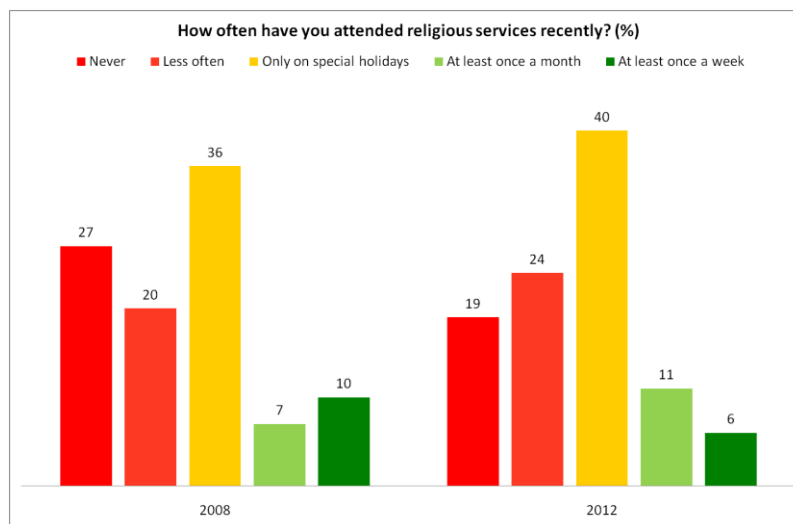


Thursday, December 06, 2012

[The Modalities of Azerbaijan's Islamic Revival](#)

Islamic revival on the societal level has become a much-touted subject in Azerbaijan in recent years. Ongoing controversy over an [informal state ban on hijabs](#) in the country's public education institutions, along with a number of recent [government-sponsored research projects](#) and [conferences on religion](#), attest to the increasing salience of Islam as a social and political issue, even as the Azerbaijani state remains staunchly secular and instrumentalizes Islam primarily for legitimization purposes.

Yet, if Azerbaijani *society* is indeed experiencing an Islamic revival, what are the manifestations of its increasing religiosity? According to data from the [Caucasus Barometer](#) (CB) and CRRC's 2012 [Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey](#) (SIDA), religious indicators such as overt religious practices and trust in religious institutions have actually shown negative trends in the last five years. Nevertheless, other indicators suggest that Azerbaijanis' private religious practices and conceptions of personal religiosity may be gaining greater currency.

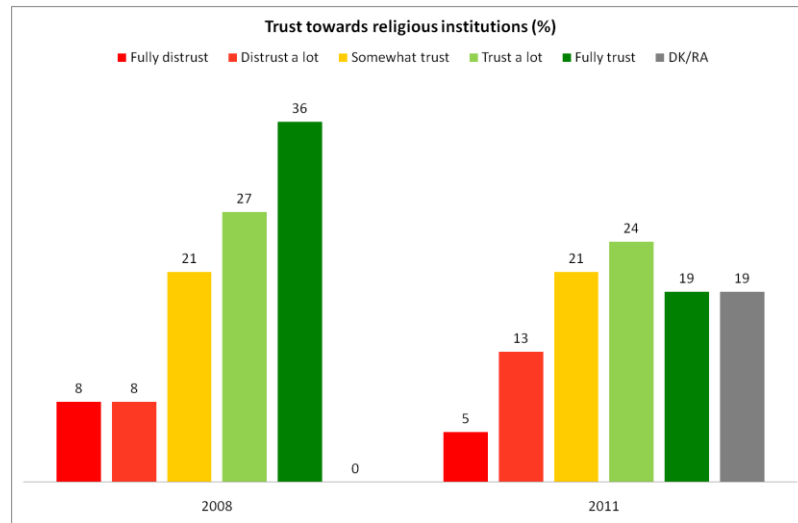


According to the CB 2008, 10% of people in Azerbaijan claimed to attend religious services on at least a weekly basis, while 7% and 36% attended at least once a month or on special holidays, respectively. Around 20% of Azerbaijanis attended services "less often" and nearly 30% "never" attended.

Religious service attendance has changed little in the last five years. According to the 2012 survey, only 6% of Azerbaijanis said they attended services at least once a week, with 11% indicating they attended at least once a month and 40% claiming only on religious holidays. Almost 25% and 20% of Azerbaijanis claimed they attended services "less often" and "never", respectively.

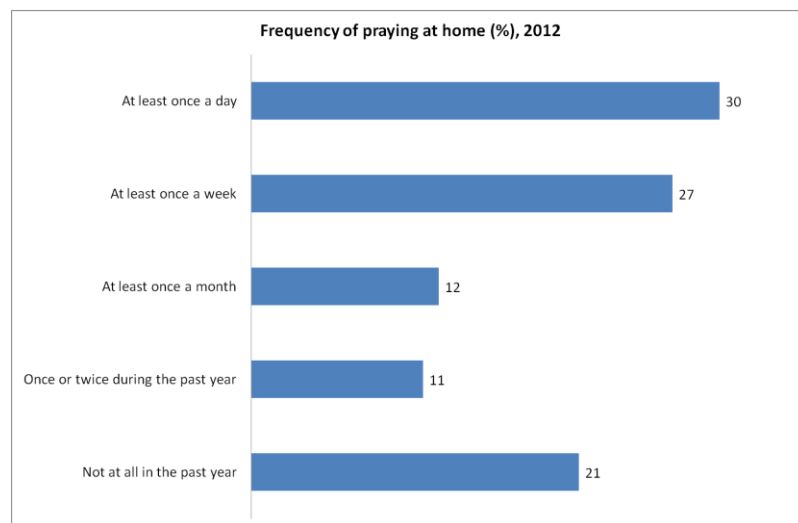
Azerbaijanis' trust in religious institutions likewise decreased between 2008 and 2011. In addition to local mosques, the institutions in question could refer to the Caucasus Muslim Board - a state-affiliated organization including Shia and Sunni leadership due to Azerbaijan's approximate 60/30% Shia-Sunni population - and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations - likewise a state-affiliated entity, tasked with regulating religious organizations operating in the country.

The institutional trust factor is especially significant, as research suggests that a country's level of religiosity depends on the authority of its religious institutions ([Chaves 1994](#)). In turn, this authority is measured by the degree of individuals' confidence in religious institutions ([Kleiman, Ramsey, & Palazzo 1996](#)). According to the CB from 2008 to 2011, there was a 17% decrease in the number of Azerbaijanis who "fully trust" religious institutions, with a slight decrease for those who trust religious institutions "a lot" and no change for those who "somewhat" trust said institutions.



Despite decreases in active religiosity, CRRC data suggest that personal conceptions of religiosity and private religious practices are becoming more important for Azerbaijanis. Between 2010 and 2012, the combined total of Azerbaijanis who claimed they were "quite" or "very" religious increased from 16% to 27%. During the same period, those claiming they were "somewhat religious" jumped from 23% to 32%.

Perhaps even more telling are 2012 data measuring the frequency of praying at home. Despite low mosque attendance, a sizeable 30% of Azerbaijanis claimed to pray at home at least once a day, while 27% said they prayed at home at least once a week and 12% once a month.



Other sources of data suggest similar trends. A 2011 poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Research indicated that 21% of Azerbaijanis were interested in religious questions "to a large extent", while 46% expressed interest "to a certain extent" and 24% to a "lesser extent." Only 9% of Azerbaijanis claimed they had "virtually no interest" in religious questions.

Even if overt religious indicators such as mosque attendance and trust remain quite low, the fact that Azerbaijanis increasingly think of themselves as more religious indicates that religiosity may be growing on a more personal, passive level. That over 50% of Azerbaijanis pray at home on at least a weekly basis is likewise an indication that private religious practices may be serving as the primary modalities of Azerbaijan's Islamic revitalization.