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AZERBAIJAN: Will the state protect Muslim scholar from Muslim death threats?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Baku-based Muslim scholar Nariman Gasimoglu has called on the Azerbaijani authorities to protect him in the wake of what he has told Forum 18 News Service were two death threats from Muslims over the past month, made because of his Islamic religious views. These threats were followed up by threats on Iranian-based Azeri-language television, which is widely available in southern parts of Azerbaijan. Gasimoglu told Forum 18 that he believes the police are unwilling to uncover the "whole network" of those he thinks may be behind the death threats. Speaking of his views on Islam, Gasimoglu said he believes that "this is not something traditional Muslims would like, but it's my right to propagate my own religious views." In 2003, an imam of a mosque not far from his home told worshippers on several occasions that a jihad should be declared against him. "Jihad in their interpretation unfortunately means fighting enemies by using weapons," Gasimoglu told Forum 18.

Baku-based Muslim scholar Nariman Gasimoglu has called on the Azerbaijani authorities to protect him, in the wake of what he says were two death threats from Muslims over the past month because of his Islamic religious views, followed up by threats on Azeri-language Iranian television, which is widely available in southern parts of Azerbaijan. "I believe the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations should take legal measures to protect people like me in this situation," Gasimoglu told Forum 18 News Service from the Azerbaijani capital on 28 March. "It's their responsibility to solicit the law enforcement bodies to ensure believers are not persecuted for expressing and practising their own religious views."

When Gasimoglu contacted Baku city police department to report the threats and to ask for police action against those threatening him, deputy chief Yashar Aliyev promised to take charge of the case and investigate. Forum 18 reached Aliyev's office by telephone on 28 March, but each time was told Aliyev is the only one handling the case and that he was out of the office.

However, after Forum 18 tried to reach Aliyev, the police of the city's Binagadi district summoned Gasimoglu to their office to help with their investigation. "They told me they have already summoned the person who threatened me from the phone I mentioned in my statement," Gasimoglu told Forum 18. "It seems they felt pressured to bring the case to an end." However, he believes the police are unwilling to uncover the "whole network" of those he reckons might be behind the death threats.

"The picture is not clear yet to what degree my life is at risk now," Gasimoglu told Forum 18, "but I take these threats seriously." He said he has been advised by friends to take precautions to avoid the "possible massacre that I might face these days".

Gasimoglu reported that on 12 March, as he was leaving the Space radio station in Baku after a broadcast on religious issues in the light of the Koran, two young men on the street blocked his path. "They demanded I stop expressing my own views on the Koran and particularly on the headscarf issue, which in their opinion were not in accord with commonly accepted traditional interpretations." Gasimoglu believes women should be free to wear or not wear a headscarf as they choose, but regards the issue as unimportant.

The two men told Gasimoglu they represented a group called Ahli-Beyt and that some group members were planning to kill him if he did not obey their demand. "I tried to explain to them that Islam in its essence has nothing to do with terror and moreover has great potential to stimulate reinterpretations to serve the values of human dignity, human rights and democracy," Gasimoglu reported of their hour-long conversation. He said the men were unconvinced and insisted that he stop expressing his views on Islam if he wanted to avoid being killed.

"I understood it as a warning that I had to take into account, so I decided to make this incident public, assuming this would help prevent them from any scenario they might carry out against me." After investigating the case, the Baku newspaper Azadliq published a front-page article on 18 March entitled "Nariman Gasimoglu as the target of fundamentalists" with his photo. The newspaper failed to elicit any response to the death threats from the Caucasian Muslim Board or the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, which disavowed any knowledge of the Ahli-Beyt organisation. Another newspaper, Yeni Musavat, also reported on the case.

"Unfortunately making the issue public did not work," Gasimoglu told Forum 18. He said that the same day, 18 March, he was leaving Space TV channel after finishing his regular Friday talk programme when he received an anonymous call on his mobile phone. "A man who spoke in a rather aggressive tone expressed his anger and told me I had to be murdered for my infidelity and he was going to carry this out," he reported. Forum 18 knows the number of the mobile phone that the call was reportedly made from, but has been requested not to publish it while the police investigation is underway.

On 20 March Iranian television channel Saher-2 told viewers of its Azeri-language news broadcast that Gasimoglu caused the anger of Muslims for his anti-Islamic propaganda. "Many believe it's the very Iranian network operating in Baku that fuels and infuses this terrorist mood into their followers, who are concerned about the influence my talks on TV or radio have on traditional and non-traditional believers," Gasimoglu told Forum 18.

Samed Bairamzade, head of the department for relations with religious bodies at the State Committee, said he had heard rumours of the threats to Gasimoglu. "But no-one has appealed to us at the committee," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 28 March. "If he had appealed to us, we would have given our opinion." He said he is aware of one Islamic group Ahli-Beyt, which sings traditional Islamic music, but says the group is not registered with the authorities so the state has no information about it.

Bairamzade insisted that as an ordinary citizen, Gasimoglu has "every right" to give his views on religious themes. "Everyone is free to express their views, so long as those views are not directed against the state," Bairamzade declared. "Every citizen of Azerbaijan has the right to appeal to the appropriate state agency about any threats, asking them to protect his or her rights. This should be to the police, the procurator's office or the court."

Over the past few years, Gasimoglu – who has translated the Koran into Azeri - has been explaining his views of his faith in the press, on television and in lectures. "I have always called on Muslims to give the consolidating preference to the Koran and to gradually stay away from sunna literature, as the latter is full of stories and interpretations which on the one hand appear to be at variance with the Koran and on the other could be seen as causing the violation of human rights and instigating intolerance," Gasimoglu told Forum 18. "I believe this is not something traditional Muslims would like, but it's my right to propagate my own religious views." Sunna literature is a collection of stories about the Prophet Mohammed's practices.

Defending Gasimoglu's right to propound his religious views is Eldar Zeynalov, the head of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan. "I know him as the pre-eminent scholar who always participates in public discussions on Islam," he told Forum 18 on 28 March. "He is not an enemy of Islam. The state must defend his right to propagate his views – this is normal in a civilised state."

However, Zeynalov complains of what he calls the "totalitarian approach to society" on the part of the current Azerbaijani regime and attempts to monopolise views on politics and religion. He also points to the role of neighbouring Iran. "They'd like to change the mind of local Muslims so that they change their statehood," he told Forum 18. "They're unhappy with the separation between Islam and the state in Azerbaijan and in neighbouring countries."

Gasimoglu is spokesperson on religious affairs for the opposition Popular Front party, but insists that what he calls his "religious enlightenment activity" is his own initiative. "Although this activity has been agreed from the start in the party as part of our concept on how to place Islam in Azerbaijan society, sometimes party colleagues are not happy about it, fearing the party may lose some electoral support from traditional believers."

He has faced some opposition in his religious work. In August 2003 local officials in the Gusar and other regions of Azerbaijan had prevented him giving lectures outlining his religious ideas to members of a women's organisation. Several times police arrived and ordered him to leave the local area.

Gasimoglu told Forum 18 that earlier in March he had learnt that back in 2003, Haji Mir Annagi, imam of Baku's Sultan Ali mosque not far from his home in central Baku, had told worshippers on several occasions that a jihad should be declared against him. "Jihad in their interpretation unfortunately means fighting enemies by using weapons," Gasimoglu told Forum 18.

On learning of the threats from the Sultan Ali mosque, Gasimoglu spoke with Imam Annagi, who disavowed any knowledge of the reported threats in 2003 and insisted he had nothing against him. "Haji Mir Annagi was not sincere trying to convince me he did not say anything like this," he told Forum 18.

Gasimoglu is also an advocate of religious freedom for all. (For his personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service "Religious freedom, the best counter to religious extremism", see F18News 10 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338).

Although the Azerbaijani government frequently warns of what it believes is the threat from radical Islam, especially from Iran, proof of such radicalism has been hard to find. In 1997 the Jeysullah (Army of Allah) group planned to blow up Baku's Hare Krishna temple, but few other incidents have been proven. Zeynalov of the Human Rights Centre is sceptical over government claims that five men who were sentenced in February for an alleged plot to attack the National Security Ministry in Baku were linked to the Al-Qaida terrorist movement led by Osama bin Laden.

At the same time, violence and threats of violence from police and security officers in recent years against a range of religious communities the authorities do not like have been well documented. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>

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