

Modus Vivendi: Jewish Minority Within Muslim Majority

Tural Ahmadov*

The spearheaded ambivalences towards Jews have prevailed largely across the world. However, not all communities globally extended the same attitude. Of the strikingly clear-cut example is the Jewish community of Azerbaijan, which comprises of two distinct groups: Mountain Jews and Ashkenazi Jews. Mountain Jews or Judeo-tat illustrates an outstanding example where Jews and Muslims coexist peacefully, contrary to the conventional wisdom throughout the world. Notwithstanding distinct culture and traditions, Mountain Jews have settled down in Azerbaijan more than two thousand years ago and collaboratively enjoy their life with their predominant Muslims neighbours.

The underlying objective of this paper is to look into the historical Muslim-Jewish bond from a varying angle, and argue that, unlike the Western world, Turkic speaking Azerbaijan is and has been a safe haven for Jews regardless of religious and linguistic distinction. Lack of consistent anti-Semitic views, sentiments in this part of the world and utterance of community and religious leaders serve as a vindication that Jews get along well with their Muslim brothers and sisters. The research is largely based on academic and non-academic resources, through which previous findings are carefully examined, and surveys and interviews are held to better underpin the issue under consideration.

Introduction

Azerbaijan, a predominantly Muslim country, enjoys close relations with its Jewish minority. The coexistence has a long root and derives from the fact that the Mountain Jewish community, unlike other Jewish communities worldwide, has resided in Azerbaijan for more than two thousand years. The length of residence is long enough, thereby the community members have partially undergone an acculturation and assimilation process in Azerbaijani society. Inter-marriage has also played a significant role in fostering coexistence. Notwithstanding, the Mountain Jewish community has always adhered to its unique culture and identity.

* Instructor at Azerbaijan State University of Economics, Bakü/AZERBAIJAN, tahmadov@syr.edu

The methods that I have addressed in writing this paper are mainly based a) on the analysis of numerous aspects of Jewish life in Azerbaijani society, b) on the review of perception of Israelis and Azerbaijanis on anti-Semitism and the ultimate analysis of the existence of this phenomenon in Azerbaijani society, and eventually c) on the interviews that were carried out by myself in Baku and Jerusalem.

I divided my paper into three chapters where I endeavour to cover three basic issues vis-à-vis this topic. Under the chapter “Minority within Majority: Jewish Identity in Azerbaijan”, I will try to succinctly describe the Jewish life in Azerbaijan through attaching emphasis on history, identity and inter-marriage. In the second chapter, which is titled “Anti-Semitism: there are Jews but not anti-Semitism?”, I will primarily try to describe concisely the ambiguities of definition of anti-Semitism and the Jewish/Israeli perception of anti-Semitism. Thus, I will provide the views of the leaders and members of the Jewish community as well as the remarks of Azerbaijani leaders on Jews. Furthermore, the results of global report on anti-Semitism and interviews that were taken in Azerbaijan will be provided as well. In the last chapter “the Jews and Azerbaijanis: model of coexistence” I will endeavour to spell out the phenomenon of coexistence of Azerbaijanis who are predominantly Muslims and Jews who are Jewish by religion. Eventually, I will provide my findings on what basis Azerbaijanis are not inflicted with anti-Semitic sentiments and why Azerbaijan is still a safe haven for national minorities and the Jews alike.

Minority Within Majority: Jewish Identify in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijani Muslims do not conceive Mountain Jews and Ashkenazim in the same way. They regard the former culturally similar to them and the latter as an affiliation to Russian culture. The rationale lies in the fact that Ashkenazim have settled in Azerbaijan rather late and have their Russian background.

One of the critical components is linguistics. Mountain Jews have good command of Azerbaijani and this is one of the reasons why they are so close to Muslim Azerbaijanis, while most Ashkenazim cannot speak Azerbaijani or Judeo-Tat, but Russian. The Judeo-Tat language of Mountain Jews is largely used in the northern part of Azerbaijan, where Jews live in compact, while Jews who live in the capital and other big cities, such as Sumgait and Ganja, use Azerbaijani or Russian. The vocabulary of the Judeo-Tat language derives from Azerbaijani and Persian, with some Hebrew elements.

Throughout the Soviet period, Mountain Jews were forced to rid their language of its Hebrew elements. In 1928, the Soviets forced them to change the Tat language from its traditional Hebrew letters to the Latin alphabet, and, in 1938, the Tats were made to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet. Up until now, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, they are using the Cyrillic alphabet. Even *Kavkaz*, the newspaper of Caucasian Jews, is printed in the Cyrillic alphabet, partially in Judeo-Tat and partially in Russian.

Another reason for empathy is that in the Soviet period Mountain Jews suffered alongside with Azerbaijani Muslims under Russian occupation to impose Russian culture by uprooting their indigenous culture and shape a new citizen.

The style of clothing of Mountain Jews is one of the elements that makes it hard to distinguish Mountain Jews from Azerbaijani Muslims. There is a distinction in clothing style between those who live in the peripheries and those who live in the capital and other major cities. Mountain Jews adhere to religious principles and women wear modest dresses and headscarves as Muslim women do.

Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan have kept their Jewish traditions and customs, although their long period of settlement partially resulted in assimilation in Azerbaijani society and Muslim culture. There are many Jewish religious customs that the Mountain Jews do not follow, but always celebrate Shabbat, Pesach, Shavuot, and other holidays.

Inter-marriage has been common among Azerbaijanis and Jews of Azerbaijan. Inga Saffron backs the hypothesis that “In appearance, the Tats are indistinguishable from their Azeri neighbours ...”¹.

Anti-Semitism: there are Jews but not Anti-Semitism

Criteria for Defining the Phenomenon and their Ambiguities

“Who is anti-Semite?” questions Shlomit Levy “is of course a problem which needs special research ... It is our assumption that the standard view is that anti-Semites are people who have a hostile attitude to Jews as Jews.”² Following the discussion by Shlomit Levy on anti-Semitism³, the criteria in defining anti-Semitism today

1 Inga Saffron, *The Mountain Jews of Guba*, The Philadelphia Inquirer, July 21, 1997, p. 1.

2 Shlomit Levy, *Israeli Perceptions of Anti-Semitism*, The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996, p. 22-23.

3 *Ibid.*

are (a) statistics on violence in a specific country, (b) public opinion surveys, and (c) political groups' attitude toward a Jewish minority. Taking them into account we can definitely conclude that there is no anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan. By and large, Azerbaijani Jewish communities - the Mountain Jews and Ashkenazi Jews - share this view. The underlying explanation for the lack of anti-Semitism is the long period of Jewish life, the partial assimilation and intermarriages.

A report on global anti-Semitism in 2005 assessed the situation of the Jewish community in Azerbaijan as follows:

Cases of prejudice and discrimination against the Jews in the country were very limited, and in the few instances of anti-Semitic activity the government has been quick to respond. There was only one reported incident during the period covered by this report. In April, the Lubavitch community received an anonymous letter containing threats during the observance of Passover. The police and military responded by blocking and securing Jewish places of worship to ensure the peaceful observance of the Passover holiday. The subsequent investigation revealed that a member of a small radical Islamic group wrote the letter, resulting in his conviction and imprisonment⁴.

The peaceful coexistence of the Azerbaijan Muslim majority and Jewish minority derives from Azerbaijanis' positive attitudes to Jews and Jewish devotion to Azerbaijani land and culture.

An Odd Phenomenon: By Jews Against Jews

Interestingly enough, there is "a self-blame phenomenon" among Israeli Jews with regard to anti-Semitism. A research, based on six possible factors in the development of anti-Semitism, two of which are related to the traits of Jews and the policy of the State of Israel, conducted in 1985 and 1993 reveals that "43 percent (of Israeli Jews) think that the traits or behaviour of Jews contribute to anti-Semitism, and just 29 percent think that this applies to the policy of the State of Israel."⁵

Jews altogether share three completely different views with regard to the responsibility on the escalation of anti-Semitic sentiments around the globe.

4 US State Department, Report on Global Anti-Semitism, January 5, 2005, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/40258.htm>

5 Shlomit Levy, *Israeli Perceptions of Anti-Semitism*, The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996, pp. 8-9.

1. Self-blame
 - (a) Behavioural trait - More than half of Israeli Jews blame Jews for enhancing anti-Semitic sentiments;
 - (b) Policy of the State of Israel - Israeli Jews consider that Israeli policy contributes to fanning of anti-Semitism.
2. Jews blame Jews? - Ultra orthodox Jews do not recognize the State of Israel and argue that Zionism contradicts Judaism
3. Blaming others - Jews blame Gentile for escalation of anti-Semitic sentiments.

Ambiguities in the Definition

The criteria that today define anti-Semitism and are, in fact, the sole measurement lack or vaguely bound some issues involved. As to these criteria, it is baffling to measure anti-Semitism is and what its boundaries are. Apart from that anti-Zionism is also associated with anti-Semitism. As to Ettinger, “no distinction should be made between the hatred of Jews as expressed in the past - whether the form grounded in Christianity or the racial anti-Semitism which reached its climax in Nazi Germany - and anti-Zionist or anti-Israeli expressions occurring nowadays ...”⁶.

An opinion poll that was carried out among Israeli Jews vis-à-vis the “assessment that expressions against Israel and against Zionism are anti-Semitic” indicates that 22 percent of respondents agree that “in almost all cases” expressions against Israel and Zionism are anti-Semitic. Whereas, 35 percent consider that “in most cases” expressions against Israel and Zionism are anti-Semitic. Moreover, 28 percent hold a view that “in only a few cases” expressions against Israel and Zionism are anti-Semitic as opposed to 14 percent who think that they are tantamount to all. Nevertheless, I will not examine this issue in depth as it goes beyond the scope of my paper.

Jews and Azerbaijanis: Model of Coexistence

An article under the title “Azerbaijan’s Jewish Enclave”⁷ highlights some important facts on the Jewish minority in Azerbaijan and stresses the long coexistence and harmonious relationship between Azerbaijani Muslims and Jews. The article

6 Shlomit Levy, *Israeli Perceptions of Anti-Semitism*, The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996, p. 25.

7 The Institute of War and Peace Reporting, *Azerbaijan’s Jewish Enclave*, 26 September, 2006, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azerbaijans-jewish-enclave>

opens with the following introduction: “Mountain Jews live harmoniously with their Muslim neighbours in the north of the country.” This sentence is followed by a statement made by Nisim Nisimov, head of the municipal administration in the village of Krasnaya Slaboda (Red Settlement): “Krasnaya Slaboda is the safest place for the Jews at the moment.” The article provides *inter alia* a clear example of Jewish devotion to Azerbaijan: “Azerbaijani Jews are proud of their son, Albert Agaronov, a tank driver who sacrificed his life in 1992 in the war over the Upper Karabakh during the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia”.

The article also quotes Lazar, one of the Jewish residents: “If a new war to free Karabakh begins tomorrow, I am sure all the young men from Krasnaya Slaboda⁸ will stand up and fight.” Significantly, as Lazar mentions further, no one is keen to go and defend Israel while it is under attack. He explains: “Yes, we are Jews, and when blood is being spilled in Israel, we feel pain for our brothers. But we are citizens of Azerbaijan and our homeland is here. We should defend our homeland, Azerbaijan”⁹.

According to Gennady Zelmanovich, head of the Ashkenazi Jewish community of Azerbaijan, “there have never been any problems whatsoever for Jews in Azerbaijan. Even in Soviet times, we did not have many of the restrictions Jews in other republics had,” referring to the boarder religious freedom and other rights that local Jews have long enjoyed.

One of my interviewees is Yusifov Yuro, who was born in Oguz, northern part of Azerbaijan in 1940 and is living in Baku although all his siblings reside overseas. He flatly argues that “there have never been anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan.” He reiterates: “Never!” He went on saying: “One of my brothers is in New York, another in Berlin and others, a brother and a sister, are in Israel. All left not because of having anti-Semitic feeling against them, but due to economic challenges. ” Then he added: “but I will not leave this place because I enjoy being here, and I do not love it less than you do (looking at my face)”.

Moshe Bekker, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Ashkenazim Jewish Community in Azerbaijan, concludes his article in “Jews in Azerbaijan: Past and Future” as follows:

8 “Krasnaya Slobada” (Red Settlement) was named during the Soviet period, but previously it was called “Evreyskaya Slobada”, which literally means “Jewish Settlement”.

9 The Institute of War and Peace Reporting, *Azerbaijan's Jewish Enclave*, 26 September, 2006, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azerbaijans-jewish-enclave>

I would like to conclude by saying that the Jewish immigration from Azerbaijan causes a lot of sadness among Azerbaijanis. Many of the immigrants go away unwillingly, driven by necessity. They never forget their home country and are trying to help it. Recently, there were several cases of an opposite movement. This called to life a new law on citizenship that took into account the recent developments. *Azerbaijan has always been and remains a country that does not know anti-Semitism and racial discrimination*¹⁰.

Elshad Mahmudlu, Lecturer at Islamic History and Religious Studies Department at Baku State University, argues that “The conflict between Jews and Muslims has nothing to do with the conflict between Jews and Arabs. The conflict between the Jews and Muslims is based on a religious factor as Islam considers Judaism distorted, but does not point to any hostility. However, the conflict between the Jews and the Arabs is entirely based on the territorial issue”.

It should be stressed that the Azerbaijani Muslim majority has never been radical or fundamental but has normally accepted the existence of different minorities, such as Jews, and has shown esteem for their religious belief. They believe that religious affiliation is not above the Azerbaijani identity, but is a part of it.

Survey Conducted at Israel and the Middle East Studies Program and at other Regional Studies Programs of Azerbaijan University of Languages

In the following section, I will focus on the role of education in shaping perceptions amongst Azerbaijani students at the Regional Studies Department of Azerbaijan University of Languages.

20.6 percent of respondents of Israel and the Middle East Studies program answered that Arabs are to be blamed for the eruption and duration of the conflict, while exactly the same number of respondents replied that Jews are to be blamed in this regard. As far as the respondent of other Regional Studies program is concerned, merely 6 percent of them blame Arabs for the conflict, while 58.4 percent blame Jews for the protracted conflict. Interestingly enough, 58.6 percent of the respondents of Israel and the Middle East Studies program blame both parties for the conflict eruption and duration, whereas 35.3 percent of students of other Regional Studies program blame both parties respectively.

10 Moshe Bekker, Jews in Azerbaijan: Past and Future, Central Asia and Caucasus Journal, No. 2, 2000, p. 193.

To the question how important Jerusalem is, only 13.8 percent of Israel and the Middle East Studies program responded that Palestinians should not concede Jerusalem to Israel either partially or wholly, whereas 60 percent of the students of other Regional Studies responded accordingly. 24.1 percent of the respondents of Israel and the Middle East Studies program think that Israel should not give up a single part of Jerusalem to Palestinians, while only 9.2 percent of the respondents of other Regional Studies responded respectively. Accordingly, 62 percent of the students of Israel and the Middle East Studies hold the view that Jerusalem can be divided as a shared capital, whereas only 26.1 percent of the students of other Regional Studies subscribed to this point of view.

As far as the Azerbaijani government position vis-à-vis the Israel-Palestinian conflict is concerned, 17.2 percent of the respondents of Israel and the Middle East Studies program consider that Azerbaijani government should support Palestinians because “we are Muslims” contrary to 27.6 percent of respondents of another Regional Studies program. However, 10.3 percent of respondents assert that Azerbaijani government, on the contrary, should back the Israeli position as opposed to 4.6 percent of respondents of another Regional Studies program. Most of the respondents, 72.4 percent, however, emphasized that although the vast majority of Azerbaijanis follow Islam, the Azerbaijani government should take a neutral stance.

As can be seen, there is a distinct difference in perception of the undergraduate students of Israel and the Middle East Studies and of the students of other Regional Studies, which can be explained through education.

Analysis

By and large, world Jewry perceive Azerbaijanis as a way they perceive Arabs owing to religious factor. This perception is the ultimate example of lack of knowledge on Azerbaijani society. Therefore, once they hear about Azerbaijan as a safe haven for Jews, they become overwhelmingly baffled.

The analysis of Azerbaijani Jews’ historical background and present reality enabled me to sum up my findings on why Azerbaijanis are not afflicted with anti - Semitic sentiments.

First and foremost, due to the long residence in Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani Jews have undergone a process of assimilation, including intermarriage with Azerbaijani Muslims. Despite the fact that most Azerbaijanis are Shi’ite Muslims - allegedly

radical religious people - they are not militant. Religion has never been above their Azerbaijani identity, but rather it has been a part of it. In addition, Judaism is a part of Jewishness in Azerbaijan, but with a few exceptions, Azerbaijani Jews are not religious but traditional. The existence of different national minorities in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani Muslims' hospitable attitudes towards them is a clear-cut illustration of multiculturalism. Jewish devotion to the Azerbaijani nation and to Azerbaijani culture has gained them esteem among Azerbaijani Muslims. Last but not least, Azerbaijani government protects national minorities, including Jews. These are the underlying reasons on what grounds anti-Semitism is not an overt in Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

It appears that the Azerbaijani public perceptions are not only shaped by media coverage but also by education, which is likely to be more enduring. At least, our survey designates that the perception of the undergraduate students of Israel and the Middle East Studies is more balanced than that of the undergraduate students of other regional studies. This is possibly due to the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and history are well covered in the curriculum of Israel and the Middle East Studies program.

The protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs has been a matter for discussion in the Azerbaijani public and media. Public attitudes and perceptions vary, owing to the diversity of the Azerbaijani society. Overall, it is readily visible that public support is in favour of the Palestinians, but not always against Israel.

The media is very careful in putting events into words and therefore plays an informative role with regard to the conflict rather than an analytical one. Yet, whatever the public and the media say does not necessarily represent the official standing. The government is discreet in issuing any statement. If it does, it carefully picks words and avoids articulating any word that is likely to disturb either of the parties involved. There were regular reports from the region and the media criticized Israel, but the government remained uninvolved.

References

Inga Saffron, *The Mountain Jews of Guba*, The Philadelphia Inquirer, July 21, 1997.

Moshe Bekker, Jews in Azerbaijan: Past and Future, Central Asia and Caucasus Journal, No. 2, 2000.

Shlomit Levy, *Israeli Perceptions of Anti-Semitism*, The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996.

The Institute of War and Peace Reporting, *Azerbaijan's Jewish Enclave*, 26 September, 2006, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azerbaijans-jewish-enclave>

US State Department, Report on Global Anti-Semitism, January 5, 2005, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/40258.htm>

Survey

The survey has been extensively conducted amongst the undergraduate students of Israel and Middle Eastern Studies program and other Regional Studies program at Azerbaijan University of Languages.

Interviewees

Semyon Ihilov, Chair of Religious Community of Jews in Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan

Rafi Izraelov, PhD student at Tel Aviv University, Israel

Yuro Yusifov, businessperson, Azerbaijan

Elshad Mahmudlu, Lecturer at Islamic History and Religious Studies Department, Baku State University.