

Georgia: Iranian Missionary Work Questioned

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Religious groups from Iran are unsettling members of Georgia's ethnic Azeri minority.

They come ostensibly to teach the Persian language and Islam. Goodwill workers from the Islamic Republic of Iran have been arriving in the predominantly ethnic Azeri region of Kvemo Kartli in southeastern Georgia and the capital Tbilisi in order to instruct and reacquaint their co-religionists with the ways of the Prophet Muhammed. But some see danger in their efforts.

Around 300,000 Azeris live in Georgia - the largest ethnic minority in a country of some five million. The majority live in Kvemo Kartli, nestled against the Azerbaijani border. Like their ethnic brothers in neighbouring Azerbaijan, and northern Iran - most adhere to the Shia version of Islam. After 70 years of communism, however, many in Georgia and Azerbaijan are only vaguely familiar with the tenets of the faith.

But many locals are not pleased with the work of the Iranian missionaries - who are mostly in fact ethnic Azeris themselves - since Azeris in the former Soviet Union tend to be more tolerant in their religious outlook.

Many view the Iranians' work as a form of propaganda for the Islamic Republic. Others are wary of the fundamentalist leanings of their teachings, which make a strong distinction between the Shia and Sunni interpretations of Islam.

Some Azeris fear that the missionaries' efforts will lead to divisions and conflict within their community.

As some locals recall, the Iranians began to arrive in Georgia approximately seven to eight years ago. Their activities focused primarily on promoting Shia religious customs and holidays, opening religious centres and schools (or madrassas), assisting local students in further studies in Iran and financing a number of religious newspapers and magazines.

Within the last few years, three Iranian organisations have opened offices in Georgia - Ahl ul-Bayt, Alul Bayt and Ali Hikmet.

Rasim Mamedov, director of the Georgian office of Ah ul-Bayt, says that his organisation observes Shia holidays and provides children with free lessons in English, Georgian and religion.

It has also published a free magazine - with the name of its organisation as its title - in Marneuli, the Kvemo Kartli regional centre, for more than two years. The publication has a circulation of 2,000 and appears monthly. And, according to its editor Nizami Mamedzade, its content is "scientific, religious and informative".

"We publish it on a goodwill basis, and send it to all regions of Georgia, as well as the city of Ganja in Azerbaijan," said Mamedzade.

But many see such activities as less than benign, and fear their influence on the community at large. Alhan Binnatoglu, an ethnic Azeri academic, poet and translator, believes such organisations are hiding their

political intentions under the cover of their acts of charity.

“Their main goal is to spread Iran’s policies among Muslims here,” he claimed. “In fact they accept only Shia, and view representatives of other movements as enemies.”

Binnatoglu points to the fact that recently in Marneuli, Iranian organisations marked the anniversary of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s death, though Binnatoglu considers him a figure of political significance for Iran but not for local Azeris. He also criticises publications such as the Ah ul-Bayt magazine, which he says promotes “Shia ideology”.

The Iranians’ efforts have possibly begun to bear fruit. One sees more and more often on the streets of Marneuli women dressed in Iranian-style head coverings.

A number of observers believe that Georgia’s Azeri community is changing before their eyes, overturning decades and even centuries of religious and cultural tolerance. Alibala Askarov, director of the Marneuli non-government organisation Geirat (Honour), says that Kvemo Kartli traditionally had one religion – one of “mutual understanding”.

“We never divided ourselves into Sunnis and Shias, and always went to each others’ weddings and funerals,” he said. “It is too bad that all this is changing, and that some people have appeared who are following their own political and ideological interests.”

Ultimately, some fear such teachings will lead to a split and conflict within Georgia’s Muslim community. “I think that [Iranian-financed organisations] create a great problem for Georgian Azeris, since Iranian influence draws a severe distinction between Sunnis and Shias,” said political analyst Ghia Nodia of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development.

Indeed, there are suggestions that a split is already occurring. Some Azeris now make a distinction between the two Islamic trends, and speak of Sunni and Shia villages. Others forbid their children from marrying outside their branch of the faith. In the teahouses at night, one can hear the men arguing over the finer points of religious doctrine.

Faig Nabiev, director of the Alul Bayt organisation, however, denies that any of the Iranian groups are fomenting religious division. He says that their main goal is to educate the public. They also plan to hold a pan-Muslim congress bringing together Sunnis and Shias.

But this reporter, a 7th grade student in the ethnic Azeri region of Gardabani, was witness to the Iranians’ work. The missionaries regularly came to my school, circulated religious leaflets and speaking to students, explaining that Shia should stick together “like a fist”.

Ultimately, observers such as Nodia see a political danger for Georgia itself. This, he points out, is a western-oriented country with aspirations to join NATO and with troops serving with Coalition forces in Iraq. Traditionally, Iran has never looked well on such countries.

“This is a difficult and delicate problem, and Georgia should deal with it carefully,” said Nodia. “As it is western-orientated, Georgia cannot prohibit the activities of such organisations. But there should be some sort of confirmation that their work does not in any way contradict national interests.”

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