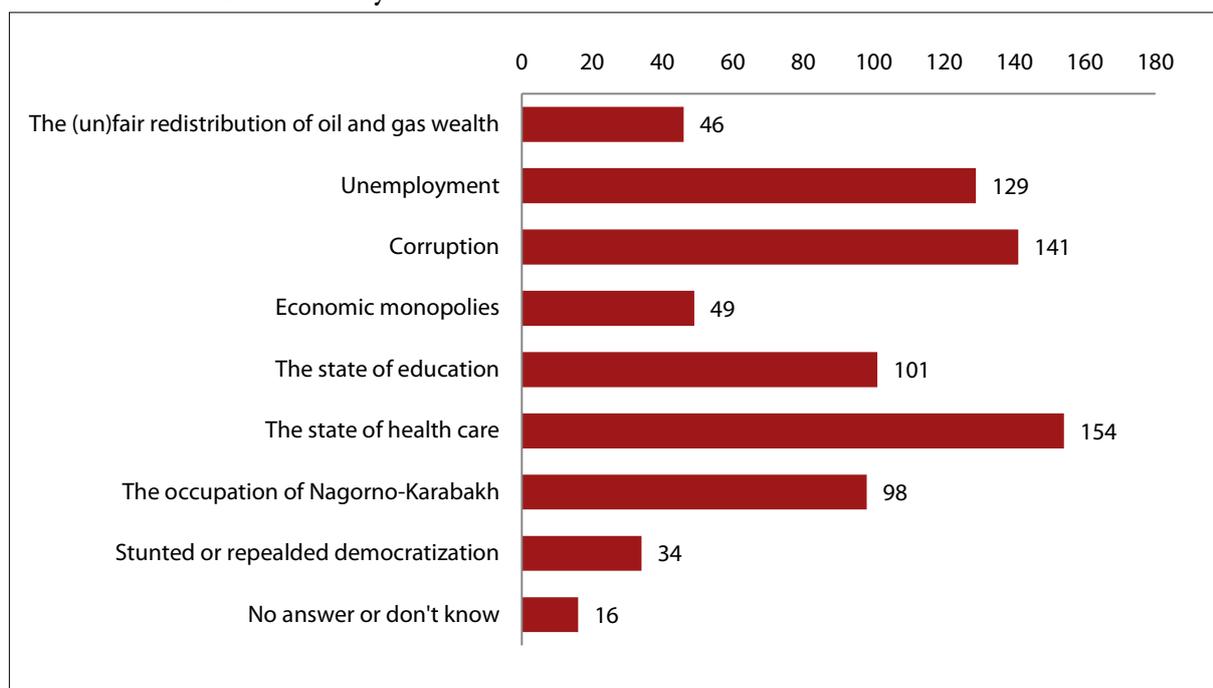
Source: table created by the author on the bases of statistics from Первая всеобщая перепись населения Российской Империи 1897 г. Распределение населения по родному языку и уездам Российской Империи кроме губерний Европейской России, Бакинская губерния, Елизаветпольская губерния, Всесоюзная перепись населения 1926 года. Национальный состав населения по регионам республик СССР, Закавказская СФСР - Азербайджанская ССР, Всесоюзная перепись населения 1939 (1959, 1970, 1979, 1989) года. Национальный состав населения по республикам СССР, Азербайджанская ССР, *Demoscope*, <[www.demoscope.ru](http://www.demoscope.ru)>, and the population censuses of 1999 and 2009, *Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi (State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan)*, <[www.stat.gov.az](http://www.stat.gov.az)>.

\*Figures for the governorates of Baku and Elisabethpol, whose joint territory more or less encompassed that of present-day Azerbaijan. The figures comprise what was then called Greater Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians) and Belarussians.

\*\*Situation for the Azerbaijani SSR of the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federative Republic.

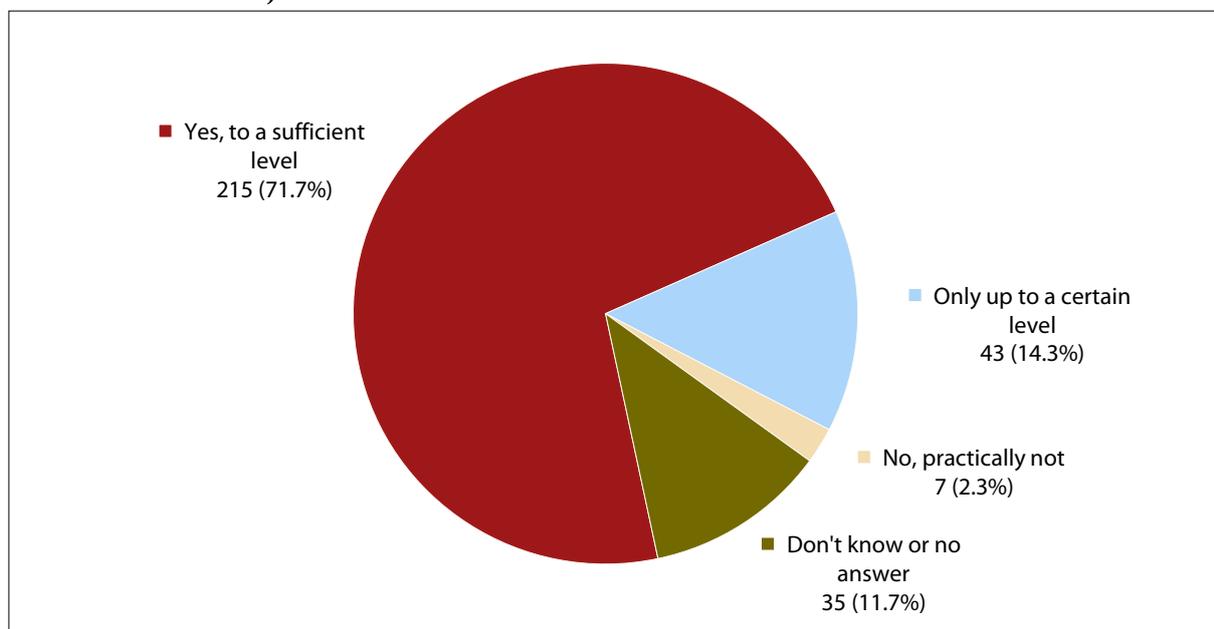
**Figure 2: Primary Self-Identification Among the Slavic-Orthodox in Azerbaijan**

Source: extracts from the results of the author's opinion survey, autumn 2015

**Figure 3: Main Challenges and Threats Affecting Azerbaijani Society, Including the Slavic-Orthodox Minority**

Source: extracts from the results of the author's opinion survey, autumn 2015

**Figure 4: Can the Slavic-Orthodox Community Preserve its Ethnic and Confessional Identity in Azerbaijan?**



*Source: extracts from the results of the author's opinion survey, autumn 2015*

## The Identity of the Caucasian Yezidi in the Wake of the Sinjar Tragedy

Allan Kaval, Erbil

### Abstract

This article compares the social and identity development of the Yezidi communities in the southern Caucasus and in Iraq. It argues that since the 1990s, a Yezidi national identity that, first, borrows a number of elements from Armenia's national-commemorative narrative and that, second, could take advantage of the relative opening of borders and of modern information and communication technologies has developed among the Caucasian Yezidi. With the old Yezidi core areas in northern Iraq under existential threat by armed conflict and displacement, this identity could become the new framework in which a modern Yezidi identity will be able to sustain itself.

### Who, in Fact, Are the Yezidi?

In summer 2014, the spate of atrocities by the Islamic State against Yezidi villagers and townspeople in the northern Iraqi district of Sinjar brought previously never seen international attention to this peculiar community and culture.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the Yezidi's ordeal, which was the sub-

ject of media coverage for a while, did not really result in a better understanding of their history, confessional practices and their identity dynamics. On the contrary, the Yezidi, who tend to be associated exclusively with their ethnographic area in Iraq while omitting the Caucasian Yezidi, are often reduced to mere victims—the role they had when much of international public first came to know about their existence. Also, through the persecutions and atrocities of which they are the target, they are supposed

<sup>1</sup> The original of this article was written in French and was translated by Bruno De Cordier.

to illustrate the ruthlessness and inhumanity of Islamic State, without being envisaged differently than in relation to their persecutors or to the crimes of the latter.

Beyond the inconsolable trauma that it brought upon the Yezidi from this area itself, the Sinjar massacres also strongly affected the wider Yezidi world. Scattered, fragmented but nonetheless more and more connected these days, the different poles that exist within the transnational Yezidi sphere tend to increasingly define themselves in relation to one another, after having followed parallel but unrelated ways in the run of the twentieth century. This is the case, for example, among the Yezidi of Armenia, a country which houses the bulk of the Yezidi within the realm the old USSR. As heirs of an identity construction first connected to the USSR before being radically disrupted by the union's demise, the Yezidi of Armenia now take part in the construction of a globalized Yezidi identity in which the memory of Sinjar could likely become a key element.

The Yezidi who live in Armenia and other parts of the southern Caucasus belong to a confessional community that is rooted in the heart of the Kurdish world, but that was scattered following recurring persecutions, the redefining of borders following the First World War, the dismantling of the Ottoman empire and establishment of the Turkish republic and of new Arab nation-states, and the founding of the USSR. Kurdish but not Muslim, the Yezidi are historically figuring as a minority within a minority, which often results in double-marginalization sealed by a reputation that they are devil worshippers. This old fallacious (but tenacious) idea has long made them a target of regular persecution by their Muslim neighbors, as well as a fascinating curiosity for Orientalists. At the heart is a religious system which comprises elements of different gnostic traditions and in which the Peacock Angel (*Tawûsê Melek* in Kurdish, *Malik al-Tawus* in Arabic), is the central figure. Being the most powerful of the seven angels to whom, in Yezidi tradition, God entrusted the guardianship of world affairs, the Peacock Angel is often considered, in Islamic folk beliefs and in the accounts of certain over-hasty external observers, to be the Fallen Angel, the devil.<sup>2</sup>

Membership of the Yezidi community is based on genealogy and is hereditary. The Yezidi's religious practice is defined by a large set of alimentary and other taboos, rules and obligations, life rituals and seasonal celebrations. This normative system is associated with a social hierarchy which contains three main 'castes'—*pir*, *sheikh* and *murid*—and a number of sub-castes that have a hereditary and endogamous character and distinct social and

religious functions. The transmission of religious knowledge is essentially oral and happens through sacred chants, hymns and eposes, who are carriers of the community's collective memory.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of oral transmission in Yezidi tradition makes the study of the origins of the Yezidi and of the historical conditions in which they came into being as a distinct category not easy. Generally, contemporary literature points out that Yezidism issued from the fusion of certain pre-Islamic belief systems which were still practiced in parts of the Kurdish highlands centuries after the coming of Islam, and of the teachings of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir al-Umawi (1073 or 1078 to 1160 or 1163), a Sufi mystic and ascetic from the Beqaa valley in what is now Lebanon who settled among the Kurds in the early eleventh century. In the beginning, little distinguished the disciples of Sheikh Adi (*Şêx Adî* in Kurdish) from other orthodox Muslim orders. But, generation after generation, their religious practices reflected a clear resurgence of heterodox elements, consisting of innovations derogatory towards Islamic dogma and of remaining pre-Islamic elements.

In turn, these customs and practices attracted the hostility upon the Yezidi of neighboring entities and ethno-religious communities, often encouraged therein by political and religious authorities. As guardians of Islamic orthodoxy, the latter indeed strongly feared the military strength of this renegade community, who, back then, comprised some of the most powerful Kurdish tribes from a military point of view.<sup>4</sup> Set at the confines of the Ottoman and Safavid empires, some of these tribes did eventually convert to Sunni Islam in the run of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at times when the rivalry between the Ottomans and Safavids created opportunities they could otherwise not capitalize on as infidels. This affected the remaining parts of the Yezidi community over the long term, in the sense that raids, expulsions and massacres became almost a constant in its existence. When these reached a new peak in the nineteenth century, several Yezidi tribes were compelled to flee and took asylum in Russian Transcaucasia.

### The Southern Caucasus as an 'Identity Laboratory'

Likewise, the turn of the twentieth century, marked as it was by the first Armenian massacres, increasing pressure on other minorities in the Ottoman space and the disruptions caused by the First World War, was equally nefari-

2 Christine Allison (2001), *The Yezidi oral tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan*, London : Curzon Press.

3 Philip G. Kreyenbroek et Khalil Jindy Rashow (2005), *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect—Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

4 Ibid.

ous for the Yezidi. The postwar establishment of several nation-states in the Middle East added to this long process of disruption, since the borders which were established sustainably divided a community. Twice a minority, as Kurds and non-Muslims, they were now targeted, in Turkey as well as Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, by the central authorities' nation-building which included pressure to assimilate into the Turkish or Arab majority and at times relocation. Today, the emergence of the Islamic State has considerably perturbed the demography of the Yezidi in Iraq and Syria. More than eighteen months after the Sinjar massacres, the number of members of the community in both countries is unknown. An increasing number of Iraqi and Syrian Yezidi are leaving their countries of origin for Europe, either using the illegal migration routes or taking advantage of specific dispositions by certain EU countries towards them and their predicament. In spite of this, northern Iraq remains the core area of the Yezidi, with the great majority living in areas controlled by the Kurdish armed forces.

The Yezidi who took refuge in Russian Transcaucasia knew a quite different historic destiny. In the twentieth century, the USSR was probably the only state which officially recognized and promoted Kurdish identity. Approached under an exclusively secular angle, the recognition of the Kurds as a 'nationality' within the Soviet order offered the opportunity to the Yezidi in the now Soviet Transcaucasia to play an active role in a process of an explicitly Kurdish identity-building, apparently discarding all confessional aspects. So, recognized as Kurds, the USSR's Yezidi came at the heart of the construction of a parallel Kurdish nationalism, taking advantage of the possibilities set by the state to teach the Kurdish language in schools and to promote secular Kurdish culture through state-supported newspapers, radio broadcasts, literary productions and theatre, and the creation of a Soviet Kurdish intelligentsia, most of whom were based in Tbilisi and Yerevan.<sup>5</sup> Hence for years, the USSR was a privileged and almost exclusive expression field of a Kurdish identity that was championed for the most part by people of Yezidi origin but who did not yet openly claim this particular part of their identity.

Mostly geared towards internal use, and strictly confined within the limits set by Soviet ideology and nationality policies, this identity construction was rather inapt to influence the nationalist dynamics which emerged all along the twentieth century in the post-Ottoman space and in Iran, despite the importance of the Kurd-

ish radio broadcasts on Radio Yerevan which could be heard over the border too. Inseparable from the Soviet societal project, this secular Kurdish culture would not survive the demise of the USSR itself. As a numerically weak minority and without a clearly-defined territory of its own, the Soviet Kurds, both those of Yezidi and Sunni Islamic background, did not expect much positive to come from the end of the Soviet state and its replacement by successor states the titular majority nations of which went through a national awakening of their own. Despite many years of official discarding and suppression, the traditional religious cleavages had also not been eradicated from the collective consciousness.

The Karabakh War became a determining factor in this regard, in the sense that it dramatically affected the national unity of Transcaucasian Kurds.<sup>6</sup> Since they were suspected by Armenian nationalists to tacitly support their coreligionists in Azerbaijan, Kurds of Muslim background who lived in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh were compelled to flee to Azerbaijan, where they face assimilation. For their part, the Kurds of Yezidi background who remained in Armenia increasingly felt the need to dissociate themselves from the Muslim Kurds who were, in Armenian nationalist narrative, also represented as active perpetrators of the Armenian massacres in the Ottoman empire in 1915. This evolution in identification, initially a survival strategy, was enhanced by both the decay of the secular Kurdish intelligentsia who had been formed in the USSR and by the emergence, in the later Soviet period, of a more explicitly Yezidi elite who hoped for support of the Armenian state by clearly dissociating itself and their followers from a wider Kurdish sphere which is for the most part Sunni Islamic.

### Armenia as a Framework Space

Besides that, with the open return of religious identification and religious actors after the demise of the USSR, the Armenian Apostolic Church became a cornerstone of Armenian national identity, just like the Georgian Orthodox Church became for national identity in the other area in the southern Caucasus with a significant Yezidi population, Georgia. Separated from their historical homeland and sacred places and with no sacred texts or confessional institutions, the formerly Soviet Yezidi lost a large part of their religious heritage and knowledge during the Soviet period. In the mid-term, this might have made part of them inclined to convert to Armenian Apostolic (or Georgian Orthodox) Christianity to elevate their social and communal status.<sup>7</sup>

5 Lucina Jafarova, 'Le théâtre kurde en URSS', *Études kurdes*, N°1, 2/2000 : 47-58, Estelle Amy de la Bretèque, 'Il y a quand même de l'espoir – Entretien avec Emerik Serdar', *Études kurdes*, N°11, 3/2012 : 103-108.

6 Estelle Amy de la Bretèque (2013), *Paroles mélodisées. Récits épiques et lamentations chez les Yézidis d'Arménie*, Paris : Classiques Garnier.

7 Balci Bayram et Motika Raoul (dir) (2007), *Religion et politique dans le Caucase post-soviétique*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.

In such circumstances and in a reflex of identity survival, the Caucasian Yezidi eventually reinvigorated their own confessional identity which at the same time became the core of a new identity distinct from Kurdishness.

All this basically comes to the sense, to the *raison d'être*, of the *Ezdiki* movement, which has been, since the 1990s, the main champion of and the driving force behind the idea of a 'Yezidi nation'. The movement, which first appeared in Armenia in the particular context of the Karabakh War, deeply and durably influenced the Yezidi of the old USSR, not only in Armenia but also those in Georgia, Russia (where many come from the southern Caucasus) and in Western European countries (most of all Germany) where a diaspora for Yezidi from the successor states of the USSR came into being from the 1990s onwards. This process of identity creation was first directed towards recognition of the community by the Armenian majority and the Armenian state, first, by distinguishing oneself clearly from the Sunni Muslim Kurds and second, by a new Yezidi commemorative discourse that is clearly analogous to the Armenian commemorative discourse.

Although the mother tongue of the Yezidi of the southern Caucasus is almost indistinguishable from the northern Kurdish Kurmanji dialects, it is now considered by the champions of the Yezidi nation and recognized by the Armenian authorities as a separate Caucasian Yezidi language: *Ezdiki*. In Armenia's censuses and official statistics, 'Yezidi' and 'Kurdish' are two different categories. The institutional reforms of 2015 which guarantee representation of non-Armenian communities in parliament also established these two distinct groups. Moreover, the *Ezdiki* movement and its different actors advance other national symbols like the conception of their own national flag. Its positions are now being spread on the internet and through online social networks, helped by the fact that the younger generations, those born in the late 1980s and in the 1990s, have no other horizon than that set by their confessional identity and have not been acculturated in an environment which valorizes Kurdishness.

The stakes are now to create a Yezidi identity capable of being recognized as legitimate by the Armenian majority. Neglected but not completely suppressed during the Soviet era, Yezidi religious practice is being rebuilt from scratch, not on the basis of the rites and institutions which are still practiced and functioning in northern Iraq, but, rather, using criteria which are applied to define a legitimate religion in the Armenian and Georgian contexts. One way in which this comes forward is the plan to build a new 'temple' in the locality of Aknalich in Armenia, whereas in fact, the notion of temples is absent in Yezidi tradition. To be built on the site of a more modest structure from 2012, the edifice, according to the architectural plans, will come to have some of the structural elements

of an Armenian church and will be decorated with Yezidi symbolism. The site is also to become a place of pilgrimage. Besides the obvious religious functions, the compound is also to host a TV station, a cultural center and a library, inspired by a similar site which was inaugurated in Tbilisi in the summer of 2015.

### From a Yezidi Nation...

This identity dynamic is also fully integrated into the ties and interaction between the Caucasian Yezidi, most of all the protagonists of the *Ezdiki* movement, and Iraqi Kurdistan and its Yezidi population. The collapse of the USSR and later of Baathist Iraq led to a relative opening of borders and communication ties that facilitated contact between the Yezidi of the Caucasus and those of Iraq that were previously near-impossible. The internet and satellite networks allow Caucasus Yezidi to remain informed about the Iraqi Yezidis' situation and predicaments, including instances of occasional violence that happened even before the Sinjar tragedy. The latter events that indeed started to occur from the early 2000s onward, reportedly involving harassment by Kurdish nationalists that the *Ezdiki* activists described as akin to Sunni fundamentalists. They feed a process of community story-telling on the internet and social media. Note that the leading advocates of the *Ezdiki* movement, the majority of whom reside in Yerevan, tend to borrow certain aspects of the Armenian commemorative discourse, using explicitly the word 'genocide' when referring to the series of car bomb attacks by Islamic militants on Yezidi near Mosul in summer 2007.

The massacre of Sinjar, of course, invigorated this dynamic, as well as the reappropriation of the events in the Middle East for aims proper to the internal Armenian context. As a matter of fact, the proximity in time of the Sinjar massacre of summer 2014 and the centennial of the Armenian genocide in spring 2015, created ample opportunity for the protagonists of the Yezidi cause to fully use the logics of mimicry. This became apparent, *inter alia*, in the presence of Yezidi religious dignitaries from Iraq at the centennial memorial service in Yerevan. The now systematic use of the term 'genocide' to designate the Sinjar events is another illustrating example. This construction of commemorative footbridges and constant references to common enemies gained new momentum with the ever-frequent evocation of the figure of Jehangir Aga, a Yezidi chieftain who fought alongside the Armenians against the Turkish armed forces in 1918.

This will to strengthen historical resonances is even more effective now that Armenian opinion and the Armenian state are being exposed to the events in the Middle East and more specifically in Syria through the situation of the ethnic Armenians of Syria, many of whom descend from survivors of the massacres in the Ottoman empire who re-settled in Aleppo, Damascus and other places in Syria under

the French mandate. In Armenia and in the Armenian diaspora, the Syrian War, the Islamic State and other militant Islamic outfits are perceived to be existential threats to the Armenians in a similar way as the Turkish massacres of 1915 were. Since 2012, there has been an influx of Armenian refugees from Aleppo and other places to the Caucasian country.

### ... to De-Territorialized Yezidism?

Nonetheless, the field on which the Yazidi identity construction and the 'Armenian(ized) narrative' of the Yezidi identity may grow and globalize is the diaspora. The Sinjar tragedy has indeed triggered a wave of migration of Iraqi Yezidis to Western Europe. Despite the recapture of Sinjar by Kurdish and Yezidi militias in autumn 2015, there is actually little hope and support among the Yezidi left to build a future in Iraq or in any Islamic country for that matter. Some notability do appeal for it because of political opportunism. If the poorer strata have no option but to stay for lack of means to emigrate, those whose financial resources permit them to do so predominantly take the road into exile. In Iraq, the trauma of Sinjar globally contributes to the redefinition of a Yezidi identity as opposed to Islam and therefore to the Kurdishness which tends to be associated with it. The new identity of the Yezidi migrants who arrived in Europe from Iraq thus tend to

be in resonance with that which was developed and practiced by the Yezidi communities who settled there earlier, and who were mainly Caucasian Yezidi influenced by the 'Armenian(ized) version' of the Yezidi identity.

After Sinjar, one can observe a clear activation of actors of the second generation who maintain and complete this identity discourse. They either contribute to it individually through publications and comments on social networks (in German, English, French, Russian and Kurdish) or collectively, in associations that provide assistance to Yezidi refugees and at the same time function as platforms for the idea of a Yezidi nation different from the Kurdish one. These evolutions clearly affect Yezidi migrants in Western Europe and their families who stayed behind but communicate with each other using the same social media. Besides, the increasing tensions with regard to Islam and Muslims and to the refugee crisis in Europe encourage Yezidi actors to emphasize in an ever more structured way that they have an identity certainly connected to the Middle East but radically opposed to Islam. This dynamic contains legitimization strategies vis-à-vis the majorities and authorities of the European host countries that clearly resemble those used in the southern Caucasus in the 1990s.

#### *About the Author*

Allan Kaval is an independent journalist and correspondent for *Le Monde* in Erbil, northern Iraq. Having authored many field and documentary reports about the war against Islamic State and about Kurdish affairs, he developed, since 2013, a specific interest in the Yezidi spaces and societies. This interest has expanded during his travels to Yazidi communities in Iraq, Georgia and Armenia and through his contacts with the Yezidi diaspora in Europe. His personal page, where part of his other work can be accessed, in French, is <<http://www.allankaval.com>>.

## Sunni and Shia Muslims in Georgia: a Societal Margin in Motion?

Inga Popovaite, Iowa City

### Abstract

This article offers a concise overview of the different Muslim groups in Georgia, and discusses their identity issues and socioeconomic situation as well as the current actions of the state directed towards their integration. The Muslim communities in Georgia, which consist primarily of Azeri, Adjarians and Kist, generally form a marginal group in society since they are not perceived to be full members of the Georgian nation due to their confessional background and, in case of Azeri and Kist, linguistic factors. A large majority of the Muslims in Georgia also live in rural regions where the overall economic and social predicament often negatively differ from that in the majority culture and in urban areas. Hence the question is whether specific socioeconomic conditions and identity issues and alienation contribute to forms of radicalization among Georgia's Muslim communities or whether there are dynamics of integration in Georgian society.

### Georgia's Muslims: a Social Topography

Georgia is a country with a predominant Christian population. As can be seen in the annex of this issue, roughly 83 percent of the population of Georgia considers themselves followers of the autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church, which is a key element of Georgian national identity. If we add the near 3.9 percent adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the followers of Armenian and Georgian Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy and the dozen or so of Evangelical, Protestant and Pentecostal denominations that are active in the country, the Christian majority comes at about ninety percent. Near one-tenth of the population identify themselves as Muslims, of which roughly a bit more than half are culturally and traditionally Sunni and the rest Shia. Ethnically, socially and ideologically, though, they form an all but homogeneous community.

The largest Muslim group in the country are ethnic Azeri or Azerbaijani. Currently, around 284,000 Turkic Azeri live in Georgia, with a clear concentration in the rural south-eastern regions of Kvemo Kartli (some 226,000) and Kakheti (33,600) which border Azerbaijan and Dagestan. A sizeable community, perhaps as large as 18,000, also lives in the capital Tbilisi. Though predominantly of Shia tradition, some authors claim that there is a sizeable Sunni minority of up to one-third among them. In everyday life and practice, though, the line between both is not clear-cut and mosques serving both denominations are common. At the country's other end on the Black Sea, in the autonomous republic of Adjara, lives most of Georgia's second-largest Muslim community, Sunni Muslims of Georgian ethnicity and language.<sup>1</sup> Adjara, whose center is the city of Batumi, used to be a part of the Ottoman empire from 1614 until the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–78, which explains the presence of an Islamized

Georgian group there. In the USSR, it was, along with the Birobijan Jewish autonomy in the Far East, one of the two territorial-administrative units specifically designed for a confessionally-defined community in a borderland area.

According to the latest official census data, about one-third of the region's population consider themselves Sunni Muslims, compared to near two-thirds adherents of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The majority of the Sunni Adjarians are generally living in rural, mountainous part of the area with a concentration around Khulo. There are also Adjarian communities in Batumi and Tbilisi. Furthermore, the Pankisi valley in the north-eastern part of Kakheti, is home to a reportedly 8,110-strong Kist community. The Kist, who are a Chechen sub-group, are mostly Sunni although a few villages are Orthodox Christian. Their traditional folk Sufism incorporated not a few animist and Christian elements. Over the last fifteen years, however, under the influence of movement and dynamics in neighboring Chechnya and Dagestan, Salafi Sunnism gathered a following among the younger segments of the Kist population. Finally, other Muslim groups in the country include about 2,000 Caucasian Avars who live in three villages in Kakheti, and Meskhetian Turks, who historically lived in Samtskhe-Javakheti but were deported to the Uzbek SSR under Stalinist rule before small numbers returned to Georgia after 1989–91. However, this article will not specifically elaborate on these latter groups, concentrating instead on the Azer(baijan)i, Adjarians and Kist.

### Exclusion from the National Imaginary

One of the biggest challenges to a Muslim living in Georgia is the perception of Georgian Orthodox Christianity as a fundament of Georgian national identity. In other words, only members of the Georgian Orthodox Church are seen by many among the grassroots, as belonging to the Georgian nation. The Georgian Orthodox Church is the most trusted public institution with 82 percent

<sup>1</sup> Muslims of Georgian ethnicity and language will be further referred to as Adjarians.

of the country's population trusting it, and has a strong influence in political and public discourse.<sup>2</sup> Also Georgian and international academics argue that the two following aspects are emphasized in the national Georgian narrative: Georgian language and Orthodox Christianity. They are perceived as the corner stones of Georgian culture and distinct national identity. By preserving their language and religion throughout the turmoil of history and wars with neighboring powers, Georgians believe to have preserved their national selves as well. Thus, at least in the eye of the majority, ethnic minority Muslims, in the first place Azeri and Kists, lack both crucial elements of Georgian identity since the Georgian language is not their native tongue and since they do not belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The Azeri identity is traditionally mostly based on their distinct Turkic ethnicity and language more than on religion. However, in line with what is happening in Azerbaijan itself, both Shia and Sunni Islam are experiencing revival among the minority's younger segments. Nowadays, more younger than aged people are attending Friday prayers in the main mosque in Tbilisi as well as in mosques in the province, just like increasing numbers are conducting the Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca) and pilgrimages to Shia religious sites in Iran and Iraq. In addition, similar to what happens among the Kist in Pankisi, there are estimates that around 20 percent among the 15–35 age bracket of the Azeri population of Kvemo Kartli are at least influenced by Salafism. The reported rise in religiosity among Azeri goes hand in hand with the increase in cross-border religious activity during the past decade or so. In the 1990s, a lot of missionaries from Iran made their way to Georgia's Azeri-populated areas and gave an opportunity to local youth to study in religious centers in Iran.

Students from Georgia who attended Islamic institutions abroad later returned, often armed with religious knowledge superior to that of the traditional religious leaders and elders, to their communities and established religious foundations, run by ethnic Azeri but often funded by foundations from Iran, Iraq and Shia and Sunni networks from Turkey. Kist, on the other hand, have always perceiving Islam to be a more integral part of their culture and society. There are now fault lines, though, between older and younger generations because the older generation is more attached to traditional Sufism while Salafi influence is clearly present among part of the young. An important vector of Salafism were refugees fleeing the Chechen Wars of 1994–96 and 1999–2000. Kist people claim that they have two homelands: Chechnya, which they see as the core area of their language and much of

their culture and customs, and Georgia, their actual homeland where they developed a specific Kist identity. In contrast to Azeri, Kists have few problems with the Georgian language in the sense that most inhabitants from Pankisi are bilingual or trilingual, using the local Chechen-based dialect to converse among themselves and Georgian and Russian for talking to officials or outsiders. In addition, their family names usually have Georgian suffixes like *-shvili* and *-adze*.

Adjarians are in a more peculiar situation. They are not complete 'others' since they always had Georgian as their mother tongue, yet not complete 'ours' because they are not Christians. They are seen as 'incomplete selves'. Importantly, Adjarian Islam is generally perceived to be in retreat, especially in Batumi and in the lowlands, because of a trend among (parts of) this population groups to convert, or, as some would say, revert, to Georgian Orthodoxy which is not only perceived to be the religion of their forefathers before the Ottoman era, but also a necessary prerequisite to fully belong to the Georgian nation and to obtain adequate social-economic status. It results in younger, socially mobile and better educated middle class and urban dwellers opting for Christianity or at least diminishing their Muslim identity, and in Islam becoming more concentrated in rural mountainous areas among more traditional population.

Finally, in recent years, Georgian and international media as well as former president Mikheil Saakashvili reported that up to 'several hundreds' young Georgian citizens from the main Muslim communities—Adjarians, Azeri and Kist—left the country to join the ranks of Daesh (Islamic State) in Syria. Although the actual proportions of this phenomenon are subject to speculation if not rabble-raising by opinion makers and interest groups, it did strengthen the perception of the presence of the 'other' in the core areas of Georgian national identity. Mainstream Muslim leaders in Georgia tend to advocate interfaith solidarity and condemn radical Islamists, but there is a plethora of reasons why a number of Muslims in Georgia are susceptible to adopt non-traditional religious practices and currents if not religious radicalism. The lack of socioeconomic opportunities in the rural regions is certainly one, yet a sense of alienation from the Georgian majority and a search for their identity at times of stark social change are certainly as important.

### The Institutional Inequalities

In Georgia, religious freedom is protected by the constitution and other laws and policies. At the same time, the constitutional agreement between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the state stresses the unique status of the Church and gives it special rights and a privileged partnership not granted to other religious denominations, includ-

2 CRRC Online Data Analysis—Caucasus Barometer, 2013

ing to those under the official Administration of Georgian Muslims. This agreement, among other rights, allows the Church to advise the government in the sphere of education (although the parliament needs to adopt legislation to implement this) and gives it exclusive rights to staff the military chaplaincy. In addition to that, the Church has a long history of state funding. Between 2002 and 2015, for instance, it received 250 million lari (then around \$105 million) or an average of 19.2 million lari per year, from the state budget. In comparison, the Administration of Georgian Muslims, established in 2011, just recently started receiving public funds, along with other traditional religious minorities like Catholics, Armenian Apostolics and Jews.<sup>3</sup> For 2014–15, the government promised to allocate 3.3 million lari (about \$1.38 million) or an annual 1.65 million lari, to the institution.

Although Muslims thus started to get funding from the state, the main funding and support for their religious activities and infrastructure comes from private as well as semi-official foundation and sources from abroad. A number of Sunni mosques in Adjara are thus financed from Turkey (Liles, 2012), while Shia foundations from Turkey, Iran, Iraqi and individual Shia leaders like al-Sistani support religious organizations in the Shia Azeri community. Some Salafi groups who are active among the Kist in Pankisi are believed to be sponsored by charities from the Arab Gulf and by Salafi Chechen networks in Russia. Such real and perceived external support, and the agendas embedded in it, adds to a climate of suspicion creating extra tension and distrust for religious minorities among the country's Christian majority. It should be noted here that Georgian law separates religious and secular education. Religious classes can take place only after school hours and cannot be controlled by the authority or teachers of a given public school. At the same time, outside instructors, for example priests, cannot regularly attend or direct students' clubs or any extracurricular activities at public schools. However, in practice, there is a strong trace of religious agenda in secular curriculum, especially in history classes, in which a lot of attention is being devoted to the historical role of the Georgian Orthodox Church as the preserver of Georgian national identity against neighboring Islamic empires and entities like the Ottomans, Persia and the southern Caspian khanates.

### The Social-Economic Predicament(s)

As mentioned above, the Azeri form the largest Muslim group in Georgia. According to the most recent census,

the one of 2002, there were over 284,000 ethnic Azeri in Georgia. This is an 8 percent drop from the more than 307,000 in 1989, which can be attributed to emigration to Turkey and Azerbaijan due to the radical change in social and economic conditions and the political turmoil and armed conflict after the demise of the USSR. Azeris mostly live in rural areas and mainly rely on agriculture, both growing for themselves and for selling, to support themselves. Around half of the Azeri rural households indicated that they live in poverty, with 46.4 percent of ethnic Azeri families in Kvemo Kartli spending more than 70 percent of their income on food as compared to 25.3 percent of ethnic Georgian families. A representative study of socioeconomic situation and attitudes among the population in Kvemo Kartli, a region where Azeri form 36.8 percent of the population, revealed that there is a substantial lack of knowledge of Georgian language among members of this minority.<sup>4</sup>

Azeri tend to live in close-knit communities, predominantly Azeri villages, and use the Turkic Azeri language instead of the Ibero-Caucasian Georgian language for intergroup communication and Russian for interethnic communication. Data showed that 78.3 percent of ethnic Azeri in Kvemo Kartli do not speak Georgian, which in turn alienates them from the labor market, distances them from ethnic Georgians and prevents them from getting enough information about various development projects and support structures implemented in this region. In addition, Azeri tend to be more disengaged from local politics than their Georgian counterparts. However, the same data suggest that ethnic Azeri understand the necessity of knowing Georgian, and respondents did not indicate any discrimination regarding their access to education or serious obstacles that would obstruct them from learning Georgian. At the same time, Azeri children show a somewhat lower involvement in education than their ethnic majority counterparts: 6.6 percent of Azeri children are not enrolled in school, compared to 2.5 percent Georgian children in the same region. In rural municipalities where Azeri constitute the majority like Marneuli, Tsalka, Dmanisi and Bolnisi, named reasons for students dropping out of school were their own choice due to lack of desire to study, no school in the vicinity, necessity to work, problems with documentation, lack of money for school supplies, and early marriages.

Although under-age marriage does occur among Georgia's majority culture too, especially in rural areas—according to the UN Population Fund, up to 17 percent

3 Established under the Saakashvili administration, the AGM was viewed by part of the respective Muslim communities to be an attempt to exercise control over in-group affairs in the Muslim community.

4 Iago Kachachishvili, Nino Korinteli, Teona Mataradze, and Mamuka Nadareishvili (2012). *Study of social and economic conditions and attitudes of Kvemo Kartli population*. Tbilisi: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC-DEZA).

of women in Georgia were married before they turned 18<sup>5</sup>—there seem to be a higher prevalence among highland Adjarians and among Azeri in Kvemo Kartli than in other parts of Georgia. In Pankisi also, a number of social factors impede social mobility. Although, as mentioned above, fluency or at least workable knowledge of the Georgian language is higher among Kist people than among Azeri, the socioeconomic conditions in Pankisi are also rather difficult. Local non-governmental organizations, for example, estimate that only one-tenth of the population in Pankisi is employed officially, although this of course does not exclude lots of activity and sometimes opportunities in the informal economy. Approximately half of the population is aged 15–25 though, and against a background of limited opportunity in education and formal employment in Pankisi itself, it remains to be seen how people will cope. Finally, the ethnic Georgian Muslims from upper Adjara share a similar socioeconomic predicament with the two above-mentioned groups. The main sources of income are paid labor in the service industry, construction and the hospitality industry, agriculture and pensions. Reportedly, around one-third of the rural population in Adjara lived below the poverty line of \$2 per day in 2006–2007. Although this has shifted, a lot of households are still precarious.

### Current Trends

This concise overview of the Muslim populations in Georgia touched upon different issues that this religious minority faces in this predominantly Christian country and society. Yet, and this is important, it is false to conclude that the situation is deadlocked and not changing for the better. To start with, Muslims already have state-level representation via the Administration of Georgian Muslims, established in 2011. In addition, the current state administration has created a new institution, the State Agency for Religious Issues, whose main goal is to ensure religious freedom and non-discrimination in the country. However, this agency has not gained public promi-

nence yet. Second, Georgia is trying to implement better state language teaching programs in ethnic minority regions, including the Azeri villages in Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti, by training teachers to teach Georgian as a second language. Similarly, affirmative action programs are applied for students with ethnic minority background who apply to universities in Georgia. Such institutional approach has a potential to improve Azeri integration into Georgian society. No such programs are being set up or planned for the Kist community though.

Third, the parliament of Georgia adopted law changes in 2015, which stipulate that underage marriage is a criminal offence. In addition, numerous grassroots organizations are taking upon themselves to educate adolescents about damages of underage marriages for women. One of the biggest current challenges though are posed by real and perceived radicalization trends among Muslims in Georgia. This issue is not new. In 2002–03, for example, the Pankisi gorge attracted international attention when it was reported to be a hideout for alleged al-Qaeda militants and armed Chechen Salafi groups. More recently, a number of Georgians citizens have reported to have joined Daesh in Syria. The exact numbers are unknown, but the media speculates that it is under 100 people. In both chapters, part of the commotion was and is artificial. In any case, the state has strengthened its antiterrorism laws, making it illegal to join paramilitary organizations abroad. There is still a lack, however, of community-driven action and bottom-up approach, such as moderate Islamic teaching by credible actors or the creation of social and economic opportunities for adolescents. Finally, the prevalence of the Georgian Orthodox Church discourse in politics, media and education, and a religiously-infused national narrative fuse religion and the state together and keep Muslims (and other religious minorities) in Georgia in the margins of the nation. As a very influential actor, the Church should also adopt a more inclusive narrative and work on social inclusion of this religious minority into a greater society.

### About the Author

Inga Popovaite is a graduate student at the Department of Sociology of the University of Iowa. She holds an MA Degree in Nationalism Studies from the Central European University, where she defended her thesis on Georgian Muslim women's national and religious identity in Adjara. Her academic interests include ethnic and religious identity, intergroup conflicts and minority inclusion in post-Soviet nation states.

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5 This number is not exact because most child marriages are not officially registered. United Nations Population Fund (2014). *Child marriage in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: regional overview*, Istanbul: UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, <<http://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%20Marriage%20EECA%20Regional%20Overview.pdf>>

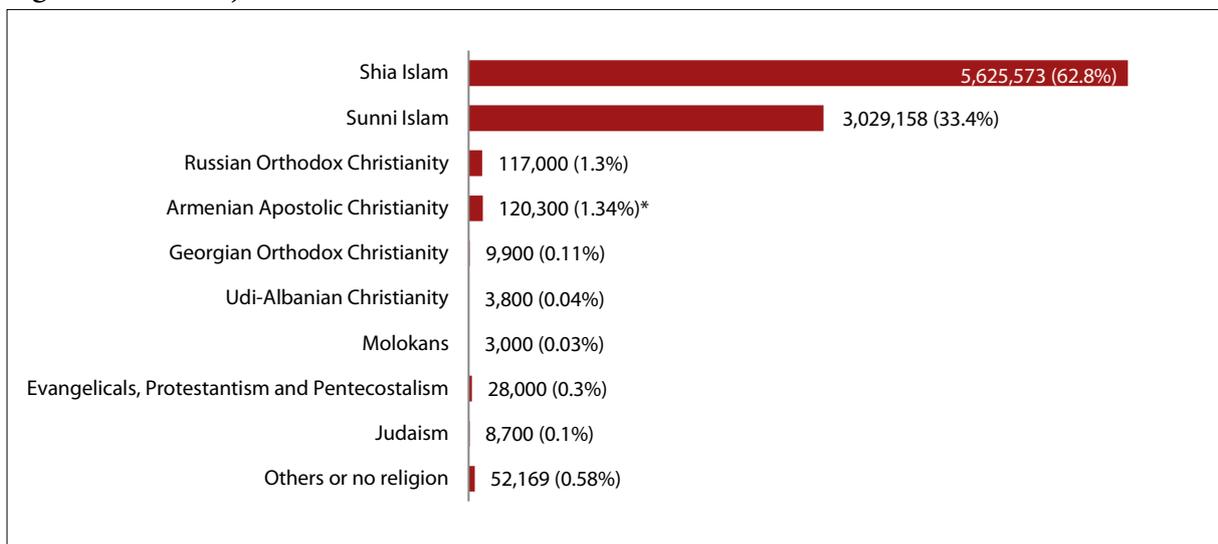
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## DOCUMENTATION

## The Confessional Demography of the Southern Caucasus

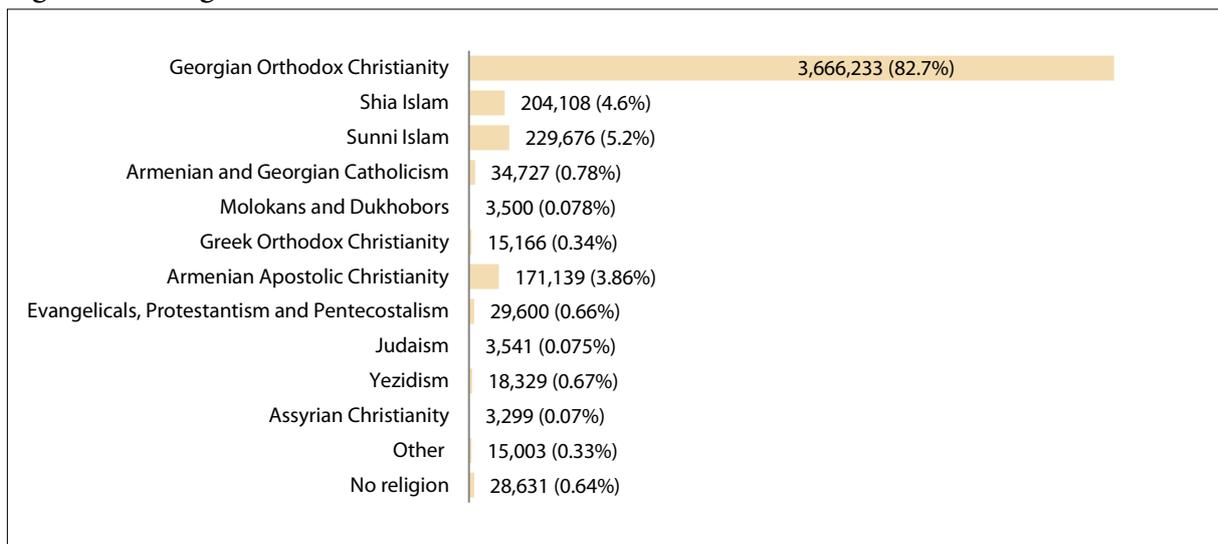
Graphics prepared by Bruno De Cordier and Inga Popovaitė on the basis of data from the population censuses of Azerbaijan of 2009, of Georgia of 2002 (the full results of Georgia's 2014 population census are only expected in mid-2016, that is after this issue goes to press) and of Armenia of 2011, the 2008 report on religious movements in Georgia by the Public Defender's Office, and Pew Research Centre—Religion and Public Life. Due to the differing methodologies of the respective sources, at times conflicting figures and differences in figures, and the lack of clarity on the distribution between Shia and Sunni, the data are approximate. They also reflect the religious (self-)identification of the population, but not the actual religious practice.

**Figure 1: Azerbaijan**

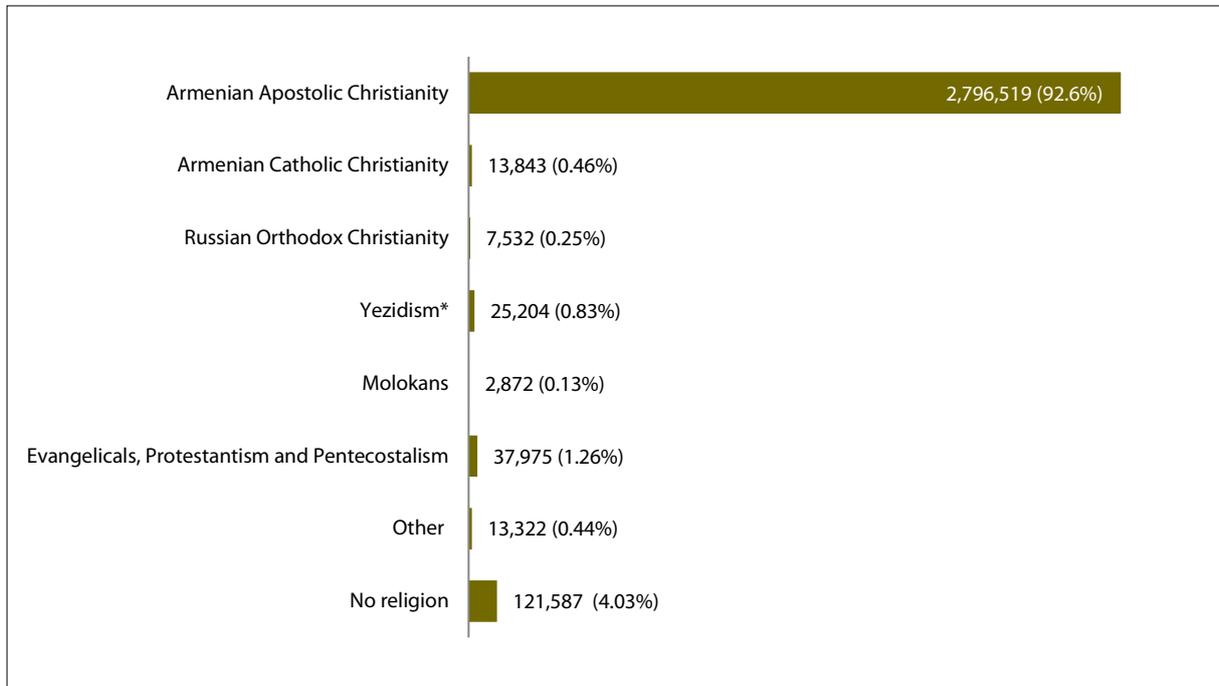


\*Concentrated in occupied Nagorno-Karabakh

**Figure 2: Georgia\***



\*Without Abkhazia and South Ossetia

**Figure 3: Armenia**

\* Number of citizens of Armenia declaring to follow or identify with the Yezidi faith (called 'Sharfadinism' in the census) as opposed to 'ethnic Yezidi', some of whom declared to follow Armenian Apostolic Christianity or Protestantism.

## ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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