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Muslim-Baha'i Relations in the Southern Caucasus at the End of the 19th and Beginning of the 20th Centuries

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Abstract

This article examines the attitudes of the South Caucasian Muslims toward the Baha'i communities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, focusing on the Nukha and Javat districts, within the broader framework of Tsarist Russia's geopolitical and geostrategic concerns—*vis-a-vis* the Shi'a majority and the Ottoman adversary—the article shows how local administrations of Elizavetopol and Baku provinces adopted an informal policy toward the Baha'is, which fostered a climate of impunity for anti-Baha'i harassment. Drawing on archival documents and oral histories, and by comparing the distinct experiences of the Baha'i communities in Nukha and Javat, the study further demonstrates how individual Baha'i leaders—through religious authority, social influence, or strategic alliances—were nonetheless able to resist persecution and, in some cases, improve Muslim—Baha'i relations. The findings underscore that, despite adverse conditions, Baha'i communities in the South Caucasus not only survived but at times thrived.

Keywords

Baha'is – South Caucasus – Nukha – Javat – Tsarist Russia – Shi'a Muslims – Ottoman Empire

1 Introduction

The existing literature on the attitude of the Muslim population in Tsarist Russia towards the Baha'i minority therein is, to a large extent, still highly under-researched. There are in existence few general studies about Baha'is in Tsarist Russia or in specific regions and locations therein (see, for example, Momen 1991: 278–305; Hassall 1993: 41–80; Shahvar 2011: 1/38–47; Rafati 2013: 460–461), but further research is still wanting. The same is relevant to the Baha'is of the Southern Caucasus,¹ including the districts of Nukha and Javat that are the focus of this article.

In the context of the attitude of the Muslim population towards the Baha'i minority over the same period, it is important to consider also the attitude of the Russian authorities to the Baha'is and their faith. Prominent Russian scholars of the Baha'i faith regarded it as a religion distinct from Islam, a position which found support among the political and military circles and local authorities in Russia as well (Shahvar 2011: 17; idem 2014: 5). However, the question is whether this was also the case in Southern Caucasus in general and in Nukha and Javat in particular? And if not, then why? These and other questions will be dealt with later.

Nukha (today Sheki) was the northernmost district of Russia's Elizavetopol province (*gubernia*). During most of the 1890s, the governor of that province was Alexander Nakashidze,² who had adopted a policy of not intervening in inter-Muslim conflicts, especially between the Orthodox Muslim religious leadership and the various Islamic popular sects. Since he regarded the Baha'i faith as an Islamic sect, he did not intervene in the Muslim-Baha'i tensions, nor in harms done by the majority-Shi'a Muslim population towards the Baha'is. Nakashidze's approach was contrary to Russia's official approach, at least since 1890, which not only regarded the Baha'i faith as distinct from Islam but also protected the Baha'is.³ My preliminary assumption is that Nakashidze's unofficial approach had a negative impact on the fate of the Baha'i community of Nukha. In addition, it seems that his approach also spilled over into neighboring provinces and had been adopted by their governors. I will show this through

1 There are few studies in existence about Southern-Caucasus Bahais, but these are either general outlines or focus more on the Soviet rather than Tsarist period of Russian rule. See, for example, Melikova 2007: 93–100; Balci/Jafarov 2007; Shahvar 2011: 38–45.

2 Alexander Nakashidze (1837–1905), Duke of Gori (now in Georgia) was a general in the Russian army and the governor of the Elizavetopol province from 1880 till 1897.

3 This official Russian approach was adopted following the murder of Haji Muhammad Riza Isfahani on 8 September 1889 in Ashgabat, following which a Russian military tribunal found their Shi'i Muslim murderers guilty, sentencing them to death; see Shahvar 2011: 22–24.

a comparative study of two different localities—Javat (in Baku province) and Nukha (in Elizavetopol province)—during the 1890s and early 1900s. During this period, both localities were two small districts where Baha'i communities existed and Baha'is lived under generally similar circumstances, namely in two neighboring provinces in Southern Caucasus, and among a majority Shi'a Muslim population. Such similarities in the living condition of these two Baha'i communities makes the comparative study possible and presents the Russian local authorities' attitude toward the local Muslims and its impact on the relations between the local Muslims and Baha'i. However, as I will later show, Muslim-Baha'i relations did not depend entirely on the local Russian authorities or the Muslim population, and the Baha'is had also some role to play in affecting them.

It seems that in Southern Caucasus the practice of regarding the Baha'is as an Islamic sect, seems to have been continued even up to the first decade of the twentieth century. For example, even as late as 1909, when the Baha'is of Baku city wanted to establish the 'Ruhanie'—the local Baha'i Spiritual Assembly in that city—they asked the Baku authorities to approve its statute, as the regulations demanded. To deal with that request, in October 1909 the Baku authorities opened a special file titled "About the request ... to approve the statute of 'Ruhanie'—the Baha'i Muslim organization of Baku".⁴ This is a clear indication that the Baha'is, even as late as 1909, were still regarded by the highest Russian local authorities in Southern Caucasus as Muslims. Thus, I endeavor to clarify the following questions: What happened to the Baha'i communities in Southern Caucasus that were affected by such an attitude? Did they cease to exist, or did they survive? And if they survived, were they completely powerless against their Muslim neighbors' harassment, or were they able to stand firm and even to regulate or normalize their relations with them? What evidence is there to support this and what kind of conclusions could be reached? Was there a difference between the attitude of the Muslims towards the Baha'is in Nukha than those in Javat? And if so, what were the causes and circumstances of such a difference?

The answers to these and previous questions will be given within the theoretical context of 'dependence-patronage relations', namely between the Russian authorities at the Elizavetopol and Baku provinces and their Muslim subjects (under which those authorities included the Baha'is as well). The time

4 See the original cover page of the file from 27 October 1909, titled "About the request ... to approve the statute of 'Ruhanie'—the Baha'i Muslim organization of Baku" [Po xodotaystvu ... ob utverzhenii ustava Bexaistkogo Bakinskogo musul'manskogo obščestva ...], *National Historical Archive of the Republic Azerbaijan* (hereafter: NHARA)/45/2/127.

span would be the 1890s and 1900s, while the historical and geographical frameworks were characterized by the tense Russo-Ottoman geopolitical and geostrategic struggle in general and in Southern Caucasus in particular.

2 Background

The South Caucasus region gradually moved from Iranian to Russian rule by virtue of the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchai (1828). On the other hand, with the growing Russo-Ottoman tension, the Ottomans began to invest greater efforts in allying the Muslims of the Caucasus to their own side and against Russia. For that end, the Ottomans first employed the pan-Islamic ideology, aiming to unite all Muslims behind the caliph, namely the Ottoman sultan. While this Ottoman attempt managed to score some success in the mostly Sunni-populated Northern Caucasus,⁵ it failed in the mostly Shi'a-populated Southern Caucasus, where the idea that the Ottoman sultan was a caliph was not part of the Shi'ite tradition. However, the Ottomans did not give up and later they turned to employ the pan-Turkish ideology in order to ally the Southern Caucasus' Muslims using their shared Turkish ethnicity. For that purpose they sent their agents into Southern Caucasus, propagating pro-Ottoman propaganda by various means (Lordkipanidze/Totadze 2010: 17–20). According to the assessment of the Russian authorities of the Caucasus this latter Ottoman effort gradually began to bear some fruit, especially after the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877–1878,⁶ when it gradually became clear that another round of Russo-Ottoman military clash would follow (which indeed happened with the outbreak of WWI).⁷

This Russo-Ottoman tension was felt by the Russian authorities of Southern Caucasus especially at the border region between Northern and Southern Caucasus, namely between the majority-Sunni and majority-Shi'a populated areas, particularly those of Elizavetopol province, the northernmost province of Southern Caucasus' region. The following documents show the extent and

5 Indeed, the Muslims of the Northern Caucasus did side with the Ottomans and the main expression of it was their joining, under the leadership of Shamil, on the side of the Ottomans during the Crimean War (1853–1856). This cooperation created a traumatic memory for the Russians (Kireev 2010: 378–379).

6 Nicolai Obruchev (Chief of the General Staff) to Rosen Ivan Tatishiev (Chief of the Caucasus Military District Staff, Deputy-head of the Caucasus Districts' Administration), December 12, 1896, no. 41, *NHARA/524/1/55*. See Sluglett/Yavuz (2011), for a detailed account of this war.

7 Col. Shiotkin (member of the staff of the Governor-General of the Caucasus) to Col. Martynov (Baku city's mayor), February 28, 1912, no. 475, *NHARA/45/1/222*.

depth of such tension, and as a result, Russian suspicion of Ottoman infiltration into Southern Caucasus. In 1895, Alexander Nakashidze, the governor of the Elizavetopol province, refused the request of Mamed Efendi Gadji (Haji) Jamil' Efendi-Zadeh—chairman of Elizavetopol province's Spiritual Majlis and the Qadi of the Nukha district—to employ a new teacher for a new modern school in Nukha. The refusal was despite of the fact that Efendi-Zadeh's had expressed his loyalty to Russia (and not to the Ottomans), and the teacher's declared desire to settle in Nukha permanently (namely not to return to Ottoman Empire).⁸ It seems that in spite of the clear gains for opening a modern, rather than an Islamic religious school (*maktab*), Nakashidze was unable to overcome his suspicions and thus refused to hire the teacher only because of his Ottoman origin.⁹

In another case from that period, the head of the Nukha district, namely a subordinate of Nakashidze, refused the request of four men who wanted to settle in Nukha and grow tobacco, simply because of their Ottoman origin. He not only sent them away, but recommended to Nakashidze that they should be followed, even though their presence in Russia had been sanctioned by the civil administration in Tiflis (Tbilisi).¹⁰

In yet another case, the local Russian authorities of the Nukha district were alarmed by the return to Nukha of a number of local residents who had previously immigrated to the Ottoman Empire.¹¹ On the background of the Russo-Ottoman tension, these and many other examples, required adopting a more flexible approach towards the local Muslim population in the framework of dependency-patronage relations, taking advantage of the fact that most of them are Muslims and its impact on 'a Muslims who did not support the Ottomans or rebelled against the Russians, unlike the Sunni majority of Northern Caucasus.¹²

8 Mamed Efendi-Zadeh to Nakashidze, October 4, 1895, no. 123 (secret, confidential), *NHARA/524/1/55*. The name of the teacher is not mentioned in the document.

9 Elizavetopol governor to Efendi-Zadeh, November 4, 1895, no. 4540 (confidential), *NHARA/524/1/55*.

10 Head of Nukha district to Nakashidze, May 21, 1895, no. 10 (confidential), *NHARA/524/1/55*.

11 Head of Nukha district to Nakashidze, May 21, 1895. See also: The Special Section of the General Caucasian Authority to Nakashidze, October 4, 1895, no. 9 (confidential), *NHARA/524/1/55*.

12 The question of how to subdue and control Muslim communities in the Caucasus tormented the Tsarist Russian administration to the final days of its existence; see Mostashari 2006: pt. 3, ch. 7.

3 Nakashidze's Approach to the Muslims of Elizavetopol Province and Its Resonance throughout Southern Caucasus

Our discussion delves on Nakashidze's approach, that was both unofficial and undeclared, and which down to the early 1890s seems to have been unknown to the Governor-General and Viceroy of the Caucasus (and to his staff) who administered all the Caucasus region from Tiflis. This is quite evident from the alarmed secret letter which was sent from the Governor-General's office to Nakashidze in 1892, in which the latter was accused of being unaware of the emergence of new sects, collectively defined as 'Zikr' (or Dhikr),¹³ in the Elizavetopol province, sects that could encourage Islamic fanaticism and thus endanger the peace of the Russian administration, hinting that Nakashidze might have 'fell asleep on his watch'.¹⁴

Nakashidze's reply refuted such accusations. He started by referring the Governor-General to one of his previous positions, from the 1860s, when Nakashidze served as the Governor-General's representative in dealing with Islamic religious currents and sects like those which now (November 1892) the Governor-General had noticed to exist in Elizavetopol province. Nakashidze explained that he had known the term 'Zikr' since the early 1860s and emphasized that its whole purpose and rituals—which at first believed to form a kind of Muslim fanaticism and fundamentalism harmful to Russian interests—turned out to be a ritual, performed only for the sole purpose of religious worship. He explained that the Orthodox Muslim religious leadership wished to concentrate all religious power in its own hands, the emergence of different sects divided and fragmented Muslim community's unity. As a result, these sects actually weakened the power of the Orthodox Muslim leadership and consequently made it more dependent on Russian authorities, thus serving Russian interests.¹⁵

According to the Orthodox Muslim leadership, the leaders of those sects testified themselves to the Muslim believers to be saints, while they were merely 'charlatans' who sought to deceive and exploit those believers, thus practically stealing the Orthodox Muslim leadership's main financial resource, namely the community of Muslim believers who accepted their spiritual lead-

13 'Zikr' (Arab., lit. meaning 'mentioning, reminding') refers to a repeated mention of the names of God, and it plays a central role in Sufi Islam.

14 Office of the Viceroy of the Caucasus to governor of Elizavetopol district, November 7, 1892, no. 492 (confidential), *NHARA/524/1/53*.

15 Elizavetopol district governor to the Viceroy of the Caucasus, November 30, 1892 (top secret), *NHARA/524/1/53*.

ership and supported them financially. This is why Nakashidze adopted a new approach towards the Muslim Orthodox leadership and community, by which the Russian authorities refrained from interfering in their affairs, and when necessary even protect them. This kind of approach also meant not interfering in Muslim harassment of Baha'is, who—as mentioned before—some of the Russian authorities regarded as a Muslim sect. Thus, as far as Muslim sects were concerned Nakashidze limited himself with surveillance only, being a measure intended only to ensure that no political activity took place within their walls. This *modus operandi* he adopted after he first encountered 'Zikr' and understood its meaning and purpose. It became a working mode for decades not only for him in Elizavetopol province, but it spilled over also to other provinces in Southern Caucasus, forming as a means for regulating Muslim religious-spiritual fanaticism, serving Russia's imperial interest.¹⁶ Such an approach allowed Nakashidze (and all those who adopted it) to be able to better control the Muslim population in Southern Caucasus, bring their Orthodox leadership closer to Russia and away from the Ottomans, and not interfering in Muslim harassment of the local Baha'is probably helped to bring them further closer to Russia. Gokchay (Goychay) district of Baku province forms one example for the adoption of Nakashidze's approach out of Elizavetopol province. In 1875 a complaint was filed by the Islamic Majlis in Baku city to the Russian authorities in Gokchay against a 'charlatan' who had settled there, impersonating himself as a Murid religious authority, and interpreting Islam "in a way that their minds could not tolerate", thus deceiving and misleading the Muslim believers. Baku's Islamic Majlis especially stressed that that charlatan's activity caused much damage to their own daily agenda, and to their economic and spiritual condition.¹⁷ In general, the Russian authorities tended to take upon themselves how to treat such charlatans, but such treatment had, of course, the added value of increasing the dependence of the Orthodox Muslim spiritual leadership on Russian rule. It should be noted that although the case discussed is from 1875 (and not the 1890s), its mention is very important as it indicates that such an approach had already been implemented at least a decade-and-a-half earlier.

Another example shows that the same approach was still being implemented in Gokchay in the 1890s. It also discussed a Murid 'charlatan' preacher, but this time the local Russian authorities did not wait for a complaint to be filed and removed that preacher immediately after they noticed his activ-

16 Elizavetopol province governor to the Viceroy of the Caucasus, November 30, 189.

17 Baku's Sunni Majlis to Head of Gokchai district, February 8, 1875, *NHARA*/524/1/7.

ity. This rapid handling of the case could indicate that such an approach had already become a *modus operandi* by then.¹⁸

4 The Baha'is in Southern Caucasus in Light of the Unofficial Approach

Having provided the context of the unofficial Russian authorities's approach in Southern Caucasus, their attitude towards the majority Shi'a-Muslim population and their religious leadership, and their definition of the Baha'is therein, a short background on the appearance of the Baha'is in Southern Caucasus is needed before moving to discuss Muslim-Baha'i relations therein as reflected in the districts of Nukha and Javat.

Research on the Baha'i faith and communities in Southern Caucasus during the Tsarist period is, to a large extent, still under-researched and relevant material quite scant. Thus, for the present research, it was necessary to conduct not only research trips to the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation to collect relevant sources, mostly of archival category, but also for conducting interviews with Baha'is and using the private archives and collections left by their previous generations. Those included current Baha'i leadership figures and even some descendants of the founders of the Baha'i communities in Nukha and Javat.

Ms. Marcela Jafarova—one of the three Baha'i figures who were interviewed—is today one of the elders of the Baha'i community of the city of Ganja (formerly Elizavetopol, the provincial capital of the Elizavetopol province). She was born in Ganja, but her mother (from the Ayyubov family) was born in Nukha and was one of those Baha'i families who immigrated from Nukha to Elizavetopol city. Jafarova's explanations helped to understand why the Baha'is in Nukha were more exposed to being harmed and harassed by the Muslims than the Baha'is in the city of Elizavetopol. According to Jafarova, it was because compared to Nukha, Elizavetopol city was much larger and geographically spread, with the Baha'is being scattered all over the capital and therefore less noticeable and prone to harassment. On the other hand, in Nukha (and Javat) they lived in a dense and concentrated location, thus being more noticeable and more frequently harassed.¹⁹ Evidence to the above is the fact that the

18 Head of Gokchay district to governor of Baku province, October 5, 1894, no. 215, *NHARA/524/1/55*. The document does not provide details about what the Russian authorities did to the Murid preacher.

19 Video-interview with Marcela Jafarova, December 19, 2022.

Baha'is (and other religious minority groups) in Elizavetopol city were (and still are) buried in Savisker cemetery.²⁰ Just as the presence of Baha'i graves, old and new, in that cemetery did (and does) not bother the Muslims very much, the same could be learned from their scattered presence throughout Elizavetopol city. It is not possible to say that in Elizavetopol city there were no harassment of Baha'is at all; what it is possible to say is that the Baha'is of Nukha, who lived there in a dense and specific area, were easily noticed and identified, and thus were more easily harassed, giving them more reason to immigrate to Elizavetopol city. The latter served as an immediate place of refuge, at least for those Baha'is from Nukha who did not want to immigrate to more distant places. However, over time, with their continued immigration to Elizavetopol, a concentrated Baha'i community began to form there as well, but this took place only few years before the establishment of the USSR (November 1922), years that are not part of our discussion in this article.²¹

Amir Khan Ayyubov—a representative of the Baha'i community that once existed in the Nukha district—was the second interviewee. He emphasized that Baha'i life in Nukha was so isolated that most of them had to marry their own relatives, although every effort was being done for such marriages to be between distant relatives as possible. In Nukha, the Baha'is were concentrated in a rather limited space and in what initially composed of a number of isolated houses near the Jaggal Deresi cemetery, an area which later came to be known as the Jaggal Makhalasi (Jaggal neighborhood), but among the locals was known as the Baha'i neighborhood.²²

The third interviewee, Salahaddin Ayyubov, elaborated in detail on the foundation of the Baha'i community in Nukha and Javat at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Salahaddin, the propagators of the Baha'i faith in the districts discussed here during the 1890s were mostly local merchants or itinerant preachers. They traveled back and forth to Iran, whether for business or religious purposes (such as visiting the Imam Riza's shrine in Mashhad) and thus, while being in Iran, became acquainted with the Baha'i religion. The Baha'i community in Nukha district was created in a similar fashion through one of the travels of his paternal grandfather—a local Shi'i merchant named Gussein (Hussein) Ayyubov (1875–1953)—to Mashhad, before turning twenty.²³ Gus-

20 During the field research in Azerbaijan, the Savisker cemetery was visited. Apart from the graves of Baha'is, there are also graves of Babis in this cemetery.

21 Video-interview with Marcela Jafarova, December 19, 2022.

22 Interview with Amir Khan Ayyubov, Sheki, October 23, 2022.

23 Phone interview with Salahaddin Ayyubov, July 7, 2022.

sein showed interest in getting to know the Baha'i faith, then converted to it, and finally became an enthusiastic propagator of it, first among his close family and later also among his distant relatives. According to Salahaddin, the main reason behind the absolute majority of the Baha'i community leaving Nukha unequivocally derived from the incessant harassment from the majority Shi'a population and the lack of Russian local authorities to protect them. By the end of the nineteenth century, this understanding led Gussein, whose family and relatives composed the majority among the Baha'is of Nukha, to plan and prepare their mass immigration from Nukha. The question was where to? As mentioned before, part of the Nukha Baha'i community preferred the nearby Elizavetopol city, but Gussein was more inclined towards Baku city. Although at that time the majority Shi'a population of Baku city was not sympathetic towards the Baha'is, yet compared to Nukha, it was still the lesser evil. Baku was already a large cosmopolitan city, which following the oil boom from the 1870s, it offered a wide range of employment opportunities, and where the Baha'is could have been able to live in a more assimilated way and alleviate their sufferings.²⁴

Salahaddin's maternal grandfather, Faraj Qasimov, was a member of the Javat's Baha'i community. Thus, Salahaddin provides important information on this community as well, making it possible to compare between the attitude of the Muslim majority towards the Baha'is in the two districts under discussion. According to Salahaddin, the Baha'i religion was first propagated in the Javat district of Elizavetopol province by Sadiq Bakuvi (Baku'i)—a Shi'i cleric who had converted to the Baha'i faith. His father was also a Shi'a cleric known as Akhund Bakuvi from Mardakian, then located some 35 km from Baku, but now part of the city. Sadiq propagated the Baha'i religion enthusiastically, an activity for which he was murdered in 1896, by the order of no other than his own father who could not bear his son's deeds and the vapors and complaints of the Shi'i clerics who served under him. The local Russian authorities, however, did not punish Sadiq's father or the murderers.²⁵

The testimony of Salahaddin is supported by correspondence between Russian officials. Although Vladimir Petrovich Rogge, the governor of Baku province at the time (1888–1899), formally ordered to investigate the murder case of Sadiq Bakuvi, there is no mention of the murderers nor his father being punished.²⁶ Furthermore, in 1901 the Baha'is of Baku city complained to the Baku

24 Phone interview with Salahaddin Ayyubov, July 7, 2022.

25 Video-interview with Salahaddin Ayyubov, September 29, 2022.

26 The assistant to the Head of the Civil Authority in the Caucasus to Evgenii Karlovich Biutsov (Russian Minister, Tehran) (Confidential), 3 February 1897, *AFPPE/194/528/2049*,

province's governor, against the harassments they had been suffering from the Muslim Shi'a, mentioning also Bakuvi's unresolved murder case, and asking for protection.²⁷ They seem to have sent a copy of their complaint to Tiflis, since the Baku governor's reply was not to the Baha'is, but to the Governor-General of the Caucasus. In his reply to the Governor-General, the Baku governor tried to present Bakuvi as a crook, accusing him of not being at all a man of faith, but one who used his skills in preaching the Baha'i faith to collect money for enriching himself and his patron in Ottoman Acre ('Abdul'Baha').²⁸

Such an approach towards the Baha'is by the Baku province authorities seems to have been in line with that of the authorities in Elizavetopol province, namely, not to intervene unnecessarily in inter-Muslim affairs. Thus, since the local Russian authorities regarded the Baha'is as a Muslim sect, they saw no reason to intervene in the murder of Sadiq Baku'vi, to arrest his murderers or his father, or to positively respond to their demand for protection. This approach was widely practiced in Elizavetopol province, and its expressions could also be seen in Baku and in Gokchay that bordered with Javat district.

However, it should be noted that the 'non-interference' approach implemented by the local Russian authorities in Southern Caucasus did not prevent the Baha'is themselves from striving to improve their relations with their Muslim neighbors. The Baha'is of Javat provide such an example. After the murder of Sadiq Bakuvi, the Baha'i cause was raised again in Javat district by Javad Qasimov who was known among the locals as 'the old man' or as Mashhadi Javad. Qasimov was highly respected among the local population mainly due to his honesty, righteousness and piety expressed in his frequent pilgrimage to Mashhad. Qasimov not only converted to the Baha'i faith, but managed, before the beginning of the twentieth century, to convert the members of his close family and distant relatives from Shi'a Islam to Baha'i faith. The most significant person among his extended family for our discussion is Faraj Qasimov (1883–1937). After Sadiq Bakuvi, the latter became a sort of second Baha'i leader in the Javat district and in fact he succeeded in improving the relationship between the local Muslims and Baha'is to some extent.²⁹

no. 108, 45–47. See also attached letter of Head of Baku province to the Office of the Head of the Civil Authority in the Caucasus, 17 December 1896, *Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire* (hereafter: *AFPRE*)/194/528/2049, no. 1594.

27 Petition of Babis [Bahais'] of Baku city to governor of Baku province, 23 January 1901, *AFPRE*/821/8/845, 3–4.

28 A. Rashmov (secretary to the governor of Baku province) to the Head of the Civil Authority in the Caucasus, 18 January 1902, *Georgian National Historical Archive*/12/7/2608, 11, 14–17.

29 Video-interview with Salahaddin Ayyubov, September 29, 2022.

The honesty and righteousness of Faraj Qasimov was to such an extent that the locals would flock to him so that he could serve as an arbitrator in various disputed issues. He was a Jewelry designer and a petty trader (mainly in what he designed), but he had the talent to express theological ideas in an impressive, eloquent and convincing manner. Soon, his interpretations of the many *surahs* of the *Qur'an* turned into wide public discourse. Thus, from late nineteenth century, the complaints of the local Muslims against the apostasy that the Baha'is were propagating among them, were gradually replaced, after the turn of the century, by Muslims demanding their Shi'a religious leaders to enter into theological polemics with Faraj Qasimov.³⁰ But given Qasimov's above-mentioned qualities and qualifications, those religious leaders preferred to refrain from that, and in fact it was only during the first half of the 1920s when, finally, the leader of the local Orthodox Shi'a spiritual community publicly confronted Qasimov. The result was that most of the audience accepted Qasimov's arguments over those of their own religious leader.³¹ On the following day, a large local crowd filled the house of Qasimov, asking him to explain more about the Baha'i religion. Thus, Qasimov became a key figure in the transformation of the Shi'a Muslim population in the Javat district, moving from having a hostile attitude towards the Baha'is to one of tolerance and even respect. An example from Faraj's own life expressed this reversal of Muslim attitude towards the Baha'is. Faraj married a girl from a Shi'a Muslim family. At the time of the wedding, he did not reveal him being a Bahai, but when his wife's parents found out, they stopped seeing their own daughter, regarding her as an apostate. All this changed after the above-mentioned polemic, when following Faraj's performance and popularity, his in-laws reconciled with their daughter and her Baha'i husband.³²

Faraj Qasimov was not the only Baha'i in Southern Caucasus who managed to improve the attitude of the Muslim population towards the Baha'is. Veisal (Faisal) Ayyubov (1892–1944) from Nukha was another case, although by different means than Qasimov's. Veisal's grandson, Amir-Khan Ayyubov (who was mentioned before), provides information about him. Veisal was a vigorous worker, with a strong and volatile character who, despite being a Baha'i, he managed to establish his status as a man of great power and influence in Nukha. He built his house in the middle of Nukha's central avenue, located in the heart of the city, among the Shi'ites, and not in the dense Baha'i neighbor-

30 Video-interview with Salahaddin Ayyubov, September 29, 2022.

31 The name of the local religious leader was not mentioned.

32 Video-interview with Salahaddin Ayyubov, September 29, 2022.

hood near the above-mentioned Jaggal cemetery. Veisal was very talented, with dizzying success in business (trading in flour) but also in music—as a soloist in musicals in Kislovodsk city's theater in Northern Caucasus, a city to which he travelled frequently due to his businesses. It was in Kislovodsk where he met his future wife (a Christian who converted to the Baha'i faith), a fact that makes Veissal quite unique in that his marriage was not intra-family, as it happened with most of his other Baha'is of Nukha.³³

According to Amir-Khan, Veisal also managed to forge connections with Nukha's criminal world, a fact that gave him additional power and influence, which, on various instances, he used to threaten the local population not to harm the Baha'is or interfere with their religious activities. One such instance was about a Baha'i collector from Palestine who was supposed to arrive at Nukha to collect the *Huquq-Allah* (God's Right/Share) from the local Baha'is. The local Shi'a religious leadership feared that his arrival might attract the local Muslim population to show interest in the Baha'i religion. They therefore conspired to kill the Baha'i collector, but having found about this conspiracy, Veisal, assisted by a Shi'a butcher shop-owner (whom Veisal knew from his connections with Nukha's crime world), acted together to prevent it. The two picked up the Baha'i collector before his arrival to Nukha, placed him sitting between them on an open carriage, and with drawn weapons, drove into Nukha, making two demonstrative rounds up and down Nukha's central avenue, sending threat signals to anyone who planned to harm the collector. When the collector finished his duty, he was returned in the same way to the point from which he was picked up.³⁴

5 Conclusion

The unofficial and undeclared approach which Nakashidze and other Russian authorities in Southern Caucasus, had adopted and implemented towards the majority Shi'a population therein, coupled with their view of the Baha'is as a Muslim sect, affected the Baha'is of Southern Caucasus gravely. This approach, which the Governor-General and Viceroy of the Caucasus and his staff in Tiflis seem to have been unaware of its existence till 1892, aimed at preserving and even deepening the rift and rivalry between the traditional Muslim Orthodox religious leaderships (Shi'a or Sunni) and those of the various Muslim popu-

33 Video-interview with Salahaddin Ayyubov, September 29, 2022.

34 Interview with Amir-Khan Ayyubov, Sheki, October 23, 2022.

lar sects, including the Baha'is. As a result, harassment of Baha'is, including killing, by Shi'a Muslim religious leadership and population could have been easily conducted, with the blind eye and approval of the local Russian authorities therein. This approach seems to have been crystallized out of the Russian necessity to check the attempts of their Ottoman enemy to win the hearts of the South Caucasian Muslims, after having succeeded in winning those of the Northern Caucasus Muslims. The unofficial approach of Nakshidze towards the local Muslim population and their religious leadership, which was adopted also by other Russian provincial authorities in Southern Caucasus, provided the following results: first, to check Ottoman attempts in winning over the Muslims of Southern Caucasus; second, to create a relationship of patronage-dependence between the Russian ruler and the local ruled Muslims; third, Russian non-interference in inter-Muslim affairs, which included also persecution of charlatan (i.e. non-Orthodox) preachers and harassment and even killing of Baha'is.

At the same time, the two majority Shi'a districts of Nukha and Javat present different modes of relationship between the Shi'a and the Baha'is. In both cases we have seen that the activities of local Baha'i personalities, could have not only prevented the harassment or decline of the Baha'i community, but even to have attracted more converts. In the case of Veisal Ayyubov, he was able not only to prevent the murder of the Baha'i collector, but to protect the local Baha'is in Nukha through his strength, power and connections. In the cases of Javad and Faraj Qasimov in Javat, this was done due to their honesty, purity and theological-polemical skills, which attracted more converts to the Baha'i faith. Such examples show that despite the harsh circumstances, such as lacking Russian protection and fierce hostility and harassment by the local Muslims, Baha'is were able to survive, defend themselves, and grow in number.

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