

**ELŞAN MUSTAFAOĞLU  
AND MƏNƏVI SAFLIĞA DƏVƏT  
A PORTRAIT OF ISLAMIC SOCIAL ACTIVISM  
IN BAKU, AZERBAIJAN**

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When I was in Baku in the fall of 2012 I attended a ceremony to commemorate Ghadir Qum. Named after a hamlet where the Prophet Muhammad reportedly halted on his way back to Medina from his last pilgrimage to Mecca, the event commemorates the alleged appointment by the Prophet of his young son-in-law and faithful companion, Ali, as his heir and successor in front of a crowd of the faithful. The ‘Ghadir Qum Speech’ reportedly took place in the spring of 632, some three months before the Prophet passed away. Ali’s appointment was disputed, and eventually he was only to become caliph, or successor of the Prophet as the leader of the faithful, some 25 years later, as the last of the Prophet’s original companions to hold this post. Ali is considered to be one of the main imams or community leaders among the Shi’ites, who especially commemorate the event and who form the denomination to which a majority of Azerbaijan’s Muslims adhere or at least traditionally associate themselves with.

The commemoration was organized by and took place in the clean and sober premises of an Azerbaijani association called Mənəvi Saflıg Dəvət İctimai Birliyi (Social Union for the Appeal to Moral Purity). Some forty people – slightly more women than men – were listening to a young guest speaker from Baku’s Islamic University who, regularly quoting from a pocket Quran and some handwritten notes, explained the background and social significance of Ghadir Qum. “What did we learn from this, people?” the speaker said in his concluding remarks. “The Prophet chose Ali because of his modesty and merit. Remember that. This should be our alternative to the culture of showing off and corruption that dominates society today. Also, Imam Ali eventually had to wait a very long time to become caliph. He thus embodied the virtue of patience and the will to serve God, the Prophet and just causes rather than kings and princes.” The message between the lines is clear. After a speech of about an hour, the audience, which was invariably young – most members were about the age of my students – urban, users of social media and mostly with or enrolled in higher education, was shown a scene from a historical drama from the 1980s in which the Prophet Muhammad appoints Ali in front of a crowd of followers.

### **The outcome of ‘transition’**

The Ghadir Qum commemoration and the people who attended it fit into the sort of activities that are regularly organized by this organization. During the casual chats I had with a number of participants after the session it became clear that none of them fit into the generic image many have of ‘religious people’ in these parts, that is, a generally older and provincial audience with limited education. And even if it was never explicitly stated, not a few seemed to view their interest in Islam and its social role with tacit pride as a way to defy the conventional interpretation of ‘being modern’ by joining an alternative interpretation and more informed practice of the

religion. In a way, being or aspiring to be an actively religious Muslim beyond the mere ethno-cultural connotation of 'being Muslim' is a statement that takes a certain courage and self-assurance. These young people are part of a relatively new religious population category in Azerbaijan, and more specifically Baku.

Mənəvi Saflıǵ Dəvət, as the organisation is called, was founded in 2001 by Elşan Mustafaoǵlu, or Hajji Elşan, as he is also known. Its proclaimed purpose is to encourage social upliftment, the restoration of morality and the development of a psychological defence against social ills, especially among the youth. It wants to achieve this "through education by putting Islam in today's societal reality and offering Islamic answers to everyday concerns rather than limiting Islam to something that only manifests itself on religious holidays". As is often the case, the personality of the founder and leader allows one to better understand the nature of the group and the circumstances in which it was founded. Mustafaoǵlu was born in Baku in late 1974 as the son of a transport employee and a paramedic. He grew up in a neighbourhood that was known for its covert entrepreneurship and black market activities in the Soviet era. Both his father and mother originally came from Nagorno-Karabakh, but settled in Baku in the 1950s, that is, long before the Nagorno-Karabakh war (1988-94) broke out.

Mustafaoǵlu received his primary and secondary education in Baku's Russian-language school system and belongs to the last birth cohort that was acculturated in the Soviet Union. By his own account the year 1988, when he was still a teenager, was crucial in his personal development. "I started to read the Quran and be an observant Muslim that year, and visited Baku's Taza Pir mosque, which was not far from our house", he recalled in our conversations. "That was certainly a statement back then, also at home. My late parents believed in God, yet, like most Soviet Muslims of active age at that time, they did not even know how to properly conduct prayers. But I knew that my paternal grandfather back in Nagorno-Karabakh did. I saw him doing it when I visited him as a child during the holidays and somehow it fascinated me." In the same year Mustafaoǵlu started to attend meetings and opposition demonstrations in what was then Baku's Lenin Square. "In my case it was more than mere youthful curiosity and adventure. You see, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, our family's homeland, had started. We knew what happened there through our relatives. They called us often. We shared their fears. The first demonstration I attended was one in support of our people in Nagorno-Karabakh and for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, after rumours that the Soviet politburo planned to transfer the area to Armenia."

### **From Karabakh to globalization**

"What especially angered me at the demonstration were the policemen, among which were fellow Azerbaijanis, who assaulted some of my friends and tore up the

three-coloured national Azerbaijani flag that one of the demonstrators carried – all this when our countrymen in Karabakh were suffering!” In 1989 Mustafaoğlu became involved in an Azerbaijani Muslim youth organization whose aim was to propagate Islamic values. Although the organization was not an institution or branch of the opposition *Müsavat* party, it was in close contact with some of its leaders and often attended its activities. He and other members of the youth organization also contributed as guest editors to newspapers published under the aegis of the party, in particular *Nash put* (‘Our Way’, a newspaper in Russian) and *Allahu Əkbər!* (God is great!), which was one of Soviet Azerbaijan’s first periodicals aimed at a more explicitly Islamic audience. Between 1991 and 1993 Mustafaoğlu studied economics and Oriental philology in Baku, followed in 1993–98 by studies in theology and Islamic pedagogy at the Qazvin university in Iran under an inter-governmental exchange programme.

Mustafaoğlu also went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon his return to Baku he took up an academic career in philosophy and social thought, first at the National Academy of Sciences and then at Baku’s State University, where he obtained his doctorate. Simultaneously he continued to write guest columns on religious and moral topics for various outlets. Over the years he developed an intellectualist profile that was very different from that of the generally secular and more libertine Soviet intelligentsia, mixing with people in Baku’s media and publishing industries in the process. Then in 2001 he founded *Mənəvi Saflıq Dəvət*. Officially registered as a public association, it operates from a discreet two-floor office compound in a narrow street not far from the *Gənçlik* metro station. This part of the city reflects Baku’s recent development. Situated quite far north of the city centre, its mixture of a dwindling number of older, one-floor houses and 1970s Soviet apartment blocks combined with large, brand new mansions and condominiums (several housing foreign embassies) shows that this is a formerly popular suburban *məhəllə* that has fallen prey to speculators and developers.

The mid-level echelons of the elite moved here, and not a few of them brought relatives from the provinces. The McDonald’s restaurant in front of the *Gənçlik* station looks – and indeed feels – like what one Azerbaijani acquaintance described as “an alien symbol of something some here want to be, but that they are not and never will be”. It is this sort of mental and social collision that gives the impetus to modern Islamic activism, not only in Azerbaijan. *Mənəvi Saflıq Dəvət* declares that it welcomes Shi’ite and Sunni Muslims. Nonetheless, its confessional framework and the personal background of both its leadership and the bulk of its supporters are clearly Shi’ite. The association is, however, not a mosque congregation nor are its activities historically embedded in one. Even if *Mənəvi Saflıq Dəvət*’s gatherings have a community atmosphere, its members and supporters go to different official or independent mosques around Baku for prayers. One mosque that they seem to prefer is the *Dadaş* mosque of the young, charismatic Imam *Şahin Hasanlı* in Baku’s

Kubinka quarter. But these mosques and their congregations have no institutional or organizational ties with Mənəvi Saflıĝ Dəvət and its activities, even if some imams occasionally contribute to the organization's quarterly magazine and its Yeni Şarq portal, and even if Şahin Hasanlı regularly speaks at the association's seminars.



*The main prayer room of Baku's Dadaş mosque (Bruno De Cordier).*

### **The Quran and imams in modern society**

Mənəvi Saflıĝ Dəvət's core activity is education and what would probably be called advocacy in international circles. This is done through regular lectures, seminars and gatherings, and through a magazine and web portal published by the association, as well as contributions and messages by Mustafaoĝlu and other members to other outlets whose editors or owners are like minded or sympathetic to the group's aims. The magazine is supplementary to the seminars and gatherings, as its topics and stories pretty much reflect those treated in the latter. Its topics range from the meaning and relevance of the Quran in modern society, to the life and example of the Shi'ite imams; the importance of prayer with illustrated, practical instructions on how to conduct them; the significance and conduct of the Hajj; Islamic answers and views on issues such as relationships, marriage and parenthood; human rights in Islam; the social ills of globalization and how to fight them; Islamic banking; medical advice; and Islamic fashion and food.



*Imam Şahin Hasanlı speaks at one of Mənəvi Saflıq Dəvət's seminars (MSDİB).*

The articles are usually researched and written by members and sympathizers, several of whom are professionally active in relevant sectors. Mustafaoğlu himself was once very active both as a guest speaker and anchorman on various television talk shows on both private and public channels that focus on religious issues or are willing to include them in their programming. Other than that, the association organizes public celebrations around major Islamic holidays, e.g. its celebration of Eid al-Fitr (the end of the annual fast) for about a hundred children. Its activities also include ad hoc charitable actions like the donation of food packages to a limited number of poor families during major religious holidays, while members organized tutoring lessons and computer classes for their children. But classic charity is more a peripheral than a core activity. In terms of staff and following, the association has five part-time employees who also put together the magazine, whereas Yeni Şərq ('New Orient') employs one full-time webmaster and analyst.

Around the association's staff is a permanent core of some twenty active volunteers who invest considerable time and effort in the association's work, but who have jobs elsewhere, such as in advertising and marketing, the banking sector or mobile phone companies. The outer circle, according to Mənəvi Saflıq Dəvət's management, consists of 150 to 200 volunteers and active sympathizers, some of them students, who – depending on the activities, time of the year and availability – practically support the group in various ways. They also invite or bring friends,

acquaintances, relatives, neighbours or colleagues to the association's activities, and hence play an informal mobilization and recruitment role. The vast majority of Mənəvi Saflıǵ Dəvət's staff and supporters consists of people in their 20s and early 30s. One striking observation was the visibly much larger number of women among its staff and participants, a fact that was confirmed by those involved, as well as by other respondents and contacts. Some explained this by the fact that the association is not rooted in a traditionally predominantly male mosque community, while the soft-spoken and sophisticated personality of the association's founder was also mentioned as a factor. Respondents also mentioned the generally higher proportion of women among the newly religious population, together with the fact that the association places stronger emphasis on day-to-day and family issues in its educational work.

### **An embryonic 'faith-based civil society'?**

Mustafaoǵlu and Mənəvi Saflıǵ Dəvət have also developed ties with international organizations and with a number of international forums and civil society organizations. In late 2006 Mustafaoǵlu participated in a US-funded exchange programme for Azerbaijani Muslims and attended media training courses organized by US-supported media and democratization projects, which at times has led to harsh criticism by some of Baku's pro-Iranian Shi'ites for what they see as leaning too close to the West and Western democracy. Since 2008 Mənəvi Saflıǵ Dəvət has participated in seminars organized by the Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation and the Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Baku and Cairo. Finally, in 2011 Mustafaoǵlu, together with a journalist and a lawyer, set up the Initiative Group for the Support of the Human Rights of Religious Citizens. The committee's first action was to mobilize support and organize volunteers for a nation-wide petition campaign of the Azerbaijani human rights organization DEVAMM against the late 2010 *hijab* ban in schools and universities. The campaign, which was conducted in eight cities or districts and aimed to gather 100,000 signatures, eventually collected over 132,000. The petitions were then sent to the office of the president of Azerbaijan. The group has also monitored and documented a series of arrests and lawsuits against 22 practising Muslims and religious opinion leaders on what it perceives to be fabricated grounds, sent findings and appeals to the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the UNHCHR and to a number of foreign embassies, and commented on the cases on a number of sympathetic Azerbaijani news portals.

According to its cadres, as well as a number of external respondents to whom the question was put, Mənəvi Saflıǵ Dəvət is funded by individual members and sympathizers who donate varying amounts of financial or in-kind support either regularly or ad hoc and often, but not exclusively, around Islamic holidays. A second source of funding is donations, also either financial or in-kind, from sympathetic



*Cover of the Mənəvi Saflıq magazine, its namesake association's main publication (MSDIB).*

Azerbaijani businesses and entrepreneurs both in-country and abroad. The commercial advertisements that have been published in the *Mənəvi Saflıq* magazine over the last couple of years, for instance, offer a glimpse of the kind of businesses that support the association. They include a large hotel, a kebab snack bar, a furniture shop and interior decorator, and Islamic beauty parlour, a large real estate agency and an advertising agency, a computer business, and a publishing house. Those who openly advertise and, as such, show their support publicly are most likely part of a larger group of businesspeople who prefer to offer more discreet support.

Mustafaoğlu's media activities also benefited from foreign grants and support from Baku media entrepreneurs.

### **'Born-again Muslims'**

The Islamic activism of the kind examined in this article is clearly concentrated in the greater Baku area. Why is this? Apart from the large mass of people – and, hence, potential audience – present here, modern Islamic activism requires a certain level of education, educational institutions, and communication facilities that are less present and available in the provincial towns and especially in the countryside. Furthermore, the anonymity of the city and the weaker social than in the provinces offer a more enabling environment for the new or rejuvenated religiosity that forms



the basis of and the audience for such activism. Finally, social contrasts and the impact of globalization are also starker here and, as such, offer more motivation for mobilization than elsewhere. According to Azerbaijani sociologist Hikmet Hajizade, “one of the major issues that has come forward is the position of the family and of women in this changing environment, which explains why the *hijab* has become such an important issue for activism here”. The urban environment and opportunities for globalization also opened a way for people to give religiosity a contemporary dimension by connecting it to human rights.

The existence of Islamic activist groups and a base of what we could call ‘born-again believers’ are not only part of a reaction vis-à-vis the social and cultural impact of globalization, but also a response to the legitimacy crisis of the two forms of Islam that long dominated the religious landscape of Soviet Azerbaijan and long after: traditionalist Islam and state Islam. Firstly, although traditionalist Shi’ism – or ‘folk Islam’, as it is often called – with its emphasis on elders, shrines, and all sorts of folk superstitions and practices that are often not of Islamic origin continues to be part of the cultural framework of the majority of Azerbaijanis, it is clear that its position is eroding. This is both because of the social change caused by labour migration and urbanization, among other things, and also because of the discredit brought about by the co-optation of elders and other traditional religious actors by the authorities. This is reportedly even more the case in urban areas, where traditional religious practice is confronted more than in the provinces with a changing social texture and with alternative, external Islamic knowledge that is often of a higher level.

### **Alternative channels of religiosity**

“There is a large contrast between what lives at the grassroots level and people who have gone on the Hajj to Mecca or to Najaf” (the Iraqi Shi’ite holy city), Vasif Sadygly, an expert on religious issues at the Centre of Religion and Democracy, told the author. “While religion is seen by most as a facet of their traditional solidarity group, people pay different degrees of attention to religious currents coming from the outside. In any case, they respect people with solid religious knowledge.” Secondly, there is the discrediting or, at least, the contestation of the legitimacy of ‘state Islam’, personified by Sheikh ul-Islam Paşazade and the Caucasus Muslim Board. If recent sociological evidence is to be believed, only 8.8 percent of those surveyed considered the Sheikh ul-Islam to be a religious leader – or at least a religious leader they personally want to associate with. Instead, he is rather perceived as an official of the regime and an oligarch with considerable interests in real estate and the import of food and consumer goods, among others. Paşazade’s legitimacy crisis allegedly goes back to his reported KGB links in the Soviet period and to the weak leadership and indecisiveness that both he and the board showed during the Karabakh war, which remains a major element of national consciousness.

In some sectors of society the crisis of both traditional Azerbaijani Shi'ism and state Islam feeds a quest and demand for alternative channels of Islamic information and education. This is part of the space in which the likes of Mustafaoğlu and his followers and activists work. To conclude, Menevi Saflig Devet and similar associations are no mass movements and they know this. Nonetheless, they are among some of the most outspoken religious actors in Azerbaijan and certainly have an impact in the formation and evolution of public opinion. Through the use of various strategies and networks, some created by the current phase of globalization, including the arrival in the country of actors from global civil society and others by rehabilitated tradition, they have positioned themselves in an increasingly fluid and contested religious space in which a practising population segment can be found. In a 1988 essay Hikmet Hajizade wrote that religion in Azerbaijan is an issue of minorities. At that time, when the legacy of both Soviet socialism and the secular nationalist opposition were much more prevalent than today, this was certainly the case. And if one focuses on *active* religiosity, it still is. Yet it will not necessarily stay this way, as both national identity and the definition of society's position in the global sphere will widen the space for a religious identification that is part of both traditional ethno-national identity and a wider confessional sphere, the Muslim Ummah. And while the Islamic activists who we examined in this article are definitely niche movements, the issues that they address and place on the mental map are not.