

## Surah Kafiroom and the Peace in the Multi-Religious Society; The Case Study of Azerbaijan and Iran

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This study has no aim to affect the ideology of any segment within any state or any society but is based on primary and secondary sources of data.

#### Abstract

Azerbaijan and Iran, both are religiously divided societies. Although the majority of both states follow Twelver-Shia Islam, there are other fractions within the Muslim identity such as Sunni-Hanafi, Sunni-Shafi, Sunni-Maliki, Zaidi-Shia and Ismaili-Shia. This study finds how Surah Kafiroom (specifically the last verse) facilitates each Muslim majority state, particularly Azerbaijan and Iran to ensure peace within their multi-religious environment. For this purpose, the study also conducts interviews of various Azerbaijani and Iranian Muslim scholars following different sects. It assists to find the answer of the question, whether Surah Kafiroom provides an administrative framework for implementing “live and let live” like the Charter of Madina, or not.

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## Introduction

Surah Kafiroom was revealed during the Makkan period of Islam, consists of six verses. The word “Kafiroom” means “disbelievers”. Modern Muslim jurisprudents across the globe consider this surah as a

way of ensuring peace in a multi-religious society (Ayoub, 2021). This study, therefore, tries to analyze what Azerbaijani and Iranian scholars (whether belong to any sect within Islam) say about how this surah guides them, and how this surah facilitates peace among the diverse religious fractions. Hence, the study first looks at the translations of this surah.

### **Translation of Surah Kafiroon**

As this surah contains six verses, its translation is;

*Say, O disbelievers,*

*I do not worship what you worship.*

*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship.*

*Nor will I be a worshipper of what you worship.*

*Nor will you be worshippers of what I worship.*

*For you is your religion, and for me is my religion (Ayoub, 2021).*

### **Interpretation and Implication by the Azerbaijani Muslim Scholars**

Religious demographics of Azerbaijan show that Azerbaijani Muslims are further divided into Twelver-Shia, Sunni-Hanafi, Sunni-Shafi, Sunni-Maliki and Salafi sects. Therefore, this study tries to collect the perspective of each sectarian segment regarding how Surah Kafiroon teaches to ensure social peace.

#### **Seyid Nadir Bakuvi**

He is the Twelver-Shia cleric, lives in Astara. As he earned higher education from Tabriz while the major portion of his life has been spent near a town at the Azerbaijan-Iran borderland, he looks highly inspired by the Iranian version of Shia Islam (based on the concept of Vilayat-e-Faqih). However, he defines the concepts given in Surah Kafiroon as;

“Islam never allows any Muslim to criticize others’ religions or sects. He is out of Islam if he disapproves of others’ thoughts, beliefs, or myths. If you are a Muslim, who are you to get the authority of condemning, object or harras others for leaving their faith? When Allah allows everyone to live on his religion, we, Muslims, have no authority to challenge anyone. For me, if someone will do this, he will be wrong and he will be disbeliever of Allah, his prophet and Quranic teachings” (Bakuvi, 2022).

“In Azerbaijan and Iran, therefore, Twelver-Shia clerics believe that, everyone has the right to live whether his religion is Islam or not. You can never find any object, harassment, criticism from any Shia-cleric or significant Ayatullah against the followers of other religions. They all always try to promote inter-faith harmony. And, they believe that Islam only spreads when love and respect become the tool of preaching” (Bakuvi, 2022).

#### **Seyid Ali Kechaari**

He is a Baku-based scholar, claimed to get religious education from Bukhara (Uzbekistan). According to him, “the last verse of Surah Kafiroon never allows you to free disbelievers to do whatever they like” (Kechaari, 2022).

He argues, “Islam does not free any religious community for doing whatever it desires. If this principle will be applied in any society, it would facilitate riots and religious rifts rather than to practice inter-faith harmony”. He blames that “the modern interpretation of the last verse of Surah Kafiroon is a misleading argument that is inspiring Muslims having confused faith. If extremist or fundamentalist ideology in Iran could not allow any non-Shia or even a Shia (but not following the philosophy of Vilayat-e-Faqih) as a president and supreme leader, if non-Protestant cannot become a king of UK, if non-Christian cannot elect as US president, why Sunni Muslims desire inter-faith harmony by neglecting their fundamental believes” (Kechaari, 2022).

He further illustrates, “inter-faith harmony, multiculturalism and social peace do not exist in Iran but it is an extremist fundamental society. On the other hand, secularism in Azerbaijan never means the implementation of the last verse of Surah Kafiroon. This is just a political act for getting enrolment in European Union. Religious differences are neither ignored previously nor able to neglect currently” (Kechaari, 2022).

### **Seyid Zahid Kerimov**

He is a Sunni-Shafi scholar, lives in Quba. During interpreting Surah Kafiroon, he argues that “to promote flexibility and easiness was the basic motive of Imam Shafi. If he opposed the ideology of Imam abu Hanfia and established a new school, it means, he believed that restrictions and criticisms always trigger anxiety, depression, militancy and quite contradicting reaction. In other meanings, every extreme act has an opposite extreme reaction” (Kerimov, 2022).

Furthermore, he discusses, “not only Azerbaijan but Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey have such a religious environment where no one observes religious rift commonly. And, this is only because of flexibility and easiness in the religion, preached by Imam Shafi. In fact, this is the practical implementation of the last verse of Surah Kafiroon which was adopted by Imam Shafi as a baseline for establishing a peaceful society”. However, on the question related to Iran, he does not consider Iran as a peaceful society, argues that “Iran is historically a multi-religious society where one sect does not allow others to rule, to govern, or to administrate” (Kerimov, 2022).

### **Seyid Fuad Kerimov**

Being a Sunni-Maliki scholar based in Zagatala, argues that “Surah Kafiroon teaches how we can live together in the multi-religious society. As peace can never be ensured without respecting others, this surah provides a way for Muslims how to respect others, and how to cooperate without criticizing or condemning them because of their religious beliefs” (Kerimov S. F., 2022).

“This lesson is not fixed for Azerbaijan or Iran, but the entire Muslim world should follow the principles given in this surah. This time, when the Muslim world is being criticized by the west due to religious militancy, this Surah provides a way to protect the peaceful image of Islam once again” (Kerimov S. Z., 2022). He further says, “since the declaration of 2016 as a year of multiculturalism, Azerbaijan has been proved as a practical exhibition of this surah where Sunni-Muslims, Twelver-Shia Muslims, Jews, Armenian Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Bahai, Zoroastrians and some other religious fraction never come for ideological riots but live peacefully within the secular structure of the Post-Soviet state” (Kerimov S. F., 2022).

### **Vasim Huseynov**

He earned his religious education in Kuwait, follows Salafi Islam, lived in Balakan. Neither he agrees with the interpretations of this Surah presented by the followers Twelver-Shia, Sunni-Hanafi, Sunni-Shafi and Sunni-Maliki scholars nor he believes in the Shia and Sunni concept of Imamate. Likewise, he neither finds a peaceful multi-cultural environment in Azerbaijan and Iran nor finds this surah as a tool to provide a way of establishing a peaceful multi-religious society. According to him, “this surah just differentiates among Muslims and disbelievers, and nothing else” (Huseynov, 2022).

### **Interpretation and Implication by the Iranian Muslim Scholars**

Within the Muslims, Iran hosts Twelver-Shia, Sunni-Hanafi, Sunni-Shafi, Zaidi-Shia and Ismaili-Shia fractions. Thus, this study tries to get views from the followers of respective sects within the Iran, and comes to know what are their beliefs about the correlation between Surah Kafiroon and peaceful multi-religious society.

### **Seyyed Asef Mehdi**

Being a pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelver-Shia scholar, staying in Qom, he highlights constitutional provisions of Iran and argues, “the articles 03 to 15, 19 to 55, 100 to 106 and 156 of the Iranian constitution ensure a peaceful multi-religious environment in Iran, and this is the true picture of the last verse of Surah Kafiroon”. However, in the case of Azerbaijan, he condemned the policies of Azerbaijan, blaming that “Azerbaijan is no more a Muslim but a secular country where rulers are gradually leaving Islamic identity for the sake of strengthening their relationship with Israel, for getting EU membership, and for triggering Iranian Azerbaijanis regarding demanding either amalgamation with the Republic of Azerbaijan or getting sovereign South Azerbaijan” (Mehdi, 2022) (Iranian-Government, 1989).

### **Hossein Bayat**

He is a Sunni-Hanafi cleric, staying in Zahedan. He also endorses the constitutional provisions that Seyyed Asef Mehdi defines, illustrating that the “Iranian political system facilitates and accommodates each religious segment peacefully. No one Sunni in Iran can blame the ruling elite for stopping him from offering prayers in his way. You may visit holy shrines or other Muslim religious places. You may find inter-faith harmony everywhere. Whatever we learned from Surah Kafiroon, the post-revolution Iranian political system practically implemented” (Bayat, 2022). However, on the question about Azerbaijan, he does not answer, claims to have no sufficient information.

### **Ali Behzad**

Being a resident of Tabriz, he is a Sunni-Shafi scholar. He idealizes not only Iran but Azerbaijan as a peaceful-multi-religious society. He claims, “he never faced any kind of restriction from Iranian authorities or IRGC for religious practices. He and his forefathers are always free in Iran for offering their prayers as per their religious teachings. Sunnis in Iran have no fear as some of the Western journalists or even some of Iranians settled abroad portray” (Behzad, 2022). He also admits that “Sunnis have all the constitutional and political rights in Iran. However, significantly northwestern Iran is experiencing a huge level of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism (Behzad, 2022)”. He offers that “if you want to trace the correlation

between Surah Kafiroon and peaceful multi-religious society, you may personally visit Iran and Azerbaijan. This is the fact that religious differences cannot be wiped out. However, to respect others and to ignore religious differences for the sake of mutual prosperity is the prime objective of Iranian and Azerbaijani societies. Hence, visitors should not rely on western propaganda but personally visit Iran and Azerbaijan. Their visit will make you able to evaluate a) what is right, b) what is wrong, and c) what ought to be” (Behzad, 2022).

### **Mahmoud Behraves**

Being a Zahedan-based scholar, he follows Zaidi-Shia Islam. He also finds Surah Kafiroon as the best solution for establishing a peaceful multi-religious environment. Therefore, he finds Azerbaijan and Iran, both states as the best practical forms of the teachings, described by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). According to him, “the theme of Charter of Madina, that was described in Surah Kafiroon, and that was implemented in the State of Madina, can be found in Azerbaijan and Iran where now each religious community is experiencing peace and shared growth (Behraves, 2022)”.

### **Mina Bahadori**

Although Mina Bahadori is a female businesswoman, she is considered as an expert in Ismaili Studies, formerly lived in Tehran but recently she has been settled in Vienna. She believes that “Imamate within the Ismaili Islam never allows any Muslim or community member to criticize others. Religion is the private code of everyone regarding connecting with his God and to those who are close to God” (Bahadori, 2022). She further claims that “Islam is a secular religion where the first Charter of Madina and then Surah Kafiroon defines inter-faith harmony, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism as the fundamental roots of any Muslim state. Therefore, there should not be a question about Iran and Azerbaijan, but wherever Muslims are lived, their society must follow secularism; a society where non-Muslims must also feel protection, the safety of life and freedom of living as per their faith” (Bahadori, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

By evaluating the perspectives of Azerbaijani and Iranian Muslim scholars (who belong to diverse sects), this study concludes that Surah Kafiroon gives a lesson of “live and let live” (Zaheer, 2022). The arguments of Seyid Nadir Bakuvi, Seyid Zahid Kerimov, Seyid Fuad Kerimov, Seyyed Asef Mehdi, Hossein Bayat, Nariman Behzad, Mahmoud Behraves, and Mina Bahadori regarding the correlation between the theme of Surah Kafiroon and “availing the peaceful multi-religious society” provide proper guidance to each fellow of Muslim societies (whether there is Azerbaijan or Iran) to support, facilitate and promote peace. Moreover, this Surah also teaches “those Muslims who do not want to stay in peace but try to criticize other religions, can also be assumed as disbelievers” (Bahadori, 2022).

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