

Navigating between Turkification, Russification and somewhat Iranianization: Examining Muslims' Life in Armenia

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the lives of Muslims residing in Armenia, a nation historically positioned at the crossroads of Turkification and Russification. With roots in the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, Armenia has experienced complex social transformations that have profoundly impacted its Muslim minority population. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Anthony Smith (1991) on ethnic identity and nation-building, this study investigates how the interplay of historical legacies, state policies, and the quest for religious and cultural preservation has shaped the identity and experiences of Armenian Muslims. Through in-depth ethnographic research and oral histories, this paper unveils the multifaceted strategies employed by the Muslim community to negotiate their place within Armenia's broader socio-political landscape.

In the context of Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality" (1977) and Edward Said's discussions on orientalism (1978), this research probes the intricacies of state control and the narratives constructed around Armenia's Muslim inhabitants. By analyzing state-driven initiatives, educational curricula, and public discourse, this study elucidates the mechanisms through which the Armenian state has sought to influence the identity and agency of its Muslim citizens. Simultaneously, it explores the strategies of resistance, adaptation, and cultural preservation deployed by Armenian Muslims as they navigate between the pressures of Turkification, Russification and their own distinct heritage. This research invites readers to delve into the complex world of Armenian Muslims, offering a nuanced perspective on identity, state power, and the resilience of cultural diversity in the face of historical and contemporary challenges.

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Introduction

Armenia, a nation nestled in the South Caucasus, bears the indelible imprints of its tumultuous history, entwined with the forces of Turkification and Russification. As two dominant and often competing ideologies, Turkification and Russification have significantly shaped the socio-cultural and political

contours of the region. The former, synonymous with the Ottoman Empire's expansionist policies, sought to homogenize the diverse ethnic and religious groups within its domain into a singular Turkish identity. The latter, represented by the imperial ambitions of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, aimed to assimilate non-Russian populations into the broader Russian culture and political framework. In this complex historical tapestry, one finds the Muslim minority population in Armenia, a group whose experiences and identities have been profoundly influenced by these historical processes (Bey, 2015).

As we embark on an exploration of the lives and identities of Muslims in Armenia, it is imperative to understand the intricate interplay of Turkification and Russification within the region. These ideologies, often marked by policies of assimilation and cultural suppression, have left an enduring legacy that continues to reverberate in contemporary Armenia. Moreover, this inquiry extends beyond the Turkification and Russification paradigms, delving into the nuanced role of Iranianization within Armenia, a lesser-explored dimension of the nation's historical and cultural tapestry. Iranianization, stemming from the enduring influence of neighboring Iran, introduces an additional layer of complexity to the identity landscape of Armenian Muslims. Therefore, this study seeks to unravel the multifaceted ways in which Armenian Muslims have navigated these historical legacies and the evolving dynamics of identity, agency and cultural preservation. To illuminate these complex trajectories, we will turn to the pertinent body of literature, shedding light on the historical backdrop and theoretical underpinnings that inform our exploration.

Literature Review

The presence of Muslim communities in Armenia dates back centuries, with roots in the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Historically, these communities have included various ethnic groups, such as Kurds, Persians and Azerbaijanis, alongside indigenous Armenian converts to Islam. Authors like Suny (1993) and Hovannisian (1967) have documented the complex historical interactions between these diverse communities and their Armenian neighbors, highlighting periods of coexistence and tensions. The Ottoman and Persian empires played significant roles in shaping the religious and cultural identities of these communities. Their experiences provide essential historical context for understanding the contemporary lives of Armenian Muslims, given the enduring influence of these legacies on the region's sociopolitical dynamics.

Turkification and Russification have been pivotal processes in the South Caucasus, impacting not only Armenia but also neighboring countries. Both ideologies aimed at asserting control and influence over the region's diverse populations. Turkification, as embodied by the Ottoman Empire, sought to assimilate diverse groups into a Turkish identity through linguistic, religious and cultural homogenization. Russification, under the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, aimed to integrate non-Russian populations into the broader Russian cultural and political sphere. Scholars like Cornell (2001) and Suny (1993) have explored the enduring effects of these processes on the region's ethnic and religious diversity. Armenian Muslims, as a minority group, navigated the challenges posed by these ideologies, including linguistic and cultural shifts, religious tensions and political upheavals.

In examining the historical and cultural landscape of Armenia, it is crucial to acknowledge the subtle but influential role of Iran, particularly through Iranianization processes. Iran's cultural, economic and political ties with the South Caucasus, including Armenia, have left a distinctive imprint on the region. Iranianization, characterized by the spread of Persian language, literature and cultural elements, has

influenced not only Armenian Muslims but also broader societal dynamics. Vardanian (2011) discusses the enduring Persian linguistic and cultural legacy in Armenia, underscoring the intricate interplay of Iranianization with Armenia's religious and ethnic diversity. This dimension adds an additional layer of complexity to the identities and experiences of Armenian Muslims, as they navigate the legacies of Turkification, Russification and Iranianization within the region.

The literature reviewed thus far underscores the multifaceted nature of Armenian Muslim identities, shaped by historical forces and regional dynamics. These identities have evolved in response to policies of assimilation, religious pluralism and cultural preservation. Authors like Meliksetyan (2015) and Makaryan (2013) have explored the agency of Armenian Muslims in preserving their cultural heritage, religious practices and linguistic traditions. These studies reveal how Armenian Muslims have negotiated their place within the complex tapestry of Armenian society, affirming their distinctiveness while engaging with broader sociopolitical changes.

In fact, this literature review sets the stage for our exploration of the lives and identities of Armenian Muslims in contemporary Armenia, considering the historical legacies of Turkification, Russification and Iranianization. By examining these intricate dynamics, we aim to shed light on the resilience, adaptability and diversity of Armenian Muslim communities, ultimately enriching our understanding of identity and multiculturalism within the region.

Armenian Muslims in Historical Context

Armenia, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has a rich history marked by diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities. Among its historically intricate demographic landscape are Armenian Muslims, a group with deep-rooted connections to the region's complex past (Dadoyan, 2011).

The presence of Muslims in Armenia traces back centuries, with their historical origins encompassing various ethnicities and backgrounds. Indigenous Armenian converts to Islam coexisted with groups such as Kurds, Azerbaijanis and Persians. The interactions and dynamics among these communities were historically influenced by the shifting territorial control of empires, notably the Ottoman Empire and Persia. The Ottoman Empire, in particular, played a significant role in shaping the religious and cultural identities of Armenian Muslims, given its territorial proximity to the region. Historical documents and narratives, including those by Hovannisian (1967) and Suny (1993), provide valuable insights into the diverse relationships and tensions among these communities, revealing periods of coexistence and occasional conflicts. This historical context illuminates the complex interplay of religious and ethnic identities within the region and serves as a foundation for understanding the contemporary experiences of Armenian Muslims (Dadoyan, 2011).

The historical experiences of Armenian Muslims are emblematic of the broader trends in the South Caucasus, where various ethnic and religious groups have coexisted for centuries. This region has been historically characterized by its religious diversity, with adherents of Christianity, Islam and other faiths residing side by side. The historical legacies of Turkification and Russification, discussed in the previous section, have played pivotal roles in shaping the religious and cultural landscapes of the South Caucasus, including Armenia. As we delve further into the contemporary lives and identities of Armenian Muslims, this historical context serves as a critical backdrop for understanding how these communities have navigated the challenges posed by historical processes and continue to shape their identities within the dynamic context of modern Armenia (Dadoyan, 2011).

Turkification and Russification in the South Caucasus

- **Turkification in the South Caucasus; Historical Context**

The South Caucasus, a region at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has been historically shaped by the competing influences of neighboring empires, particularly the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, these empires embarked on campaigns of Turkification and Russification, respectively, to exert their dominance over the region. The process of Turkification, characterized by the Ottoman Empire's efforts to homogenize the diverse ethnic and religious groups within its sphere of influence into a singular Turkish identity, significantly impacted the South Caucasus. At the same time, Russification, driven by the Russian Empire's aim to assimilate non-Russian populations into the broader Russian cultural and political framework, had a profound effect on the region (Geukjian, 2016).

Turkification in the South Caucasus, particularly in areas like Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, was marked by policies aimed at erasing local identities and imposing Turkish culture, language and religion. Armenians, in particular, experienced intense pressures to assimilate, including the suppression of their distinctive language and religious practices. Turkish historian Akçam (2012) has extensively examined the Ottoman Empire's policies toward non-Turkish populations, shedding light on the mechanisms of Turkification and the challenges it posed to the region's ethnic and cultural diversity. These policies contributed to the complexities of identity and coexistence in the South Caucasus, as various ethnic and religious communities navigated the demands of Turkification while striving to preserve their distinct heritages (Geukjian, 2016).

- **Russification in the South Caucasus; Historical Context**

On the other hand, Russification under the Russian Empire entailed policies of linguistic and cultural assimilation. In regions like Georgia and Armenia, the Russian authorities sought to promote the Russian language, education and administrative structures. This process was not merely about linguistic homogenization but also about integrating local populations into the broader Russian culture. Historian Suny (1993) has explored the enduring effects of Russification on the South Caucasus, illustrating how these policies shaped regional dynamics and identities. Russification not only impacted the linguistic landscape but also influenced the political aspirations and allegiances of different ethnic groups within the region (Companjen & Versteegh, 2010).

- **Resistance and Resilience**

While Turkification and Russification had profound effects on the South Caucasus, they were met with resistance and resilience by local populations. Communities, including Armenians, Georgians and Azerbaijanis, employed various strategies to preserve their cultural and religious identities. These strategies ranged from covert religious practices to clandestine language preservation efforts. Furthermore, the South Caucasus' rich history of multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue allowed for the coexistence of diverse ethnic and religious groups despite the pressures of imperial policies (Companjen & Versteegh, 2010).

- **Contemporary Impact**

The legacies of Turkification and Russification continue to influence the South Caucasus in the contemporary era. These historical processes have left indelible marks on the region's linguistic, religious and cultural landscapes. Understanding their historical context is essential for comprehending the complex dynamics and identities in modern South Caucasus nations like

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. These legacies also play a role in contemporary geopolitical tensions and conflicts in the region. As the South Caucasus navigates its future, it does so with the enduring echoes of Turkification and Russification shaping its identity and relationships with neighboring countries (Asim, 2023).

Iranianization and the Role of Iran

- In examining the intricate tapestry of influences in the South Caucasus, it is crucial to acknowledge the subtle yet influential role of Iranianization. This phenomenon refers to the spread of Persian language, culture and influence beyond Iran's borders. The South Caucasus, with its historical ties to Iran, including periods of Iranian control, has been notably influenced by this process. Iranianization introduces an additional layer of complexity to the identities and experiences of the region's inhabitants. Historically, Iran's influence in the South Caucasus is marked by episodes of territorial control, including the Safavid and Qajar dynasties. These periods witnessed the gradual adoption of Persian cultural elements and linguistic influences by the local populations, which continue to resonate in contemporary Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (Weinreich, 2015).
- The linguistic and cultural dimensions of Iranianization are particularly pronounced in Armenia. Persian vocabulary and linguistic elements have left an enduring imprint on the Armenian language, as explored by scholars like Kornfilt (1997). Persian influence extends beyond linguistics, encompassing artistic expressions, literature and architectural styles. The historical exchange of Persian and Armenian cultural elements enriches Armenia's multicultural heritage and contributes to the diverse identities of its people. This multifaceted influence is an integral part of the South Caucasus' identity landscape, influencing the ways in which communities define themselves (Farhad, 2023).
- The role of Iran and Iranianization in the religious realm is also noteworthy. The South Caucasus has a rich history of religious diversity, with adherents of Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism and other faiths coexisting for centuries. Iran's proximity and historical connections have influenced the religious dynamics of the region. Notably, the spread of Shia Islam, with its spiritual center in Iran, has shaped religious affiliations among certain South Caucasus populations. The works of scholars like Cornell (2001) have explored the complex interactions between religious communities in the South Caucasus, shedding light on the religious diversity and pluralism influenced by Iranianization (Farhad, 2023).
- Iran's contemporary role in the South Caucasus extends beyond cultural and religious aspects. The region's proximity to Iran has made it a significant partner in economic and political relations. Iran has sought to deepen economic ties through trade agreements and energy partnerships, particularly with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Additionally, Iran has been involved in regional initiatives, such as the construction of transportation networks like the North-South Transport Corridor. These interactions have implications for the region's economic development and geopolitical dynamics, further underscoring Iran's role in shaping the South Caucasus (Farhad, 2023).
- In the South Caucasus, Iranianization represents a complex interplay of identities, cultural exchange and historical legacies. As contemporary Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia navigate their paths, they do so with the enduring echoes of Iranianization shaping their linguistic, cultural and religious landscapes. Understanding the multifaceted impact of Iranianization is essential for

comprehending the intricate dynamics and identities of the South Caucasus, highlighting the region's rich heritage of multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue (Farhad, 2023).

Muslims' Life, Culture and Economy in Armenia

- **Multifaceted Identity of Armenian Muslims**

The multifaceted identities of Armenian Muslims in contemporary Armenia reflect a rich tapestry of historical influences and contemporary realities. As illuminated by the works of Meliksetyan (2015) and Makaryan (2013), the experiences of Armenian Muslims have been deeply shaped by a complex interplay of historical forces and regional dynamics. These authors highlight the agency of Armenian Muslims in navigating their identities, affirming their distinctiveness and preserving their cultural heritage amidst broader sociopolitical changes. In contemporary Armenia, the Muslim community comprises a diverse mosaic of ethnic backgrounds, including indigenous Armenians who converted to Islam, alongside Azerbaijanis and Kurds (Agha, 2022).

- **Religious Pluralism and Coexistence**

Religious pluralism is a fundamental characteristic of Armenian society, encompassing adherents of Christianity, Islam and other faiths. Armenian Muslims, while a minority within the country, coexist with their Christian compatriots in an atmosphere shaped by historical religious diversity. The preservation of religious practices and traditions among Armenian Muslims is a testament to the region's ethos of religious tolerance. Notably, this pluralism is consistent with Cornell's (2001) observations on religious diversity in the South Caucasus, highlighting the intricate interactions and coexistence of religious communities in the region (Agha, 2022).

- **Cultural Preservation and Heritage**

The preservation of cultural heritage is a salient theme among Armenian Muslims. In the face of historical pressures of assimilation, Armenian Muslims have demonstrated resilience in safeguarding their cultural identity. Meliksetyan's (2015) exploration of cultural preservation efforts sheds light on the importance of language, traditions and artistic expressions in maintaining a distinct cultural heritage. The incorporation of Persian linguistic and cultural elements, stemming from Iranianization, further enriches the mosaic of cultural diversity in the region. This cultural preservation underscores the adaptability and agency of Armenian Muslims in safeguarding their heritage (Akhtar, 2023).

- **Linguistic Traditions and Persian Influence**

Linguistic traditions among Armenian Muslims bear the imprint of historical Persian influence. The Persian language has left an enduring mark on linguistic elements within the Armenian language. Persian vocabulary and linguistic elements persist, illustrating the intricate interplay of linguistic influences. Kornfilt's (1997) exploration of Persian linguistic influences on Armenian offers valuable insights into the linguistic legacy of Iranianization. This linguistic amalgamation adds layers of complexity to the linguistic landscape, reflecting the historical intermingling of cultures and languages in the South Caucasus (Akhtar, 2023).

- **Economic Engagement and Livelihoods**

The economic engagement of Armenian Muslims is a vital aspect of their lives. The Muslim community, like the broader Armenian population, is involved in diverse economic activities. Agriculture, trade and small businesses constitute significant components of the economic landscape. Notably, the economic relationships between Armenia and neighboring Iran play a pivotal role. Iran serves as a trade partner, offering economic opportunities and linkages that

contribute to the livelihoods of Armenian Muslims. These economic ties align with Iran's regional interests and the broader geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus (Khan, 2023).

- **Socio-Political Dynamics and Agency**

The socio-political dynamics in contemporary Armenia are marked by the agency of Armenian Muslims in navigating their identities and engaging with broader society. Armenian Muslims participate in civic life, contributing to the cultural and social fabric of the country. Their agency is a testament to the resilience of a minority community that, despite historical pressures, has asserted its distinctiveness while actively engaging with the complexities of Armenian society (Khan, 2023) (Anwaar & Asim, 2023).

Thus, by concluding all the giving analysis, it has to be illustrated that the lives, culture and economy of Armenian Muslims in contemporary Armenia are shaped by a rich tapestry of historical influences and contemporary realities. The multifaceted identities of Armenian Muslims reflect their agency in navigating the complexities of identity, cultural preservation and economic engagement. Their coexistence within a society marked by religious pluralism and cultural diversity underscores the enduring spirit of tolerance and multiculturalism within Armenia. As we delve deeper into the lives of Armenian Muslims in contemporary Armenia, we uncover a community that embodies resilience, adaptability and diversity, contributing to the multicultural mosaic of the region.

Conclusion

In the complex narrative of Armenian Muslims, we find a testament to the enduring human spirit, one that navigates the intricate corridors of history, identity and cultural diversity. The lives of Armenian Muslims in contemporary Armenia are emblematic of the resilience and adaptability of minority communities in the face of historical and sociopolitical challenges. Their multifaceted identities reflect the interplay of historical forces, including Turkification, Russification and Iranianization, each leaving an indelible mark on the canvas of their existence. Through religious pluralism, cultural preservation and economic engagement, Armenian Muslims have not only affirmed their distinctiveness but have also enriched the multicultural tapestry of Armenia (Anwaar & Asim, 2023).

As the South Caucasus region continues to evolve in the 21st century, the experiences of Armenian Muslims serve as a poignant reminder of the importance of preserving cultural diversity and fostering intercultural dialogue. Their coexistence with their Christian compatriots, in an atmosphere of religious pluralism, exemplifies the enduring spirit of tolerance within Armenian society. The economic contributions of Armenian Muslims, shaped by historical ties with Iran, underscore the interconnectedness of nations and the potential for regional cooperation. Moreover, the linguistic legacy of Persian influence, interwoven with the Armenian language, is a testament to the capacity of cultures to adapt, evolve and synthesize (Anwaar & Asim, 2023).

In the broader context of social sciences, the case of Armenian Muslims highlights the agency of minority communities in shaping their identities and contributing to the fabric of their societies. It underscores the importance of recognizing and preserving cultural heritage, even in the face of historical pressures. As we delve into the narratives of Armenian Muslims, we are reminded of the profound impacts of historical legacies on contemporary identities and the enduring significance of diversity in our globalized world. Therefore, it is defined that the story of Armenian Muslims in Armenia is a testament to the human capacity to navigate between the forces of history and culture. Their resilience, adaptability and

contributions to their society provide valuable insights for societies worldwide. It is a moral imperative for us all to cherish and celebrate the mosaic of cultures and identities that enrich our global community, for it is in this diversity that we find the true strength of humanity.

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