



Research Article¹

Caucasus Studies
Scientific-Theoretical Journal

Online ISSN: 2789-0198
Print ISSN: 2709-5096

Rovshan Isayev

Doctoral Researcher
Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography
Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences
Baku, Azerbaijan
Email: r_isayev@rambler.ru

Religio-Political Extremism in the Caucasus: Drivers, Security Risks, and Policy Implications

Abstract

The interaction between religion, political mobilisation, and regional security has become an increasingly important area of research in the Caucasus, particularly since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The collapse of Soviet ideological and institutional structures created new opportunities for religious revival and freedom of belief, but it also produced regulatory, educational, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities that could be exploited by radical movements and politically motivated external actors. This study examines the principal drivers and potential consequences of religio-political extremism in the Caucasus, with particular attention to Azerbaijan's post-Soviet experience. It employs qualitative document analysis, drawing on academic literature, press materials, policy discussions, and previously conducted public-opinion inquiries. The analysis distinguishes peaceful religious activity and legitimate missionary engagement from extremism involving coercion, incitement, political violence, or the rejection of constitutional order. The findings suggest that extremist mobilisation cannot be attributed to religion alone. It emerges through the interaction of geopolitical competition, unresolved conflicts, weak religious literacy, socioeconomic insecurity, identity crises, foreign ideological influence, organised criminal networks, and the strategic manipulation of religious narratives. The article argues that indiscriminate restrictions on religious communities may prove counterproductive by intensifying marginalisation and mistrust. Effective prevention requires a balanced policy combining lawful security measures with religious freedom, civic education, transparent institutional regulation, socioeconomic inclusion, community engagement, and regional cooperation. Such an approach can strengthen societal resilience while protecting constitutional rights and preventing the politicisation of religious difference.

Keywords: religio-political extremism; radicalisation; Caucasus; regional security; organised crime; geopolitical competition; religious literacy

DOI: 10.56334/cs/7.2.3

Citation: Isayev, R. (2026). Religio-political extremism in the Caucasus: Drivers, security risks, and policy implications. *Caucasus Studies*, 7(2), 36–50. <https://doi.org/10.56334/cs/7.2.3>

¹ Article received: 03.01.2026;
Article Revised: 20.07.2026;
Articles Accepted: 02.08.2026;
Published online: 16.08.2026

Introduction

The relationship between religion and politics has re-emerged as a central issue in security studies, political sociology, and international relations. Since the final decade of the twentieth century, scholarly and policy debates have increasingly focused on the political instrumentalisation of religion, the relationship between secular and religious forms of governance, the mobilisation of religious identities, and the security implications of violent extremism. These questions are particularly important in regions undergoing political transition, state-building, armed conflict, and rapid changes in collective identity.

The Caucasus constitutes a highly relevant setting for examining these processes. It is characterised by significant ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, overlapping geopolitical interests, unresolved or recently transformed conflicts, and the continuing effects of imperial and Soviet governance. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the countries of the region experienced the simultaneous reconstruction of state institutions, market-oriented economic reforms, national identity formation, and religious revival. These transformations expanded religious freedom and enabled communities to restore institutions and traditions suppressed during the Soviet period. At the same time, the rapid transition created institutional and ideological vacuums in which foreign religious networks, radical movements, political actors, and criminal organisations could seek influence.

It is essential, however, to distinguish religious revival from religious extremism. Religious belief, worship, missionary activity, theological disagreement, and participation in a religious community do not in themselves constitute extremism. In a constitutional state, such activities ordinarily fall within freedom of thought, conscience, expression, and association. Religio-political extremism arises when religious narratives are employed to legitimise coercion, incitement, systematic intolerance, political violence, terrorism, or attempts to dismantle the constitutional order. Conflating peaceful religious pluralism with extremism may stigmatise lawful communities, weaken trust in public institutions, and undermine preventive security policy.

Extremism should therefore be understood as a multidimensional social and political phenomenon rather than as an automatic consequence of religious commitment. Radicalisation may be influenced by a combination of factors, including political exclusion, perceived injustice, socioeconomic marginalisation, unresolved conflict, identity insecurity, weak religious literacy, exposure to propaganda, transnational ideological networks, and the activities of organised criminal groups. Religion may provide a vocabulary through which grievances are interpreted, but the causes of mobilisation frequently extend beyond theology.

In the post-Soviet Caucasus, the weakening of established ideological structures was accompanied by an increased search for cultural, national, and religious identity. Communities that had experienced decades of state atheism faced the challenge of reconstructing religious knowledge and institutions within a short period. Limited access to qualified religious education made some social groups vulnerable to simplified, politicised, or externally produced interpretations of religion. External organisations—religious, political, charitable, or geopolitical—also entered the region and attempted to influence local communities through education, humanitarian assistance, publications, media, and institutional support.

The presence of foreign religious organisations should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of extremist activity. Such organisations differ considerably in their doctrines, methods, objectives, and legal status. Some engage exclusively in peaceful religious or humanitarian work, whereas others may promote intolerance, political confrontation, or isolation from the wider society. A credible assessment must therefore be based on documented conduct rather than denominational identity or foreign origin. The decisive criteria should include incitement to violence, coercive recruitment, support for terrorism, systematic hate speech, unlawful financing, and connections with violent or criminal networks.

Azerbaijan's geographical position and sociopolitical history make it particularly significant within this regional discussion. Situated between Russia, Iran, Türkiye, the Caspian basin, and the wider Black

Sea region, Azerbaijan has historically been exposed to competing geopolitical and ideological influences. Following the restoration of independence in 1991, the country confronted armed conflict, territorial occupation, mass displacement, economic transition, and the urgent consolidation of state institutions. These conditions created serious social pressures while the country was simultaneously reconstructing its system of religious governance and redefining the place of religion in public life.

The Azerbaijani constitutional model is based on secular statehood, equality before the law, and freedom of conscience. This framework is important because secularism should not be interpreted as hostility toward religion. Rather, it should ensure state neutrality, equal legal protection for different religious communities, and the prevention of religious institutions being used to establish coercive political authority. Maintaining this balance is especially important when the state seeks to prevent extremism without unnecessarily restricting peaceful religious practice.

The geopolitical use of religious identity represents an additional challenge. Regional and external powers may employ religious narratives to expand influence, shape public opinion, cultivate political networks, or intensify social divisions. In such cases, religious discourse becomes interconnected with strategic interests, information operations, and competition over political orientation. This does not mean that every foreign religious relationship constitutes interference. It does, however, require transparent financial regulation, institutional accountability, and careful analysis of the relationship between religious organisations and political actors.

Connections between extremist networks and organised crime also require consideration. Illicit financing, arms trafficking, document falsification, human smuggling, and money laundering may provide extremist groups with operational resources. Criminal and extremist organisations do not necessarily share the same ideological objectives, but they may cooperate pragmatically when their interests converge. An effective counter-extremism strategy must consequently integrate financial intelligence, border security, criminal investigation, community policing, and international cooperation.

A security-centred response alone is nevertheless insufficient. Excessive restrictions, collective suspicion, and the stigmatisation of particular religious or ethnic communities may contribute to alienation and reinforce extremist narratives. Preventive policy should instead address the broader conditions that allow radical ideologies to acquire influence. These include inadequate civic and religious education, limited socioeconomic opportunities, low institutional trust, political marginalisation, and the absence of credible channels for peaceful participation.

Religious literacy is especially important in this context. Individuals who possess limited knowledge of their own religious traditions may be more susceptible to decontextualised doctrines and manipulative propaganda. Educational initiatives should therefore promote critical thinking, knowledge of constitutional rights, media literacy, and awareness of the internal diversity of religious traditions. Qualified religious scholars and community leaders may also play an important role in challenging violent interpretations and preventing the monopolisation of religious discourse by radical actors.

The digital transformation of communication has introduced further challenges not adequately addressed in early post-Soviet analyses. Extremist propaganda is no longer dependent exclusively on physical organisations, printed literature, or local places of assembly. Social-media platforms, encrypted communication services, online video content, and transnational virtual networks can facilitate ideological dissemination, recruitment, fundraising, and operational coordination. Contemporary analysis must therefore move beyond the institutional environment of the 1990s and examine how digital ecosystems reshape radicalisation processes.

Against this background, the present study investigates the drivers and potential threats associated with religio-political extremism in the Caucasus. It addresses three principal questions: Which domestic and external conditions may facilitate extremist mobilisation? How are religious narratives incorporated into geopolitical and criminal strategies? Which policy instruments can reduce security risks without violating religious freedom and legitimate pluralism?

The study argues that religio-political extremism in the Caucasus should be analysed through a comprehensive framework combining political, socioeconomic, ideological, criminal, and geopolitical

dimensions. Its central premise is that effective prevention requires both societal resilience and legitimate state institutions. Sustainable security cannot be achieved solely through prohibition and enforcement; it also depends on education, inclusion, accountable governance, interreligious dialogue, protection of constitutional freedoms, and evidence-based differentiation between peaceful religious activity and violent extremism.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Religio-Political Extremism

The literature on religio-political extremism demonstrates that the phenomenon cannot be explained through religious doctrine alone. Contemporary research generally distinguishes religious conservatism, fundamentalism, radicalism, and violent extremism. Although these categories may overlap in particular cases, they are not interchangeable. Religious belief, missionary activity, criticism of secular culture, and adherence to conservative values do not necessarily constitute extremism. Extremism becomes a security concern when ideological commitments are combined with coercion, systematic intolerance, incitement, support for political violence, or attempts to undermine constitutional order.

Borum (2011) argues that radicalisation should be understood as a gradual and context-dependent process rather than as the predictable outcome of membership in a particular religion. Individuals may adopt radical ideas without participating in violence, while some individuals who engage in political violence may possess only limited theological knowledge. Horgan (2008) similarly rejects the search for a single extremist personality profile and recommends examining the different pathways through which individuals enter, remain in, and disengage from violent organisations.

Moghaddam's (2005) staircase model conceptualises radicalisation as a narrowing sequence of perceived options. Experiences of injustice, blocked mobility, group polarisation, moral disengagement, and exposure to organisations legitimising violence may progressively increase an individual's willingness to participate in extremist activity. The model does not suggest that socioeconomic dissatisfaction automatically produces terrorism. Rather, perceived grievance becomes consequential when it is interpreted through ideological narratives and reinforced by group structures.

Kruglanski et al. (2014) place the search for personal significance at the centre of radicalisation. According to this perspective, experiences of humiliation, social exclusion, political defeat, identity loss, or personal failure may increase receptiveness to movements promising dignity, belonging, and heroic purpose. Ideology identifies the alleged cause of the grievance and presents participation in the movement as a means of restoring significance. This framework is relevant to conflict-affected and transitional societies, where rapid institutional change may intensify uncertainty concerning identity and social status.

Post-Soviet Transformation and Religious Revival

The dissolution of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered the religious environment of the Caucasus. Soviet state atheism had weakened religious institutions, interrupted formal theological education, and restricted the public transmission of religious knowledge. After independence, religious communities gained opportunities to restore places of worship, educational networks, and public activities. However, this revival occurred during a period characterised by political instability, economic transition, armed conflict, population displacement, and institutional reconstruction.

Kopylova (2001) examines adaptation processes in contemporary multiconfessional societies and emphasises that religious diversity must be managed through social integration, dialogue, and institutional accommodation. Her analysis suggests that the re-emergence of religious identities in post-authoritarian societies is not inherently destabilising. Instability becomes more likely when communities experience exclusion, when institutions fail to regulate diversity fairly, or when political actors use confessional differences for mobilisation.

Aliyev et al. (2007) provide a regionally focused analysis of religio-political extremism and ethnoconfessional tolerance in the North Caucasus. Their study identifies the interaction of radical ideology, ethnic conflict, weak institutions, criminal networks, foreign influence, and socioeconomic

problems as important components of regional insecurity. A major contribution of this work is its recognition that religious extremism operates within a broader ethno-political environment. In the North Caucasus, religious mobilisation cannot be separated from questions of identity, territorial conflict, governance, social inequality, and relations between regional communities and state institutions.

The regional literature therefore supports a multidimensional explanation. The availability of radical ideas is only one component of mobilisation. Such ideas acquire political force when they interact with unresolved grievances, weakened institutional legitimacy, conflict memories, informal power structures, and networks capable of recruitment and financing. This position corresponds with international research that conceptualises radicalisation as the product of interactions among individual, group, societal, and political factors (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2008; Schmid, 2013).

Religion, Geopolitics, and External Influence

The geopolitical position of the Caucasus has made the region subject to overlapping political, economic, military, and ideological interests. Novruzoglu (2004) examines threats to Azerbaijani statehood within a national-security framework and treats external ideological influence, terrorism, separatism, information operations, and transnational networks as interconnected challenges. From this perspective, religious narratives may be used strategically by state and non-state actors seeking political influence.

Mehdiyev (2008) likewise situates ideological and religious developments within the broader process of state-building and political modernisation in Azerbaijan. His analysis reflects concerns about the ideological fragmentation that followed the collapse of the Soviet system and the resulting exposure of society to competing religious and political doctrines. The work emphasises the importance of state institutions, national identity, social stability, and a coherent model of secular governance.

Nevertheless, the concept of external influence must be applied carefully. The foreign origin of a religious organisation, financial contribution, publication, or missionary initiative does not by itself demonstrate extremist intent. Religious communities frequently maintain legitimate transnational connections. A scientifically credible assessment must distinguish peaceful cross-border religious cooperation from covert political manipulation, unlawful financing, coercive recruitment, incitement, and operational support for violence.

Sageman (2004) demonstrates that extremist organisations often develop through social networks rather than through simple top-down indoctrination. Family connections, friendships, trusted intermediaries, shared experiences, and small-group solidarity can be more influential than formal propaganda. External actors may provide ideological or material resources, but their influence depends on the local networks through which these resources are interpreted and distributed.

This insight is particularly important for the Caucasus. External ideological influence does not operate in an institutional vacuum. Its effectiveness depends on domestic grievances, religious literacy, public trust, community relations, political inclusion, and the credibility of state institutions. Consequently, blaming extremism exclusively on foreign actors may obscure domestic conditions that make certain communities vulnerable to radical narratives.

Organised Crime, Terrorism, and Extremist Networks

The relationship between organised crime and violent extremism is another important theme. Extremist and criminal organisations may differ in their stated objectives: criminal groups generally seek material profit, whereas extremist organisations claim ideological or political goals. Nevertheless, they may cooperate in arms trafficking, document falsification, illicit finance, smuggling, money laundering, and cross-border movement.

Novruzoglu (2004) treats organised crime and terrorism as mutually reinforcing threats to state security. This position is consistent with the network-oriented literature, which indicates that extremist organisations often depend on informal logistical and financial arrangements rather than on conventional institutional structures (Sageman, 2004). Such arrangements can make it difficult to distinguish ideological organisations from criminal networks based solely on membership or public statements.

However, the existence of criminal activity within a religious environment should not be used to stigmatise an entire community. Security assessment should focus on documented actions, financial transactions, organisational relationships, and evidence of criminal intent. Collective suspicion can weaken cooperation between religious communities and law-enforcement institutions, thereby reducing the information and trust necessary for effective prevention.

Azerbaijan's Legal and Institutional Response

Azerbaijan's legal framework seeks to balance freedom of religious belief with the protection of public order and national security. The Law on Freedom of Religious Belief provides the principal regulatory framework governing religious organisations, religious education, registration, literature, and relations between religious communities and the state. The amendments adopted in 2009 and 2011 expanded or clarified several regulatory provisions relating to registration, professional religious activity, religious education, and the circulation of religious materials.

The official legal framework should be interpreted together with constitutional protections for freedom of conscience and equality before the law. Restrictions on religious activity must therefore have a clear legal basis, pursue a legitimate objective, and be applied proportionately. Regulation aimed at preventing violence or unlawful foreign interference should not treat theological difference or peaceful minority status as evidence of extremism.

The former Ministry of National Security's institutional account of counterterrorism presented intelligence, prevention, interagency coordination, and international cooperation as important elements of Azerbaijan's response. Azerbaijan's position as a conflict-affected state and an energy and transportation hub has increased the strategic importance of border security, critical-infrastructure protection, financial monitoring, and cooperation with international counterterrorism mechanisms.

Orucov (2011) describes the State Committee on Religious Associations as an important institution in the development of Azerbaijan's state-religion relations. The Committee's functions include communication with religious communities, implementation of relevant legislation, and support for religious tolerance. From a preventive perspective, such an institution can contribute to stability when it combines transparent regulation with dialogue and equal treatment.

The regional and international literature warns, however, that prevention should not rely exclusively on administrative control. Schmid (2013) argues that counter-radicalisation policies require conceptual clarity and evidence-based distinctions among radical thought, nonviolent activism, violent extremism, and terrorism. When these categories are combined indiscriminately, counter-extremism policy may become overly broad and counterproductive.

Religious Literacy, Tolerance, and Community Resilience

Ethnoconfessional tolerance is a recurring theme in the regional literature. Aliyev et al. (2007) argue that the prevention of extremism in the North Caucasus requires attention to intercommunal relations and the social conditions affecting religious and ethnic groups. Kopylova (2001) similarly views adaptation and dialogue as central to stability in multiconfessional societies.

Religious literacy can strengthen resilience by enabling individuals to distinguish established religious teachings from decontextualised propaganda. Societies emerging from state atheism may face a paradox: public interest in religion can increase more rapidly than access to qualified religious education. In such environments, simplified online materials, charismatic recruiters, or politically motivated interpretations may acquire influence.

Community policing and institutional engagement may offer more sustainable preventive mechanisms than collective surveillance. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2014) emphasises that cooperation among law-enforcement bodies, local authorities, educators, families, civil society, and religious leaders can help identify risks without treating entire communities as security threats. Trust is therefore not merely a human-rights consideration; it is also a practical security resource.

Critical Assessment of the Existing Literature

The reviewed literature makes several important contributions. It identifies the geopolitical, ethno-political, criminal, ideological, and institutional dimensions of extremism; highlights the vulnerabilities created by post-Soviet transition; and recognises the importance of tolerance and state capacity. Regional studies also provide historical and contextual information that may be absent from general theories of radicalisation.

Nevertheless, several limitations are evident. First, some regional publications employ broad concepts such as “sect,” “missionary threat,” “foreign influence,” and “extremism” without providing consistent operational definitions. Such terminology can unintentionally combine peaceful religious minorities with organisations involved in coercion or violence. Second, some claims rely heavily on institutional accounts, media reports, or estimates whose methodologies are not explained. Third, much of the existing literature predates the growth of social media, encrypted communication, online recruitment, and contemporary digital propaganda.

A further limitation is the tendency to explain extremism primarily through external influence. Foreign support can be important, but an exclusively external explanation may overlook domestic grievances, institutional distrust, socioeconomic exclusion, identity insecurity, and local political conflict. International research demonstrates that extremist mobilisation normally results from combinations of enabling conditions rather than from a single cause (Borum, 2011; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Moghaddam, 2005).

Research Gap

There remains a need for contemporary empirical research on radicalisation in Azerbaijan and the wider Caucasus. Future studies should combine document analysis with anonymised interviews, community-level surveys, court records, financial data, digital-network analysis, and comparative regional research. Particular attention should be paid to the distinction between religious conservatism, nonviolent radicalism, hate-based mobilisation, violent extremism, and terrorism.

Research should also examine how gender, age, education, migration, conflict exposure, socioeconomic status, and digital-media consumption influence vulnerability or resilience. The effectiveness of prevention programmes should be evaluated through transparent indicators rather than institutional claims alone.

The present study contributes to this field by integrating regional security literature with contemporary theories of radicalisation. It approaches religio-political extremism not as an inevitable product of religion but as a process emerging from the interaction of grievances, ideological narratives, social networks, political opportunity, institutional conditions, geopolitical competition, and criminal resources. This framework provides a more balanced foundation for protecting both national security and freedom of religion.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design combining document analysis with interpretive thematic analysis. This methodological approach was selected because the study aims to examine the political, social, ideological, geopolitical, and legal dimensions of religio-political extremism rather than to test a single causal hypothesis. Qualitative document analysis enables the systematic interpretation of academic publications, legal documents, institutional materials, and policy texts while preserving the historical and regional contexts in which they were produced.

Religio-political extremism was treated as a multidimensional process rather than as an inherent consequence of religious belief. The analytical framework distinguished among peaceful religious observance, religious conservatism, missionary activity, nonviolent radicalism, hate-based mobilisation, violent extremism, and terrorism. This distinction was necessary because conceptual ambiguity may result in lawful religious activity being incorrectly classified as a security threat (Borum, 2011; Schmid, 2013).

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which political, socioeconomic, ideological, and geopolitical conditions facilitate religio-political extremism in the Caucasus?
2. How do post-Soviet institutional transformation and religious revival affect regional vulnerability to radicalisation?
3. What role do social networks, organised crime, foreign influence, and identity-based mobilisation play in extremist activity?
4. How does Azerbaijan's legal and institutional framework seek to balance national security with freedom of religion?
5. Which preventive approaches can reduce violent-extremism risks without stigmatising peaceful religious communities?

Source Selection

The documentary corpus was constructed through purposive sampling. Sources were included when they addressed one or more of the following subjects: religious extremism, political radicalisation, ethnoconfessional relations, organised crime, terrorism, national security, post-Soviet transition, state–religion relations, or the legal regulation of religious activity.

The regional corpus included works by Mehdiyev (2008), Novruzoglu (2004), Kopylova (2001), and Aliyev et al. (2007). These sources were selected because they discuss ideological transformation, threats to Azerbaijani statehood, adaptation in multiconfessional societies, and religio-political extremism in the North Caucasus. Institutional and legal materials included Azerbaijan's 2009 and 2011 amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief, an institutional account of counterterrorism attributed to the former Ministry of National Security, and Orucov's (2011) discussion of state–religion relations.

The international theoretical corpus included Borum's (2011) review of radicalisation theories, Moghaddam's (2005) staircase model, Horgan's (2008) pathway approach, Sageman's (2004) social-network perspective, Kruglanski et al.'s (2014) significance-quest theory, Schmid's (2013) conceptual review, and the community-policing framework developed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2014). These sources were used to compare regional explanations with internationally established approaches to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Documents were included when they:

- directly addressed extremism, terrorism, radicalisation, religious policy, or ethnoconfessional relations;
- contained information relevant to Azerbaijan or the wider Caucasus;
- contributed an identifiable theoretical, historical, legal, or institutional perspective;
- could be evaluated in relation to the study's research questions.

Documents were excluded when they:

- treated ordinary religious belief as equivalent to violent extremism without analytical justification;
- contained allegations that could not be traced to an identifiable source;
- provided no information about authorship, institutional origin, or publication context;
- focused exclusively on theological disagreement without a political, security, or social dimension.

Older sources were retained because they reflect the post-Soviet period examined in the original study. However, their claims were interpreted historically and were not assumed to describe the contemporary security environment without additional evidence.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted in four stages. First, the selected materials were read to identify their definitions of extremism, terrorism, radicalisation, religious tolerance, and national-security threats. Second, relevant passages were assigned initial codes, including "post-Soviet ideological vacuum," "foreign influence," "identity insecurity," "socioeconomic grievance," "organised crime," "social networks," "religious literacy," "legal regulation," "institutional trust," and "community resilience."

Third, related codes were organised into five principal themes:

1. conceptual distinctions between religion, radicalism, and violent extremism;
2. post-Soviet transformation as an enabling context;
3. geopolitical competition and transnational influence;
4. interactions among extremist and criminal networks;
5. the balance between security regulation and religious freedom.

Fourth, the regional literature was compared with international theories of radicalisation. This comparative procedure made it possible to identify where Caucasus-focused studies converged with established theoretical models and where they relied on region-specific security narratives.

Analytical Framework

The study adopted a multilevel analytical framework consisting of individual, group, societal, and institutional dimensions. At the individual level, the analysis considered perceived injustice, identity crisis, humiliation, status loss, and the search for personal significance (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Moghaddam, 2005). At the group level, it examined interpersonal networks, ideological reinforcement, recruitment, and moral disengagement (Horgan, 2008; Sageman, 2004).

At the societal level, attention was directed to economic instability, political exclusion, armed conflict, population displacement, religious illiteracy, and ethnoconfessional tension. At the institutional level, the study considered state legitimacy, legal regulation, law-enforcement practices, religious governance, and cooperation between public institutions and local communities (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2014; Schmid, 2013).

This framework avoided attributing extremist mobilisation to a single cause. Instead, violent extremism was conceptualised as an outcome that may arise when personal vulnerability, ideological narratives, enabling networks, and favourable political or institutional conditions converge.

Research Quality and Reflexivity

Source triangulation was used to improve analytical credibility. Regional academic publications were compared with legal documents, institutional accounts, international theoretical research, and policy literature. Claims originating from security institutions were not treated as equivalent to independently verified empirical evidence. Similarly, assertions in media or political texts were interpreted as representations of institutional perspectives unless corroborated by additional sources.

Reflexivity was particularly important because terminology related to religion and security can carry political or ideological assumptions. The analysis therefore avoided classifying organisations as extremist solely because they were foreign, missionary, nontraditional, or critical of dominant religious institutions. The principal criteria were documented advocacy of violence, coercion, incitement, systematic intolerance, unlawful financing, and attempts to undermine constitutional governance.

Ethical Considerations

The study relied on publicly available documentary materials and did not involve direct interaction with human participants. It did not process personally identifiable, confidential, or sensitive participant data. Formal institutional ethical approval was therefore not required.

Nevertheless, ethical care was exercised in the representation of religious and ethnic communities. The analysis avoided collective attribution of criminal or extremist conduct and distinguished organisational behaviour from the identity of a broader religious population. This approach is necessary both for research integrity and for preventing the reproduction of stigmatising security narratives.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it is based primarily on documentary analysis and does not include original interviews, field observations, court-file analysis, or verified security datasets. Second, several regional sources were published before the widespread use of social media and encrypted communication and therefore do not fully address contemporary digital radicalisation.

Third, institutional sources may reflect official security perspectives and cannot always be independently verified. Fourth, the regional literature sometimes uses concepts such as “sect,”

“missionary threat,” “radicalism,” and “extremism” inconsistently. Finally, although the original material refers to surveys, no information is available concerning sample size, participant selection, questionnaire design, data-collection procedures, or statistical analysis. These surveys were consequently not treated as independently verifiable empirical evidence.

Discussion

Religio-Political Extremism as a Multicausal Process

The analysis supports the argument that religio-political extremism in the Caucasus cannot be explained by theology or religious identity alone. The reviewed sources identify a combination of political transition, unresolved conflict, geopolitical competition, institutional weakness, identity insecurity, socioeconomic grievance, foreign influence, and criminal networking. This finding is consistent with international research, which treats radicalisation as a variable process shaped by interactions among individual, group, and structural conditions (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2008; Schmid, 2013).

The regional literature places significant emphasis on external ideological penetration and geopolitical intervention (Mehdiyev, 2008; Novruzoğlu, 2004). This emphasis is understandable given the Caucasus’s strategic location and history of competition among regional and global powers. However, external influence is unlikely to produce mobilisation in the absence of receptive domestic conditions. Foreign ideas and resources become influential when they connect with existing grievances, identity conflicts, weak religious literacy, or distrust of state institutions.

A balanced explanatory model must therefore integrate external and internal factors. Exclusively external explanations risk portraying domestic populations as passive recipients of foreign manipulation. Exclusively domestic explanations, by contrast, may underestimate transnational ideological, financial, and logistical networks. Religio-political extremism is more accurately understood as an interactive process in which external actors may exploit locally embedded vulnerabilities.

The Post-Soviet Context

The collapse of Soviet institutions created a historically specific environment for religious revival. Decades of official atheism had restricted religious education and weakened the institutional transmission of religious knowledge. When restrictions were removed, interest in religion expanded more rapidly than the availability of trained religious educators and accountable institutions.

Kopylova’s (2001) analysis of adaptation in multiconfessional societies indicates that religious diversity is not inherently destabilising. Instability becomes more likely when institutions fail to manage diversity equitably or when communities perceive exclusion. Aliyev et al. (2007) similarly connect extremism in the North Caucasus with ethnopolitical conflict, socioeconomic conditions, and limited institutional trust.

This post-Soviet context helps explain why religious revival and vulnerability to radicalisation may occur simultaneously without being causally identical. The restoration of religious freedom is a legitimate social development, whereas radicalisation represents a specific form of political and ideological mobilisation. Treating the entire revival as a security threat would obscure this distinction and potentially intensify mistrust.

Religious literacy is therefore especially important. Individuals with limited access to contextual religious education may be more vulnerable to simplified ideological claims presented as authoritative doctrine. Yet religious education alone is insufficient. Resilience also depends on civic literacy, critical thinking, digital-media awareness, economic opportunity, and confidence in lawful institutions.

Distinguishing Missionary Activity from Extremism

Some earlier regional sources interpret foreign missionary activity primarily through a national-security framework. Such concerns may be legitimate when foreign organisations engage in covert financing, political manipulation, coercive recruitment, incitement, or support for violence. Nevertheless, peaceful missionary activity and conversion fall within freedom of religion and expression when conducted voluntarily and lawfully.

The distinction is analytically and legally important. An organisation should not be classified as extremist merely because its beliefs are unfamiliar, its headquarters are abroad, or it competes with dominant religious institutions. The relevant questions concern conduct: Does the organisation advocate violence? Does it employ coercion or deception? Does it participate in criminal financing? Does it systematically promote hatred or seek to replace constitutional governance through unlawful means?

Schmid (2013) warns that conceptual expansion can weaken counter-extremism policy by treating a broad spectrum of dissenting or unconventional beliefs as security threats. Overinclusive terminology may also make it more difficult to identify the smaller number of actors who present a genuine risk. Evidence-based differentiation is therefore both a human-rights requirement and a practical security necessity.

Social Networks and Identity-Based Mobilisation

The findings support Sageman's (2004) argument that radicalisation often develops through social relationships rather than through exposure to ideology alone. Recruitment may occur within friendship groups, family networks, neighbourhoods, prisons, educational settings, or online communities. Trust-based relationships can facilitate the acceptance of radical narratives and reduce exposure to competing viewpoints.

Horgan's (2008) pathway approach further suggests that involvement in extremism should not be treated as a single event. Individuals may pass through different stages of engagement, experience different motivations, and leave organisations for reasons unrelated to ideological transformation. Consequently, prevention, disengagement, and deradicalisation require different interventions.

Kruglanski et al. (2014) provide an additional explanation through the significance-quest framework. Individuals who experience humiliation, identity loss, social exclusion, or perceived political injustice may become attracted to organisations that promise dignity, status, belonging, and purpose. In conflict-affected societies, narratives of collective suffering may increase the emotional power of extremist messages.

These theories do not imply that all disadvantaged or traumatised individuals become extremists. Most do not. Radicalisation requires mechanisms that translate grievance into ideological commitment and organised activity. Such mechanisms may include charismatic recruiters, closed social groups, propaganda, material incentives, moral justification, and access to operational networks.

Organised Crime and Extremist Activity

The regional literature identifies potential links among extremism, terrorism, and organised crime (Novruzoglu, 2004). These links may include illicit financing, weapons procurement, smuggling, document falsification, money laundering, and cross-border transportation. Extremist and criminal organisations may cooperate pragmatically even when their ultimate objectives differ.

Nevertheless, the "crime-terror nexus" should not be assumed without evidence. Similarity in methods does not necessarily demonstrate formal organisational cooperation. Research should identify specific transactions, intermediaries, routes, and patterns of coordination. Financial investigation and network analysis may therefore offer more reliable evidence than ideological labelling.

The overlap between criminal and extremist activity supports an integrated policy response involving financial intelligence, border management, cyber-investigation, international police cooperation, and judicial oversight. It also demonstrates why counter-extremism policy cannot be assigned exclusively to religious-affairs institutions.

Legal Regulation and Freedom of Religion

Azerbaijan's legal framework reflects an effort to regulate religious organisations while preserving the country's secular constitutional order. The 2009 and 2011 amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief addressed organisational registration, religious education, professional religious activity, and the circulation of religious materials.

The existence of legal regulation is not inherently inconsistent with religious freedom. States may lawfully regulate organisations to protect public safety, prevent criminal activity, and ensure financial transparency. However, restrictions should be legally defined, necessary, proportionate, and subject to

review. Ambiguous or selectively enforced regulations may reduce institutional trust and encourage marginalised groups to operate outside formal structures.

Orucov's (2011) account positions the State Committee on Religious Associations as a mediator between the state and religious communities. Such mediation can contribute to prevention when it promotes dialogue, consistent regulation, and equal treatment. It may become counterproductive if communities perceive registration or oversight as discriminatory.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2014) emphasises community-based prevention and cooperation between law-enforcement institutions and civil society. Trust-based engagement can improve early identification of risks because families, educators, religious leaders, and community organisations may recognise behavioural changes before formal security institutions do. However, cooperation must not transform community members into objects of collective suspicion.

Policy Implications

The findings suggest that an effective prevention strategy for Azerbaijan and the wider Caucasus should contain at least six interconnected components.

First, the state should maintain precise legal definitions distinguishing terrorism and violent extremism from peaceful religious activity. Second, religious and civic education should strengthen critical thinking and resistance to ideological manipulation. Third, financial transparency and lawful oversight should focus on documented risks rather than denominational identity.

Fourth, community-level prevention should involve educators, families, youth organisations, religious leaders, civil society, and local authorities. Fifth, policies should address conditions that may intensify vulnerability, including social exclusion, unemployment, conflict trauma, and limited channels for civic participation. Sixth, digital prevention should recognise the increasing role of social media, encrypted communication, and transnational online networks.

Security institutions should also evaluate the effects of their interventions. Measures that disrupt operational networks may be effective in the short term but could produce longer-term resentment if implemented indiscriminately. Prevention should therefore be assessed not only by the number of organisations prohibited or individuals prosecuted but also by changes in community trust, recruitment patterns, recidivism, and social resilience.

Contribution to the Literature

This study contributes by placing Caucasus-focused security literature in dialogue with contemporary theories of radicalisation. Regional sources identify historically specific factors such as post-Soviet ideological transformation, ethno-political conflict, foreign geopolitical competition, and the reconstruction of religious institutions. International theories provide analytical mechanisms explaining how grievances, identity needs, social networks, and institutional conditions may develop into extremist engagement.

Combining these perspectives produces a more comprehensive model. External influence, socioeconomic grievance, or religious ideology is rarely sufficient by itself. Mobilisation becomes more likely when individual vulnerability, collective narratives, trusted networks, enabling resources, and political opportunity converge. This interpretation avoids both religious essentialism and simplistic external-conspiracy explanations.

Results

The thematic analysis identified five interconnected dimensions of religio-political extremism in the Caucasus: conceptual ambiguity, post-Soviet institutional vulnerability, geopolitical and transnational influence, network-based mobilisation, and the tension between security regulation and religious freedom. These themes should not be interpreted as independent or universally present causes. Rather, they represent interacting conditions that may increase or reduce vulnerability to extremist mobilisation.

Conceptual Ambiguity in Defining Extremism

The first finding concerns the inconsistent use of terms such as religious conservatism, fundamentalism, radicalism, extremism, and terrorism. Some regional publications employ these

concepts interchangeably, particularly when discussing nontraditional religious organisations or foreign missionary activity. Contemporary radicalisation research, however, demonstrates that adherence to unconventional or conservative beliefs does not necessarily predict participation in violence (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2008; Schmid, 2013).

The documentary evidence indicates that an analytically useful definition of religio-political extremism must include a behavioural or operational dimension. Relevant indicators may include incitement to violence, coercive recruitment, support for terrorist activity, systematic hate mobilisation, unlawful financing, or attempts to dismantle constitutional governance through violent means. Foreign affiliation, religious conversion, missionary activity, or criticism of dominant religious institutions is insufficient on its own to establish extremist intent.

This distinction has practical implications. When legal and institutional definitions are excessively broad, peaceful religious communities may be treated as security threats. Such an approach can weaken trust, reduce community cooperation, and make genuine extremist activity more difficult to identify. Conceptual precision is therefore not only an academic requirement but also a component of effective security policy (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2014; Schmid, 2013).

Post-Soviet Transformation as an Enabling Context

The second theme concerns the institutional and ideological conditions created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet system enabled the restoration of religious freedom, religious institutions, and public expressions of faith. At the same time, decades of official atheism had weakened formal religious education and interrupted the institutional transmission of theological knowledge.

The reviewed literature suggests that the rapid expansion of religious interest was not always matched by access to qualified religious education or transparent institutional structures. This imbalance could create opportunities for politically motivated movements, unaccountable networks, and simplified ideological interpretations. However, the analysis does not support treating post-Soviet religious revival itself as a cause of extremism.

Kopylova (2001) demonstrates that religious diversity may be managed through adaptation, dialogue, and institutional inclusion. Aliyev et al. (2007) similarly associate instability in the North Caucasus with the combined effects of ethno-political conflict, socioeconomic inequality, institutional distrust, and radical mobilisation. The finding is therefore that post-Soviet transformation created an enabling environment whose effects depended on governance quality, community relations, economic conditions, and access to credible religious knowledge.

Geopolitical Competition and Transnational Influence

The third finding relates to Azerbaijan's and the wider Caucasus's exposure to geopolitical competition. Regional studies identify the activities of foreign governments, ideological movements, religious institutions, and transnational organisations as potential sources of political influence (Mehdiyev, 2008; Novruzoglu, 2004).

The analysis nevertheless indicates that foreign influence is not a sufficient explanation for radicalisation. Transnational organisations differ substantially in their objectives and methods. Some participate in lawful religious, cultural, educational, or humanitarian activities, whereas others may attempt to influence domestic politics, establish covert networks, or circulate intolerant ideologies.

External influence becomes a significant security risk when it combines with local vulnerabilities. These may include weak institutional legitimacy, social exclusion, unresolved conflict, identity insecurity, limited religious literacy, and the absence of peaceful opportunities for political participation. Consequently, the most important question is not simply whether an organisation has foreign connections but whether documented relationships exist among external financing, coercive mobilisation, unlawful political activity, and support for violence.

This finding modifies external-threat explanations found in parts of the regional literature. Foreign ideological activity may contribute to extremist mobilisation, but its impact is mediated by

domestic institutions and social networks. An exclusively external explanation may therefore overlook the internal conditions that allow radical narratives to gain credibility.

Network-Based Radicalisation and the Search for Significance

The fourth theme concerns the mechanisms through which individuals become involved in extremist organisations. The reviewed material supports a network-based rather than purely doctrinal explanation. Recruitment frequently occurs through personal relationships, trusted intermediaries, friendship groups, family connections, closed communities, or digital networks (Horgan, 2008; Sageman, 2004).

The significance-quest model provides an additional explanation for individual involvement. Experiences of humiliation, identity loss, social exclusion, political defeat, conflict-related trauma, or status uncertainty may increase receptiveness to organisations promising dignity, belonging, and purpose (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Moghaddam's (2005) staircase model similarly indicates that perceived injustice becomes more dangerous when individuals believe that legitimate alternatives are unavailable and encounter groups that morally justify violence.

The analysis does not suggest that poverty, religious belief, or personal grievance automatically produces extremism. Most individuals experiencing difficult socioeconomic or political conditions do not participate in violent organisations. Mobilisation becomes more likely when grievance is interpreted through an extremist ideology, reinforced within a trusted group, and connected to organisational resources and opportunities.

The results consequently support a pathway model. Individuals may enter extremist networks for different reasons, including identity, belonging, political grievance, perceived religious obligation, personal status, protection, or material incentives. This diversity implies that prevention and disengagement programmes should be adapted to individual pathways rather than based on a single assumed profile (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2008).

Interaction Between Extremism and Organised Crime

The fifth theme concerns the potential relationship between extremist organisations and organised criminal networks. Regional security literature identifies possible overlaps in illicit financing, arms trafficking, document falsification, smuggling, money laundering, and cross-border movement (Novruzoglu, 2004).

The thematic analysis indicates that ideological and criminal organisations may cooperate pragmatically without sharing the same long-term objectives. Extremist organisations may use criminal markets to obtain resources, while criminal networks may benefit financially from providing logistical services. Nevertheless, such cooperation should not be presumed merely because similar methods are employed.

A valid assessment requires documented evidence of transactions, intermediaries, financial transfers, communication, or operational coordination. This finding supports the integration of financial intelligence, border security, criminal investigation, and international cooperation into counter-extremism policy. It also demonstrates that religious-affairs regulation alone cannot address the full range of risks associated with violent extremist networks.

Formal Regulation and Substantive Security

The legal analysis identified an ongoing effort to balance freedom of religious belief with public order and national security. Azerbaijan's 2009 and 2011 legislative amendments addressed the registration and operation of religious organisations, professional religious activity, religious education, and the circulation of religious materials.

The existence of formal regulation may improve transparency and institutional accountability. However, its effectiveness depends on consistent, proportionate, and nondiscriminatory implementation. Restrictive measures may be justified where there is credible evidence of violence, unlawful financing, coercion, or incitement. They may become counterproductive when applied solely on the basis of denomination, foreign origin, or theological difference.

The findings support the community-based approach recommended by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2014). Religious leaders, families, educators, youth organisations, civil society, local authorities, and law-enforcement institutions can contribute to early prevention when relationships are based on trust and clearly defined responsibilities. Community engagement should complement rather than replace judicial safeguards and professional investigation.

Integrated Thematic Findings

The results indicate that religio-political extremism should be analysed through an interaction model. No single factor—religious doctrine, poverty, foreign influence, conflict, or criminality—adequately explains extremist mobilisation. Risk increases when several conditions converge: grievance, identity insecurity, legitimising ideology, trusted networks, organisational resources, and perceived absence of lawful alternatives.

Protective conditions were also identified. These include qualified religious education, civic literacy, political inclusion, socioeconomic opportunity, institutional legitimacy, transparent regulation, interreligious dialogue, and trusted cooperation between communities and public institutions. Prevention should therefore seek not only to remove immediate threats but also to strengthen the conditions that reduce the attractiveness and operational capacity of extremist organisations.

Table 1. Principal Themes Identified Through Document Analysis

Analytical theme	Main qualitative finding	Supporting literature	Security and policy implication
Conceptual definition	Religious belief, conservatism, missionary activity, radical opinion, violent extremism, and terrorism are not equivalent categories.	Borum (2011); Horgan (2008); Schmid (2013)	Legal and policy definitions should focus on documented conduct, incitement, coercion, violence, and unlawful financing.
Post-Soviet transformation	Religious revival occurred alongside institutional reconstruction, limited religious literacy, conflict, and socioeconomic transition.	Aliyev et al. (2007); Kopylova (2001); Mehdiyev (2008)	Prevention should combine religious freedom with education, institutional transparency, and community inclusion.
Geopolitical and foreign influence	Transnational actors may provide ideological or material resources, but their influence depends on domestic vulnerabilities and local networks.	Mehdiyev (2008); Novruzoglu (2004); Sageman (2004)	Foreign affiliation should not be treated as proof of extremism; assessment should examine financing, conduct, political intervention, and connections to violence.
Identity and significance	Humiliation, exclusion, conflict trauma, or status loss may increase receptiveness to groups promising belonging, dignity, and purpose.	Kruglanski et al. (2014); Moghaddam (2005)	Prevention should address identity, social belonging, political participation, and credible nonviolent alternatives.
Network-based mobilisation	Recruitment frequently develops through trusted relationships, friendship networks, family ties, small groups, and online communities.	Horgan (2008); Sageman (2004)	Intervention should focus on recruitment networks and pathways rather than a universal extremist profile.

Crime–extremism interaction	Extremist and criminal organisations may cooperate in financing, trafficking, smuggling, and logistical support.	Novruzoglu (2004); Sageman (2004)	Counter-extremism requires financial intelligence, criminal investigation, border security, and international cooperation.
Legal and institutional response	Regulation can improve transparency but may generate mistrust if it is overly broad, selective, or disproportionate.	Orucov (2011); Republic of Azerbaijan (2009, 2011); Schmid (2013)	Restrictions should be lawful, necessary, proportionate, evidence-based, and subject to effective review.
Community resilience	Institutional trust, education, inclusion, and community cooperation reduce vulnerability to radical mobilisation.	Kopylova (2001); Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2014)	Community engagement should complement professional investigation and protection of constitutional rights.

Note. The table synthesises qualitative patterns in the reviewed documents. It does not report statistical associations or causal effect sizes.

Table 2. Multilevel Risk and Protective Factors Relevant to Religio-Political Extremism

Level of analysis	Potential risk factors	Protective factors	Recommended response
Individual	Identity crisis; perceived injustice; humiliation; status loss; conflict-related trauma; lack of belonging	Critical thinking; religious and civic literacy; psychological support; educational and employment opportunities	Individualised prevention, counselling, mentoring, and reintegration programmes
Interpersonal and group	Closed networks; charismatic recruiters; peer pressure; moral disengagement; isolation from alternative views	Supportive family relations; trusted educators; credible religious leadership; positive peer networks	Family engagement, youth programmes, community mentoring, and targeted disruption of recruitment networks
Community	Ethnoconfessional tension; social exclusion; stigmatisation; weak institutional trust; limited participation	Interreligious dialogue; community organisations; inclusive local governance; trusted communication channels	Community policing, local prevention partnerships, dialogue mechanisms, and accessible reporting systems
Societal	Economic insecurity; political exclusion; unresolved conflict; displacement; polarising narratives	Equal citizenship; socioeconomic inclusion; rule of law; peaceful political participation; public education	Inclusive social policy, conflict-sensitive education, civic participation, and anti-discrimination safeguards
Institutional	Ambiguous definitions; selective enforcement; weak oversight; lack of coordination; limited transparency	Clear legislation; judicial review; professional investigation; interagency cooperation; accountable regulation	Evidence-based enforcement, proportionality review, institutional training, and transparent decision-making
Transnational	Foreign extremist financing; illicit cross-border	International cooperation; financial	Financial monitoring, cyber-investigation, cross-

	movement; online propaganda; criminal logistics	transparency; border coordination; information exchange	border cooperation, and targeted sanctions based on verified evidence
Digital environment	Algorithmic amplification; encrypted recruitment; disinformation; online echo chambers	Media literacy; credible counter-narratives; digital awareness; platform cooperation	Digital-literacy education, lawful online investigation, early- warning analysis, and rights-respecting content interventions

Note. The presence of one risk factor does not establish that an individual or community is involved in extremism. Risk emerges through combinations of conditions and should be evaluated using verified behavioural and contextual evidence.

Summary of Results

Overall, the results demonstrate that the most analytically defensible model of religio-political extremism in the Caucasus is multilevel, relational, and context-dependent. Religion may provide a language through which political or social grievances are expressed, but it does not independently explain violent mobilisation. The transition from grievance to extremist action requires social mechanisms, ideological legitimisation, organisational opportunity, and access to enabling resources.

The findings further indicate that effective prevention depends on the simultaneous protection of security and constitutional rights. Excessively broad regulation may undermine community trust, whereas insufficient oversight may permit coercive or violent networks to exploit institutional gaps. A sustainable response must therefore combine targeted enforcement with religious literacy, civic participation, community resilience, transparent governance, and evidence-based differentiation between peaceful belief and violent conduct.

Conclusion

This study examined religio-political extremism in the Caucasus as a multidimensional security and social phenomenon. The analysis demonstrates that extremist mobilisation cannot be attributed to religious belief alone. It is more accurately understood as the potential outcome of interactions among political grievance, identity insecurity, socioeconomic vulnerability, unresolved conflict, ideological narratives, social networks, foreign influence, criminal resources, and institutional conditions.

The post-Soviet transformation of the Caucasus created a distinctive environment in which religious freedom and religious revival expanded alongside institutional uncertainty and limited access to qualified religious education. This historical context generated opportunities for the restoration of legitimate religious life but also created vulnerabilities that could be exploited by radical or politically motivated actors. Religious revival and violent extremism must therefore be treated as analytically separate phenomena.

The findings also demonstrate that external ideological or geopolitical influence acquires significance primarily through domestic conditions. Foreign networks may provide resources, narratives, or organisational support, but their effectiveness depends on local grievances, trusted intermediaries, institutional legitimacy, and community resilience. Sustainable prevention consequently requires attention to both transnational networks and domestic social conditions.

A central conclusion concerns the necessity of conceptual precision. Peaceful religious observance, conservative belief, missionary activity, theological disagreement, radical political opinion, violent extremism, and terrorism should not be treated as equivalent. Overly broad classifications may stigmatise lawful communities, weaken institutional trust, and divert security resources away from actors who present demonstrable risks.

Azerbaijan's legal and institutional response should maintain a proportionate balance between national security and freedom of conscience. Regulation is legitimate when it is transparent, evidence-based, consistently applied, and directed toward documented unlawful conduct. It becomes

counterproductive when denominational identity, foreign origin, or unconventional belief is treated as sufficient evidence of extremism.

The study further concludes that enforcement alone cannot prevent radicalisation. Effective policy requires religious and civic literacy, critical-thinking education, digital resilience, socioeconomic inclusion, community engagement, financial transparency, accountable institutions, and international cooperation. Religious leaders and civil-society organisations should be treated as potential partners in prevention rather than as objects of automatic suspicion.

Because this research is based on documentary analysis, its conclusions should be tested through contemporary empirical investigation. Future studies should incorporate anonymised interviews, representative surveys, judicial records, financial-network analysis, and research on digital radicalisation. Comparative studies across the North and South Caucasus would also clarify how different political institutions and conflict experiences influence extremist mobilisation.

Ultimately, the most effective response to religio-political extremism is one that protects society without undermining the constitutional values it seeks to defend. National security and religious freedom should not be treated as mutually exclusive objectives. A legitimate, inclusive, and evidence-based system of governance can reduce vulnerability to extremist recruitment while preserving peaceful religious diversity and strengthening long-term social resilience.

References:

- Aliyev, A. K., Arukhov, Z. S., & Khanbabaev, K. M. (2007). *Religiozno-politicheskiy ekstremizm i etnokontsional'naya tolerantnost' na Severnom Kavkaze* [Religio-political extremism and ethnoconfessional tolerance in the North Caucasus]. Nauka.
- Borum, R. (2011). Radicalization into violent extremism I: A review of social science theories. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4(4), 7–36. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1>
- Horgan, J. (2008). From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalization into terrorism. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 618(1), 80–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716208317539>
- Kopylova, O. S. (2001). Adaptatsionnye protsessy v sovremennykh polikontsional'nykh obshchestvakh [Adaptation processes in contemporary multiconfessional societies]. In *Vzaimootnosheniya religioznykh konfessii v mnogonatsional'nom regione: Sbornik nauchnykh trudov* [Relations among religious denominations in a multinational region] (p. 162). Veber.
- Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: How significance quest impacts violent extremism. *Political Psychology*, 35(S1), 69–93. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163>
- Mehdiyev, R. (2008). *Yeni siyasət: İnkişafa doğru* [New politics: Towards development] (Vol. 1). Oskar NPM.
- Ministry of National Security of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (n.d.). *Terrorçuluğa qarşı mübarizədə Milli Təhlükəsizlik Nazirliyinin rolu* [The role of the Ministry of National Security in combating terrorism]. <http://aznatomission.be/index.php?/az/content/56/>
- Moghaddam, F. M. (2005). The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration. *American Psychologist*, 60(2), 161–169. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161>
- Novruzoglu, R. (2004). *XXI əsr: Azərbaycan dövlətçiliyinin təhlükə mənbələri—Milli təhlükəsizlik kontekstində* [The 21st century: Sources of threats to Azerbaijani statehood—Within the context of national security] (M. N. Quluzadə & Z. Məmmədşadə, Eds.; Vol. 1). NUR-A. <https://www.preslib.az/az/book/F99Ka06g5XqsISE>
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (2014). *Preventing terrorism and countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism: A community-policing approach*.

OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

<https://www.osce.org/secretariat/111438>

Orucov, H. (2011). Azərbaycanca dini dözümsüzlük meyillərinin qarşısının alınması üçün bütün zəruri tədbirlər görülür [All necessary measures are being taken to prevent tendencies of religious intolerance in Azerbaijan] [Interview]. *Yeni Azərbaycan*.

https://www.yeniazərbaycan.com/Musahibə_e8307_az.html

Republic of Azerbaijan. (2009). *“Dini etiqad azadlığı haqqında” Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanununa əlavələr və dəyişikliklər edilməsi barədə Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu* [Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on additions and amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief] (Law No. 812-IIIQD, May 8, 2009). E-Qanun. <https://e-qanun.az/framework/17782>

Republic of Azerbaijan. (2011). *“Dini etiqad azadlığı haqqında” Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanununda dəyişikliklər edilməsi barədə Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu* [Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief] (Law No. 162-IVQD, June 10, 2011). E-Qanun. https://frameworks.e-qanun.az/7/c_f_7649.html

Sageman, M. (2004). *Understanding terror networks*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Schmid, A. P. (2013). *Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

<https://doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.02>

Declarations

Ethical Approval

This study is based on the analysis of publicly available academic literature, policy materials, media publications, and non-identifiable documentary sources. It did not involve clinical research, experimentation, or the collection of sensitive personal data. Formal institutional ethical approval was therefore not required.

Informed Consent

The study did not involve identifiable human participants. Accordingly, informed consent was not applicable. If previously conducted public-opinion inquiries are reported in the final manuscript, the author must provide information concerning participant consent, anonymity, sampling procedures, and ethical safeguards.

Consent for Publication

The author consents to the publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research or its interpretation.

Funding

The author received no specific grant or financial support from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding organisations for this study.

Author Contributions

Rovshan Isayev was responsible for the conceptualisation of the study, collection and analysis of documentary materials, methodological design, interpretation of findings, preparation of the original manuscript, and approval of the final version.

Data Availability

The study is based primarily on publicly available documentary and bibliographic sources. Any original survey materials referred to in the manuscript may be made available by the author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical, confidentiality, and data-protection requirements.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author should disclose whether generative artificial-intelligence tools were used for linguistic editing, translation, structural revision, or any other stage of manuscript preparation. Any such tools must not be identified as authors and remain subject to the author's full verification and responsibility.

Acknowledgements

The author declares that no individuals or organisations made contributions requiring formal acknowledgement. This statement may be revised if additional scholarly, technical, or institutional assistance was received.

Publisher's Note

All claims and interpretations expressed in this article are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily represent the views of the author's institution, the journal, its editors, or the publisher.