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Ziyad Amrahov*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6853-3311>

The History of the Qadi Office in the Irevan Region of Azerbaijan (Late Eighth–Early Twentieth Centuries)

Azərbaycan'ın İrevan Bölgəsində Kadılıq Kurumunun Tarihi (Geç VIII. Yüzyıldan Erken XX. Yüzyıla)

Abstract

This study investigates the emergence, institutional evolution, and historical functions of religious authorities and the office of qadi in the Irevan region, one of the historical regions of Azerbaijan. It draws upon archival documents and historical materials preserved in the State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Central Historical Archive of the National Archives of Georgia (Tbilisi), the State Archives of the Republic of Türkiye (Istanbul), and the archives of the Caucasus Muslims. These materials demonstrate that Muslim religious leaders in the Irevan region played a significant role not only in spiritual life but also in regulating legal relations and resolving social disputes in accordance with Sharia principles. During the Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods, separate qadis were responsible for civilian and military affairs, while higher judicial authorities supervised appointments and the administration of justice. In the Qaraqoyunlu and Aghqoyunlu states, qadis continued to perform both judicial and religious functions. With the establishment of the Safavid state in the early sixteenth century, religious administration acquired a stronger place within the broader structure of government. Although religious officials generally functioned under the authority of the ruler, qadis maintained a central position in provinces, districts, and urban centers. One of the principal administrative regions in which this institution remained active was Irevan, historically known as Chukhursad. By examining these developments across successive

*Doctor of Philosophy in History, Associate Professor, Department of Western Azerbaijan History, A.A. Bakikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Azerbaijan, z.amrahov@gmail.com

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political periods, the study reveals the continuity, adaptability, and institutional significance of the qadi office in the legal and social history of Azerbaijan.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, Irevan, qadi, Islam, clergy, justice*

Öz

Bu çalışma, Azerbaycan'ın tarihî bölgelerinden biri olan İrevan bölgesinde dinî kurumların ve kadılık makamının ortaya çıkışını, kurumsal gelişimini ve tarihsel işlevlerini incelemektedir. Araştırma, Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti Devlet Tarih Arşivi, Gürcistan Millî Arşinleri Merkez Tarih Arşivi (Tiflis), Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Devlet Arşinleri (İstanbul) ile Kafkasya Müslümanları arşivlerinde muhafaza edilen arşiv belgeleri ve tarihî materyallere dayanmaktadır. Bu kaynaklar, İrevan bölgesindeki Müslüman din adamlarının yalnızca manevî yaşamda değil, aynı zamanda hukukî ilişkilerin düzenlenmesinde ve toplumsal uyumsuzlukların şer'î esaslara göre çözümlenmesinde de önemli bir rol üstlendiklerini göstermektedir. Selçuklu ve İlhanlı dönemlerinde sivil ve askerî alanlarda ayrı kadılar görev yapmış, üst dereceli adli makamlar ise atamaları ve yargı düzenini denetlemiştir. Karakoyunlu ve Akkoyunlu devletlerinde kadılar hem hukukî hem de dinî görevlerini sürdürmüştür. Safevî Devleti'nin XVI. yüzyılın başlarında kurulmasıyla birlikte dinî idare, devlet yapısı içinde daha güçlü bir konum kazanmıştır. Din görevlileri genel olarak hükümdarın otoritesi altında faaliyet göstermiş olmakla birlikte, kadılar eyaletlerde, sancaklarda, kazalarda ve şehir merkezlerinde merkezi konumlarını korumuştur. Bu kurumun faal biçimde işlediği başlıca idarî bölgelerden biri, tarihî kaynaklarda Çukur-Saad olarak anılan İrevan bölgesidir. Farklı siyasî dönemler boyunca yaşanan bu gelişmeler, kadılık makamının Azerbaycan'ın hukuk ve toplum tarihinde süreklilik gösteren, değişen şartlara uyum sağlayan ve kurumsal önemini koruyan bir yapı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Azerbaycan, Irevan, kadı, İslam, din adamları, adalet*

Introduction

One of the regions where qadis historically exercised authority in Azerbaijan was the Irevan region. During the establishment and development of the Qaraqoyunlu and Agqoyunlu states in the fifteenth century, religious leaders such as the sheikh al-Islam and qadis enjoyed considerable influence among the population of Azerbaijan. However, until the beginning of the sixteenth century, no independent religious institution headed by these spiritual authorities existed in the territories of Azerbaijan; rather, religious leaders functioned within the administrative framework of the ruling power.

One of the historical areas of Azerbaijan where qadis, selected from among the religious leadership of the Islamic community, were appointed and served was the Irevan region. The activities of the qadi institution in the Irevan region continued in various forms almost until 1918. After the establishment of the Republic of Armenia in May 1918 in the territories of the former Irevan Governorate, severe transformations affected not only the demographic structure of the region but also the religious life of the local Muslim population. In the subsequent period, many historical, cultural, and spiritual values associated with the local population of the Irevan region and Western Azerbaijan were damaged, displaced, or lost. Nevertheless, the history of the qadi institution in the Irevan region can be reconstructed through archival documents, manuscript materials, and historical literature. These sources make it possible to examine the institutional trajectory of Islamic judicial authority in the region and to reassess its historical significance on the basis of documentary evidence.

Geographical Area of the Irevan Region

The historical Irevan region was composed of a series of plateaus and high plains extending from north to south, stretching from the southern part of the Lesser Caucasus toward Mount Ağrı. The highest areas were located in the northern part of the region. Geographically, it was bordered by the Kars region to the west and the Erzurum province, situated in the Asian part of present-day Türkiye, to the south.

The study of archaeological and written sources indicates the long historical significance of the territories of the Irevan region. This is reflected in the similarities between the Soyuzbulag and Qarakilsa rock carvings, dated to the fifth–second millennia BCE, and the Gobustan rock carvings, as well as in discussions concerning the linguistic and alphabetic features of the Nuvedi-Gargadashi inscriptions and the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions (Əmrahov, 2022). Before the Russian occupation of the South Caucasus, the region historically formed part of successive Azerbaijani states and political entities, including Caucasian Albania, the Shaddadids, the state of the Azerbaijani Atabegs, the Qaraqoyunlu, the Safavid Empire, and later the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates. For long periods, Azerbaijani Turks constituted a major component of the population of these territories. The beginning of Russian rule in the South Caucasus in the early nineteenth century profoundly affected the territories of the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates, as well as many other regions of Azerbaijan. Administrative restructuring transformed the territorial organization of the region, while later demographic changes altered its social composition. Throughout history, numerous settlements, villages, and cities associated with Azerbaijani Turks existed in the Irevan region. Thousands of historical monuments, including fortresses, mosques, minarets, caravanserais, and baths, were constructed there. Some of these structures preserved their existence until the beginning of the twentieth century (Əmrahov, 2022).

Religious Institutions in the Socio-Political Life of the Irevan Region

After the spread of Islam in the territories of Azerbaijan in the seventh century and its transformation into the dominant religion from the eighth century onward, the administration of religious affairs gradually developed and became more institutionalized. Individuals possessing deep knowledge of Islamic teachings, influence in theological matters, and authority within Sufi circles increasingly came to occupy prominent positions in society. These figures addressed complex juridical questions, interpreted Islamic rulings and Sharia norms, and undertook a range of functions considered important for communal life. It is known that from the middle of the ninth century, independent and semi-independent states emerged in both southern and northern Azerbaijan. During the periods of the Sajids, Salarids, Shaddadids, Ravvadids, and Shirvanshahs, spiritual leaders of the Muslim community

acquired substantial influence in matters related to the application of Sharia norms. Nevertheless, they did not yet function as the heads of fully independent religious institutions. At the same time, the role of the sheikh al-Islams in the spiritual life of society gradually expanded. With the establishment of the Azerbaijani Atabey state in the twelfth century, the socio-political, cultural, and spiritual life of the country entered a new phase of development. During the Atabey period, the frontiers of the state extended from Derbend in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. Research indicates that the Azerbaijani Atabeys not only asserted their authority in the political sphere, but also patronized Islam and maintained close relations with influential religious leaders. Through regular consultation with these figures, they sought to strengthen social cohesion and respond to the moral and spiritual needs of society. Similar tendencies remained visible in subsequent centuries, particularly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Available sources do not confirm that the spiritual leaders of Islam acted independently during the establishment and rule of the Azerbaijani Qaraqoyunlu and Aghqoyunlu states in the fifteenth century. However, research demonstrates that religious figures such as sheikhs al-Islam and qadis exercised considerable influence among the population of Azerbaijan. For example, during the final years of the Aghqoyunlu dynasty, in the reign of Sultan Yaqub, Abdulvahab, one of the Azerbaijani sayyids, served as the Sheikh al-Islam of Tabriz (Bayramlı, 2006). However, until the beginning of the sixteenth century, no independent religious institution headed by these spiritual authorities existed in the territories of Azerbaijan; rather, religious leaders operated under the authority of the shah.

The emergence of the Safavid state at the beginning of the sixteenth century had a significant impact on the organization of state structures as well as religious institutions. During the Safavid period, the head of the religious administration was regarded as the chairman (İbrahimov, 1958). The chairman, drawn from among the higher clergy, was the principal authority in the country after the Safavid shahs. The Russian orientalist I. P. Petruşevski, discussing the place of the chairman within the state structure, noted that the second most important figure was the chairman-azam, who led the Muslim clergy. Endowment property and revenues assigned to madrasas and charitable institutions were under the authority of the chairman-azam (Petruşevski, 1951). Many sources from the Safavid period indicate that the chairman resolved legal matters independently. His rulings were accepted by other bodies dealing with judicial affairs, and state officials could not interfere in his jurisdiction. The chairman also decided on the appointment and dismissal of clerics in higher religious institutions and supervised the repair of madrasas, khanegahs, and other sacred buildings (Musəvi, 1977). Sheikh al-Islams, qadis, mutawallis, mudarris, and naqibs were likewise appointed and dismissed by the chairman's ruling. Khondamir records that religious figures, regarded as one of the most respected

strata of society, turned to the chairman rather than to other departments in matters concerning their needs. The chairman also prepared general legal regulations that were implemented throughout the country (Bayramlı, 2006). The head of the clerical administration was the chairman-khassa, while the chairman-i al-mamalik acted as his deputy and as the head of the customary courts. He guided the divanbey in issuing Sharia rulings in accordance with Qur'anic principles and established legal norms.

In the early years of Shah Ismail's reign, namely in 1501, Qadi Shamsaddin Gilani was appointed as *sadr*. However, during the reign of Shah Ismail I, the *sadr*, like other officials, was changed frequently (Bayramlı, 2006). It should also be noted that while sources provide detailed information on the *sadrs* who headed the supreme spiritual administration, they contain far less information regarding provincial *sadrs*, especially those in Azerbaijan.

Sheikh-ul-Islam, Qadi and Muftiship in Irevan

Even in the fifteenth century, the office of Sheikh-ul-Islam held significant influence within the religious administration of Azerbaijan. For example, during the final years of Aghqoyunlu rule, Abdulvahab, one of the Azerbaijani sayyids, served as the Sheikh-ul-Islam of Tabriz during the reign of Sultan Yaqub.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Sheikh-ul-Islams were appointed to individual cities upon the proposal of the chairman and by decree of the shah. Sanson, one of the noted observers of the medieval East, wrote that the Sheikh-ul-Islam was the third-ranking religious figure and was responsible for resolving religious matters. The Ottoman traveler E. Çələbi likewise provided noteworthy information on this issue, stating that Sheikh-ul-Islams and *qadis* were present in Nakhchivan, Tabriz, Ardabil, Irevan, and other Azerbaijani cities (Çələbi, 1997). Engelbert Kempfer also noted that the chairman nominated clerics to the two major religious offices of Sheikh-ul-Islam and *qadi*, while the shah formally confirmed these appointments by decree. According to his account, although the Sheikh-ul-Islam ruled on religious and civil matters and the *qadi* ranked immediately after him as a Sharia judge, both offices possessed comparable official authority.

In general, a review of the available sources suggests that there was no sharp functional division between the offices of Sheikh-ul-Islam and *qadi*. Tavernier wrote that the two highest religious dignitaries were subordinate to the chairman, one being the Sheikh-ul-Islam and the other the *qadi*. The settlement of Sharia matters was shared between these two offices, and both carried out the directives of the chairman in the provinces.

Engelbert Kempfer, discussing the practical division of duties between the *qadi* and the Sheikh-ul-Islam, stated that disputes concerning purchase and sale contracts, marriage, and divorce were heard in their courts. In this sphere, they performed the roles of both judges and notaries. After hearing the

disputing parties, examining witnesses, and clarifying the substance of the case, the qadi issued his decision, and no lawyer was required in the proceedings. Sources also indicate that, with the consent of the shah and the chairman, the Sheikh-ul-Islam could simultaneously hold a second religious office. Qadi Ahmad Qumi records that Shah Abuvalki Mir Shamsaddin was transferred to the office of Sheikh-ul-Islam with the guarantee of the chairman; he was also appointed trustee of the Sham-Gazan waqf properties in Tabriz and granted an annual salary of one hundred tumans.

Sheikh-ul-Islams were at times also engaged in teaching. In this regard, Isgander bey Munshi writes that during the reign of Shah Tahmasib, one such figure taught in Ardabil for a period while simultaneously serving there as Sheikh-ul-Islam. He was frequently summoned to the shah's palace and consulted on religious affairs (Bayramlı, 2006). It is evident from the shah's decree concerning the appointment of new judges to the cities of Sheki and Irevan in 1691 that documents regarding the appointment of district sultans required the approval of the Sheikh-ul-Islam, together with the beylerbey and other civil and religious officials of the province (*Şəki ölkəsinin mülkiyyəti haqqında II Şah Səfinin hökmü*, 1691). In Azerbaijan, the chairman-khassa, or *sadr al-mamalik*, was considered the fourth-ranking spiritual authority after the Sheikh-ul-Islam. The sources indicate that qadis were appointed with the consent of the shah and upon the proposal of the chairman. In provinces, districts, cities, and settlements, the qadi occupied an important institutional position. I. P. Petruşevski writes that in the cities and large settlements of the beylerbeylik there was a qadi who acted as the head of the local Shiite clergy. In the capital, as well as in towns and settlements, supervision over the proper implementation of the law fell within the jurisdiction of the Sharia qadis. Even in smaller districts, qadis were active. Legal documents, cultural and juridical contracts, decrees of the shah, and letters issued by higher authorities acquired official validity after being sealed by the Sharia qadi. Engelbert Kempfer similarly observed that for this reason every city dweller wished to have a Sharia qadi. Evliya Çələbi also recorded the activities of qadis in Marand, Ardabil, Khoy, Ganja, Irevan, and other Azerbaijani cities.

Qadis were appointed through the *divan as-sadara* and were removed from office only by decision of the chairman. The sources also preserve detailed information regarding their additional responsibilities. In his work *Nameyi-Nami*, Khondamir states that the qadi, in addition to handling marriage matters and the registration and confirmation of documents, was also responsible for preventing actions contrary to religion and Sharia. He likewise supervised the property of orphans, persons lacking legal capacity, and displaced persons. Moreover, qadis were among the principal

speakers in the presence of the shah. Safavid rulers were reported to have declared that “the qadis in the country are my successors” (Bayramlı, 2006).

During the Safavid Empire of Azerbaijan, both the beylerbey and the qadis were represented in the “Justice Council.” The historian Isgander bey Munshi records that in 1576 Shah Ismail II instructed Prince Ibrahim Mirza to establish such a council in order to observe the condition of the people and examine their complaints. The decrees and rulings of this council were to be formally inscribed and sealed (Qüdsi, 1789–1791). During the Safavid period (1501–1736), the center of the Chukhursad beylerbeylik, one of the principal administrative-territorial units of the state, was the city of Irevan. The province was governed by beylerbeys from the Rumlu and Ustajli tribes appointed by the Safavid shahs. Among the most prominent were Div Sultan Rumlu, Huseyn Khan Sultan Rumlu, and Mahammad Khan Tokhmaq Ustajli. It was under the direction of Mahammad Khan Tokhmaq Ustajli that the well-known Khan’s Palace (Sardar Palace) of Irevan was built in 1578.

In this regard, valuable information is preserved in the S. Kekelidze Institute of Manuscripts of the Georgian Academy of Sciences. One of the documents held there dates to the reign of Shah Suleiman. From a decree dated 1672, it is clear that qadis were appointed to the city of Tabriz and its surrounding districts. The content of the decree shows that the duty of adjudicating disputes and issuing fair judgments in Tabriz and nearby districts was entrusted to a three-person committee. Although judges could exercise certain powers individually, as a rule, the authority of each member amounted to one-third of the full jurisdiction. Therefore, at least two members had to agree for a decision to be considered valid (*Təbrizin qazılığı haqqında II Şah Səfi tərəfindən verilmiş qərar*, n.d.).

The same material demonstrates that qadis appointed by decree of the Safavid shahs served as guardians of legal norms in districts and provinces and played an important role in protecting moral values through law. For that reason, they enjoyed the protection of the government. Medieval sources frequently described qadis as learned, pious, just, disciplined, and not inclined toward unlawful enrichment. The ruling further indicates that qadis were appointed to or dismissed from office by order of the presidency. They could also defend the lower social strata in provincial districts when necessary, thereby strengthening their own standing (*Təbrizin qazılığı haqqında II Şah Səfi tərəfindən verilmiş qərar*, n.d.).

Information concerning the office of the qadi is among the most valuable aspects of these documents. Only two principal Safavid-era works provide substantial information on this subject. One is *Nameyi-Nami* by Giyasaddin ibn Humamaddin, written during the reign of Shah Ismail, and the other is *Tazkiratul-Muluk*, composed anonymously during the late Safavid period. The decree discussed

above falls approximately 160 years after the first text and around 50 years before the second. It indicates that throughout the Safavid period qadis were involved in issuing judicial verdicts and regulating matters concerning land, water, and other civil affairs. They were responsible for drafting documents related to the purchase and sale of property, issuing marriage and engagement certificates, resolving disputes among the population, encouraging observance and obedience, distributing inheritances, collecting khums and zakat, administering ownerless property, punishing offenders, and carrying out a range of additional administrative functions (Bayramlı, 2006).

One of the qadis was Mirza Muhammad Zahid, a descendant of Abdul-Wahhabiyya, while the others were Mir Muizzeddin Muhammad and Mir Muhammad Muqim. Each was assigned responsibility for one-third of Tabriz and its environs. The decree outlining the duties of a qadi lists responsibilities such as drafting judicial decisions and legal documents, concluding marriages, reconciling disputes, encouraging worship, distributing inheritances and bequests, collecting khums and zakat for those in need, restoring mosques and madrasas, suppressing intoxicants, punishing those who violated Sharia norms, registering the property of orphans and missing persons, certifying documents, and appointing or dismissing certain lower officials not designated by the presidency. This decree clearly demonstrates that the qadi possessed extensive legal authority and that in major cities several qadis could serve simultaneously. In addition to religious matters, qadis also dealt with civil and criminal cases. Engelbert Kempfer notes that after hearing both parties, receiving witness testimony, and examining the substance of the matter, the qadi rendered his opinion independently, without outside interference. These facts indicate that the qadi fulfilled a combined religious and judicial function.

The qadi of the qadis supervised the other qadis of the city and was entrusted with resolving more significant religious disputes. Some qadis were also known as accomplished calligraphers and poets. Qadi Ahmed Gumi, describing events of 1583, writes that Khoylu qadi Abdullah had no equal in Azerbaijani Turkish and Persian, excelled in various forms of calligraphy, and composed fine poetry. For many years, he drafted official correspondence sent to the Ottoman Empire and India.

The sources further indicate that, like other religious offices, the position of qadi could at times become hereditary. One example is the father of Mirza Ibrahim, who served as qadi of Hamadan during the reign of Shah Tahmasib. After Shah Tahmasib's death, Mirza Ibrahim himself assumed the office of qadi of Hamadan. He taught students and studied religious texts, while Sharia matters were handled by his deputies. Deputies of qadis could also settle certain disputes with their authorization. Sanson writes that in the cities there were clerics serving as deputies of the chairman, deputies of the Sheikh-ul-Islam, and one or two deputies of the qadi. Two such deputies participated in each court

session. They generally resolved minor disputes and could be invited to more serious proceedings in an advisory capacity.

One of the historical Azerbaijani territories where Islamic religious institutions emerged and developed throughout the Middle Ages, and where qadis were appointed and active, was the Irevan region. During the Safavid Empire, the Irevan region of Azerbaijan was known as the Chukhur-Sad Beylerbeylik. I. P. Petruşevski writes that most of Armenia was part of the Irevan or Chukhur-Sad province. Several medieval sources referring to the central city of the Chukhursad Beylerbeylik identify Irevan as “Ravan” (Çələbi, 1997). It is known that the Chukhursad Beylerbeylik, situated on the frontier with the Ottoman Empire, possessed strategic importance and therefore remained a focal point of Ottoman policy. Because of this significance, the Ottoman Empire occupied the region during the war of 1578–1590 and retained control until the beginning of the seventeenth century. During this period, Ottoman official circles recorded information concerning the administration of the Irevan region, its Sharia courts, and its qadis.

In the documentary collection entitled *Detailed Book of the Irevan Province* compiled in 1590, it is possible to identify qadis appointed from the center, the cities in which they served, and the names of qadis active in the Irevan region. Information dated 1590 shows that the observance of justice in the province was supervised by the Sharia court. Qadis appointed from the center, and not subordinate to provincial officials, operated in Irevan, Aralıq, Talın, Ağcaqala, Nakhchivan, Sharur, and Ordubad (1590-cı il tarixli İrevan vilayətinin müfəssəl dəftəri, 2023).

According to the same *Mufassal Defter* of 1590, the Irevan province organized by the Ottoman government within the territory of the Chukhursad Beylerbeylik consisted of seven qadi districts and twenty-six subdistricts. Although each qadi district had its own qadi, the names of qadis can be identified in only four of them: the qadi of Irevan, Maulana Mahammad Sharif oğlu; the qadis of Nakhchivan, Maulana Jannati and Maulana Huseyn; the qadi of Ordubad, Maulana Bali Efendi; and the qadi of Sharur, Maulana Davud (1590-cı il tarixli İrevan vilayətinin müfəssəl dəftəri, 2023).

During Ottoman rule, the activities of the Sharia courts in the Irevan province covered several fields, including civil disputes, criminal matters, administrative cases, and supervision over the implementation of legal norms. Under the supervision of the qadi, the transfer of revenue-producing assets classified as *muqatıa* was also organized (1590-cı il tarixli İrevan vilayətinin müfəssəl dəftəri, 2023). According to Ottoman practice, qadis were recorded in the *Mufassal Defter* with the title *mavlana*.

The same register further shows that qadis in the Irevan province also handled inheritance matters. Under the supervision of the qadi, clerks of the Sharia court prepared inheritance registers,

recorded state valuations, listed goods by type and value, and noted the fees to be received by court clerks (1590-cı il tarixli İrevan vilayətinin müfəssəl dəftəri, 2023). According to the law, the Sharia court also heard criminal cases. In a ruling sent to the qadi of Irevan in 1596–1597, qadis were informed of legal violations in the province. Particular attention was drawn to the leasing of the deputyship, responsible for supervising the implementation of regulations in the districts, through the *iltizam* system. The ruling declared this unacceptable and also emphasized the emergence of armed groups in the province that caused material and moral harm to the rural population, calling for measures against them (1590-cı il tarixli İrevan vilayətinin müfəssəl dəftəri, 2023). According to information preserved in the “Detailed Tahrir Notebook of the Ravan Liva dated 1727,” compiled during the Ottoman period, qadis were also appointed to the Irevan Liva. The record indicates that the first Ottoman qadi in Irevan was Mevlana Ahmed Bahaeddin. In a further entry dated August 10, 1732, Ahmed Bahaeddin is again mentioned as qadi of Irevan.

After the collapse of the Azerbaijani Safavid Empire and the short period of rule under Nadir Shah Afshar, the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates emerged in the territory of the former Chukhursad beylerbeylik (Əmrahov, 2022). As in other Azerbaijani khanates, political authority in the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates was concentrated in the khanate institution. Palace officials occupied an important place in administration, while the Divan, or Council of Honor, functioned as an advisory body alongside the khan. The clergy also held an important place in the state structure, although their participation in governance remained limited and the final decision belonged to the khan. In khanates with a predominantly Shiite population, including Irevan and Nakhchivan, leadership of the clergy was carried out by Sheikh-ul-Islams. The khan could appoint a mujtahid, akhund, qadi, or another cleric to this office. The mujtahid represented the highest rank. Where such a figure existed within the khanate, he exercised religious leadership; otherwise, a qadi, akhund, or another cleric was appointed by the khan. In khanates where Sunnis predominated, the highest religious authority was generally exercised by effendis or qadis, ranking below the mufti in the Sunni hierarchy.

To become a qadi, a cleric was expected to have reached legal maturity, possess sound memory and health, enjoy a reputation for integrity, demonstrate commitment to religious principles, and maintain exemplary moral conduct. In addition, candidates were expected to be born into a free family, to be of legitimate birth, to have mastered the principles of *ijtihad*, and to be male.

In the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates, clerics also occupied an important place in the Divankhana, the supreme state body. The Divankhana included the khan, vizier, mustovfi, divanbey, and other officials, together with the chief cleric. The principal function of the supreme religious leader

was to legitimize the khan's decrees through fatwas. In many instances, the office of divanbey was also held by senior clerics. In such cases, the divanbey likewise served as an adviser to the khan on legal matters, much like the qadi.

The Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates were divided administratively into districts and villages. In this framework, the khans appointed one or two qadis to each district. Their responsibilities included ensuring the operation of the Sharia court and supervising the collection of khums and zakat.

The Sharia courts were headed by the Sheikh-ul-Islam, the qadi, and several akhunds and mullahs. These courts considered a wide range of disputes, including serious criminal cases, theft, civil claims, dowry and divorce matters, reconciliation among relatives, guardianship, inheritance distribution, and the conclusion, execution, or violation of contracts (Şopen, 1852). Recognizing the importance of the Sharia courts, the khans appointed educated individuals well acquainted with legal norms to the office of qadi. In 1783, Irevan Khan Huseynali Khan appointed Seyid Muhammad, who was known among the population as a learned man, as chief qadi. The document states that he should “sit on the throne of an independent and majestic qadi and resolve conflicts on the basis of the blessed laws of Sharia” (Qüdsi, 1789–1791).

Sharia justice was mainly administered by village and district qadis together with the chief qadi of the khanate. However, where doubts arose concerning their rulings, the khan could intervene in judicial affairs. In such circumstances, he convened a general assembly of the clergy and personally attended the meeting. There, the supreme religious leader, the qadi, and several senior clerics possessed decision-making authority, while others participated in an advisory capacity. There were separate Sharia courts for each sect. The chief qadi of the khanate was expected to entrust matters concerning a sect to which he did not belong to a qadi from that same sect. Otherwise, intervention in the affairs of another sect could generate discontent among the population.

Religious Situation in Irevan during the “Provisional Administration”

As a result of the wars between the Russian Empire and the Qajar state in 1804–1813 and 1826–1828, the northern khanates of Azerbaijan, including the territories of the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates, were occupied by Tsarist Russia. The khanate administrative system in the northern territories of Azerbaijan was abolished, and the previous administrative-territorial divisions underwent substantial changes. The khanates that did not submit to tsarist rule and resisted were gradually transformed into provinces and districts beginning in 1806. Initially, six provinces were organized: Baku (1808), Guba (1810), Sheki (1819), Shirvan (1820), Karabakh (1822), and Talysh (1826), together with two districts, Yelizavetpol (1804) and Jar-Balakan, and two distances, Gazakh (1812) and Shamshadil (1812) (Əmrahov, 2022). The territories of the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates, occupied

in October 1827 and formally incorporated into Russia under the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, were likewise reorganized as provinces (*Obozreniye Rossiyskikh vladenyi za Kavkazom v statističeskom, etnografičeskom, topografičeskom i finansovom otnosheniyakh*, 1836).

In October 1827, a “Provisional Administration” was established in the Irevan province. It is clear from Document No. 432, Volume 7 of the *Acts of the Caucasian Archaeological Commission* that general rules for the administration of the Irevan province were prepared by Count Paskevich on October 6, 1827. According to the first article of these regulations, which consisted of nineteen provisions, a “Provisional Administration” was created in the Irevan province under the leadership of Lieutenant General Krasovsky and composed of Bishop Nerses together with the temporary commandant of the Irevan fortress, Lieutenant Colonel Borodin (*Akti, sobranie Kavkazskoy Arkheografičeskoy Komissiey*, 1878).

According to Article 8 of the regulations, guard detachments composed of local residents loyal to the Russian government were organized, while Article 12 provided for the gradual supply of the Irevan and Sardar-Abad fortresses with the necessities required for both the garrison and the civilian population (*Akti, sobranie Kavkazskoy Arkheografičeskoy Komissiey*, 1878). In addition, the “Provisional Administration” was entrusted with maintaining order in the province, protecting the territory from external threats, determining revenues inherited from the previous administration, and redirecting these resources to the interests of the Russian state. Thus, the regulations introduced immediately after the occupation, consisting of nineteen articles, marked the beginning of the imperial administrative order in the Irevan province and initiated a new phase in the political governance of the region.

The Transformation of the Main Mosque of Irevan into a Russian Orthodox Church

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the colonial policy pursued by the Russian Empire in the South Caucasus also affected the religious institutions of the local inhabitants of the Irevan province, including the Azerbaijani Muslim population. On the proposal of the State Synod, and by the decision of Emperor Nicholas I dated November 4, 1827, the main mosque of Irevan was transformed into a Russian Orthodox church (*Akti, sobranie Kavkazskoy Arkheografičeskoy Komissiey*, 1878).

Following this development, the former political status of the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates, like that of other khanates of Northern Azerbaijan, was abolished after their incorporation into the Russian Empire. First, on March 21, 1828, the so-called “Armenian province” was established in the territories of these khanates, and later, on June 9, 1849, the Irevan Governorate was created by tsarist decree (Əmrahov, 2022).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, after the occupation of the territories of the South Caucasus, including Northern Azerbaijan, the tsarist ruling circles introduced significant changes in the structure of Islamic institutions in the region. In this context, in 1823 the office of Sheikh-ul-Islam was established in Tbilisi to lead the Shiite population of Transcaucasia, and nine years later, in 1832, the office of mufti, as the head of the Sunni population of the Caucasus, was likewise established in Tbilisi. Thus, the imperial administration initiated a policy of reorganizing Islamic religious institutions in accordance with the political requirements of the new order and bringing Muslim religious figures under closer administrative supervision. At the same time, one of the principal objectives of this policy was to reduce the dependence of the Muslim clergy of the Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, on the religious centers of the broader Muslim world.

The Statute “On the Organization of Muslim Provinces” of 1829

After the Treaty of Turkmenchay, tsarist policy, in accordance with imperial objectives, further intensified its activities aimed at the Russification and Christianization of the Caucasus, as well as the promotion of Armenian administrative interests in the region. A so-called “Armenian province” was established in the territories of the former Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates. In practice, these transformations profoundly affected the political and social position of the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus.

The Supreme Commander of the Russian forces in the South Caucasus, I. Paskevich, who played a major role in the occupation of the Irevan Khanate, also became directly involved in the reorganization of the Muslim clergy as part of this broader policy. Initially, particular attention was given to the Shiite clergy. Paskevich concentrated on the question of creating a structured Shiite spiritual administration. The Tabriz mujtahid Mir Fattah Agha Tabatabai became a central figure in official plans to lead the Shiite clergy. His high religious rank was regarded by the tsarist authorities as politically useful. At that time, there was no mujtahid of comparable standing in Northern Azerbaijan, while only a limited number of individuals in Iran held that title. This circumstance was considered a possible guarantee that the Shiite clergy of the region might accept his leadership. In addition, Mir Fattah Tabatabai had previously called upon the population not to resist the Russian army when imperial forces entered the territories of Southern Azerbaijan, arguing that such a course would prevent bloodshed. These factors attracted the attention of the Russian authorities. Moreover, Mir Fattah Tabatabai was included in the administrative structure created by Paskevich, where he was noted for his loyalty to the new order (Hüseynli, 2002).

In this context, the tsarist administration and its local officials employed various measures to place the Muslim clergy under closer supervision and ensure that religious institutions operated in

accordance with imperial objectives. In 1829, Paskevich established a “special committee” composed of three members under the chairmanship of P. Zavileysky in order to prepare the “Regulations on the Organization of Muslim Provinces.” The committee was also charged with drafting proposals concerning the administration of the Muslim clergy. For this purpose, Mir Fattah was expected to participate closely in its work. After some time, however, it became evident that the committee would be unable to complete the task in a satisfactory manner. Paskevich therefore ordered its members to suspend other duties and concentrate exclusively on preparing the “Regulations on the Organization of the Muslim Clergy.” Nevertheless, the project was ultimately rejected because of a number of deficiencies and because it did not fully correspond to governmental expectations (Hüseynli, 2002).

Mir Fattah Agha also played a role in the unsuccessful outcome of the committee’s work. By the committee’s decision of July 31, 1829, the mujtahid was instructed to submit his views on the organization of the Muslim clergy and the proposed spiritual administration by August 8. Mir Fattah, however, refused to participate in the committee’s proceedings. He argued that the rank of mujtahid represented the highest religious authority and that, after the imams, only a mujtahid possessed the right to legislate in religious matters. On this basis, he maintained that Muslims should recognize such an authority as the supreme arbiter in questions of religion. Mir Fattah had earlier also declined appointment as the head of the newly planned spiritual administration, stating that, according to Islamic law, it was not appropriate for the Muslim clergy to become involved in secular affairs (Hüseynli, 2002).

Conclusion

Thus, the available sources indicate that following the spread of Islam in the territories of the South Caucasus, religious and institutional structures gradually emerged and developed in Azerbaijan, including the Irevan region. Among the principal officeholders within these institutions, the Sheikh-ul-Islam and the qadi occupied particularly important positions, especially in the settlement of disputes arising within society and in the regulation of matters connected with family and communal life.

During successive political periods, including the Seljuk, Hulagud, Safavid, Irevan Khanate, and Irevan Governorate eras, qadis were appointed to the Irevan region by the ruling authorities. Within their jurisdictions, they adjudicated legal disputes, supervised marriage procedures, certified documents, and contributed to the maintenance of public order through the application of recognized legal norms. Their authority demonstrates that religious offices in the region were not confined to spiritual functions alone, but also formed an integral component of administrative and judicial governance.

The historical trajectory of the qadi institution in Irevan further illustrates the continuity and adaptability of Islamic legal traditions under changing political regimes. Although the institutional framework evolved over time in response to broader transformations in state power, the office of the qadi retained its relevance as a mechanism of legal mediation and social regulation. In this respect, the history of religious institutions in Irevan provides valuable insight into the interaction between governance, law, and society in the wider historical experience of Azerbaijan.

Author Contributions

The author is solely responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, analysis, and writing of the study.

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