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# GEORGIA

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## **Introduction**

Despite the relatively small number of Muslims in Georgia, issues related to Islam and Muslims have taken on an increasingly high profile in recent years. 2014 witnessed continued public debate over the permissibility of ethnic Georgian Sunni Muslims to establish and preserve religious institutions.

Global events and transnational links also caused resonance. The participation of ethnic Kist, Georgian citizens in the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), on the one hand, stoked fears of Salafi radicalisation among Georgia's Kists, who are closely related to the Chechens, reside primarily in the Pankisi Gorge, and have traditionally adhered to Islam. On the other hand, Turkish and Iranian religious actors continued to develop links with Georgia's Sunni and Shi'i communities, respectively.

Meanwhile, institutional and legal developments prompted state actors to become increasingly involved in managing Muslim issues. The Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG)—a state-supported Muslim organisation created by the government of former President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2011—underwent personnel changes and asserted greater control over Muslim persons and property in Eastern Georgia. Similarly, the creation

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of a new State Agency for Religious Issues gave the state a stronger legal basis for coordinating Muslim affairs.

Finally, independent Sunni and Shi'i organisations and communities, which refuse to accept AMAG's spiritual authority due to its close ties to the government, continued to criticise state initiatives in the religious sphere. Muslim organisations of all stripes remained active in promoting social causes, celebrating major religious holidays and opening new mosques.

## **Public Debates**

Public debates over sacred Muslim spaces and displays of Muslim religiosity, which rose sharply following the victory of the Georgian Dream coalition in Georgia's 2012 parliamentary elections, continued throughout 2014. In particular, ethnic Georgian Muslims in Adjara and Samtskhe-Javakheti encountered resistance from local government officials and Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) activists in establishing new mosques and Muslim educational institutions.

In early 2014, Adjara's regional government changed its previous decision to allow the construction of a second mosque in Batumi. The city's Muslim population has long requested permission to build a new place of worship due to overcrowding in the current Orta Jame Mosque, which was constructed under Ottoman rule in the 1860s. Despite promises for funding and building permits in October 2013 from then-Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili,<sup>3</sup> the head of the government of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Archil Khabadze, stated

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<sup>3</sup> Nikuradze, Mari, "Uncertainty about plans for a new mosque in Batumi", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 24 October 2013, <http://dfwatch.net/uncertainty-about-plans-for-new-mosque-in-batumi-53912>, accessed 1 November 2014.

in April 2014 that the regional government decided to expand Orta Jame rather than to permit a new structure.<sup>4</sup>

Local Muslims expressed doubt that an expansion would sufficiently reduce overcrowding during Friday prayers, and they feared that the proposed modifications would compromise Orta Jame's structural and historic integrity.<sup>5</sup> Shortly before Georgia's 15 June 2014 local elections, Adjara's local Muslims stated that they intended to hold demonstrations if the government did not grant permission for a new mosque. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili visited Adjara and called on Muslims not to demonstrate, promising that the Government had already allocated 10 million lari (\$5.8 million) for the expansion project.<sup>6</sup>

Khabadze subsequently announced plans to create a commission to handle Orta Jame's expansion, in which the new State Agency for Religious Issues, "muftis, parishioners, government and experts" would participate. He also stated that the expansion would be achieved with "Georgian money."<sup>7</sup> Khabadze's latter comment was likely meant to pacify Orthodox Georgians and GOC officials, who often accuse the Turkish government of intervening in Adjara's religious affairs.<sup>8</sup>

The mosque issue underlined divisions both within the Georgian Muslim communities and between Muslim and Orthodox actors. In an interview in August 2014, Taniel Nakaidze,

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<sup>4</sup> "Adjara changes its decision to allow new mosque in Batumi", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 8 April 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/adjara-changes-its-decision-to-allow-new-mosque-in-batumi-60860>, accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>5</sup> "Georgian government promises to solve Batumi mosque issue", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 29 July 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/georgian-government-promises-to-solve-batumi-mosque-issue-34714>, accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Nikuradze, Mari, "Mosque issue in Batumi remains unsolved", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 19 August 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/mosque-issue-in-batumi-remains-unresolved-58310>, accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>7</sup> "Georgian government promises to solve Batumi mosque issue", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 29 July 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/georgian-government-promises-to-solve-batumi-mosque-issue-34714>, accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>8</sup> "Planned mosque in Batumi focus on popular unrest", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 2 April 2012, <http://dfwatch.net/planned-mosque-in-batumi-focus-of-popular-unrest-66499>; "Gachechiladze: pravoslavnye i musul'mane poka ne prishli k obshhemu mneniyu o vosstanovlenii mecheti v Batumi", *Kavkazskij uzul*, 13 May 2012, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/206465/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/206465/), accessed 1 November 2014.

Deputy Chairman of the Georgian Muslims Union (GMU) and a respected voice among minority religious communities across Georgia, criticised the official Muftiate for supporting the government narrative on Orta Jame's expansion and claimed that then-Mufti Jemal Paksadze did not represent "the real opinion of Muslims." Nakaidze also said that the government intentionally prolonged the mosque process in an attempt to placate the GOC,<sup>9</sup> which enjoys tremendous political power in Georgia and has carried out an aggressive Christianisation campaign in Adjara since independence.<sup>10</sup>

Interreligious relations in Adjara declined further on 10 September 2014, when Orthodox residents in the small Black Sea coastal town of Kobuleti protested against the opening of a local madrasa. According to reports, Orthodox protesters slaughtered a pig and hung its severed head on the door of the planned madrasa.<sup>11</sup> The next day, demonstrators blocked the road between Kobuleti and Batumi for several minutes, claiming that the owner of the building was from Turkey and that he had not received permission from residents to open a madrasa.<sup>12</sup>

Local Muslims condemned the incident and sought to dispel Orthodox protestors' claims. Then-Mufti Paksadze stated that "we are deeply offended; this is a very bad incident; this is a huge insult for Muslims,"<sup>13</sup> while Tariel Nakaidze said that the pig's head was simply the latest example of harassment from Orthodox neighbours in the run-up to the

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<sup>9</sup> Nikuradze, Mari, "Mosque issue in Batumi remains unsolved", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 19 August 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/mosque-issue-in-batumi-remains-unresolved-58310>, accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See Liles, Thomas, "Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara", *European Centre for Minority Issues Working Paper* No. 57, February 2012, [www.ecmcaucasus.org/upload/publications/working\\_paper\\_57\\_en.pdf](http://www.ecmcaucasus.org/upload/publications/working_paper_57_en.pdf), accessed 28 February 2012.

<sup>11</sup> "V Adzharii svinaya golova poveshena na dver' zdaniya, gde zaplanirovano otkrytie medrese", *Kavkazskij uzal*, 10 September 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/248932/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/248932/), accessed 15 September 2014

<sup>12</sup> "Locals slaughtered pig outside planned madrasa in Georgia", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 10 September 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/locals-slaughtered-pig-outside-planned-madrasa-in-georgia-75567>, accessed 1 November 2014

<sup>13</sup> "Pig's Head Nailed to Planned Muslim School in Kobuleti", *Civil.ge*, 10 September 2014, [www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27654](http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27654), accessed 15 September 2014.

madrasa's opening on 13 September 2014. Shamil Kakaladze, who heads the organisation Relations of Georgian Muslims and administers the institution, conceded that a Turkish citizen owned the building. However, Kakaladze clarified that it was not solely a Muslim religious school, but rather a boarding school for approximately 40 socially-vulnerable Muslim children.<sup>14</sup> Under normal operating conditions, the madrasa's students would spend about 1.5 hours each day studying the Qur'an, with the remaining school day devoted to the standard secular curriculum. Moreover, the school in question would reduce overcrowding in Kobuleti's primary madrasa, which has a capacity of ten and was hosting 29 students as of October 2014.<sup>15</sup>

The reaction from state actors was mixed. Shortly after the incident, Kobuleti District Head Sul Khan Evgenidze told journalists that Kobuleti residents had been misled to believe that "Georgian families" would use the building. Likewise, he said that the district government had not granted an operating license to the organisation Relations of Georgian Muslims.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the Ministry of the Interior opened a criminal case in accordance with Article 151 of the Criminal Code ("threat of death or damage to health or destroying property"),<sup>17</sup> while Kobuleti police arrested three Orthodox protestors on 11 September 2014. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Garibashvili "fundamentally condemn[ed] the provocation that took place in Kobuleti,"<sup>18</sup> while Public Defender<sup>19</sup> Ucha Nanuashvili denounced the incident

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<sup>14</sup> "Investigation into protest against Muslim school", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 11 September 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/investigation-into-protest-against-muslim-school-39758>, accessed 15 September 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Inga Popovaite, "Kobuleti, where Muslims are not welcome", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 4 October 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/kobuleti-where-muslims-are-not-welcome-88539>, accessed 20 October 2014.

<sup>16</sup> "Pig's Head Nailed to Planned Muslim School in Kobuleti", *Civil.ge*, 10 September 2014, [www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27654](http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27654), accessed 15 September 2014.

<sup>17</sup> "V Adzharii svinaya golova poveshena na dver' zdaniya, gde zaplanirovano otkrytie medrese", *Kavkazskij uzal*, 10 September 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/248932/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/248932/), accessed 15 September 2014.

<sup>18</sup> "Troje uchastnikov akcii protiv otkrytiya medrese v Kobuleti oshtrafoваны za narushenie obshhestvennogo poryadka", *Kavkazskij uzal*, 13 September 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/249044/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/249044/), accessed 2 December 2014.

as an “extreme expression of religious intolerance”<sup>20</sup> and called on law enforcement bodies to conduct an effective investigation to discourage such incidents in the future.<sup>21</sup>

In a statement on 11 September 2014, the Patriarchate officially condemned the incident as unacceptable to Christians, although it claimed that the madrasa lacked government approval. The statement also suggested that the incident had been timed to coincide with an international conference on religious freedom in Tbilisi, as well as a visit by the director of the Turkish Presidency for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), Mehmet Görmez.<sup>22</sup> In a meeting with Görmez on 13 September 2014, Patriarch Ilia II condemned the Kobuleti incident and raised the question of renovating and resuming services at Georgian Orthodox monasteries in eastern Turkey.<sup>23</sup>

Despite such public condemnations and the opening of a criminal investigation, tensions persisted in Kobuleti. Following the 11 September protests, Orthodox residents barricaded the madrasa, intensified a 24-hour neighbourhood watch, and demanded changing Georgia’s Constitution to make Orthodoxy the official state religion. The head of the government of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara Khabadze scheduled a 16 September 2014 meeting with Muslim and Orthodox representatives to discuss the situation, although he postponed the meeting indefinitely after being unexpectedly called to Tbilisi. As such, the

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<sup>19</sup> The Office of Public Defender of Georgia (a.k.a. Ombudsman) was created under the Organic Law on the Public Defender of Georgia (1996). The aims of the office are to provide oversight on human rights protection and assist with Georgia’s compliance with human rights commitments, as well as to provide advice and educational activities on human rights protection. See “Functions of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, *Public Defender of Georgia*, [www.ombudsman.ge/en/public-defender/mandati](http://www.ombudsman.ge/en/public-defender/mandati), accessed 11 May 2015.

<sup>20</sup> “Sobytiya v Kobuleti yavlyayutsya krajnim vyrazheniem religioznoj neterpimosti – ombudsmen”, *Gruziya Online*, 18 September 2014, [www.apsny.ge/2014/pol/1411075979.php](http://www.apsny.ge/2014/pol/1411075979.php), accessed 2 December 2014.

<sup>21</sup> “Georgian Orthodox Church issues statement on madrasa incident”, *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 12 September 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/georgian-orthodox-church-issues-statement-on-madrasa-incident-96424>, accessed 2 December 2014.

<sup>22</sup> “Georgia’s Orthodox Church condemns Kobuleti event”, *Interpress News*, 11 September 2014, [www.interpressnews.ge/en/society/61812-georgias-orthodox-church-condemns-kobuleti-event.html?ar=A](http://www.interpressnews.ge/en/society/61812-georgias-orthodox-church-condemns-kobuleti-event.html?ar=A), accessed 2 December 2014.

<sup>23</sup> “Patriarch Ilia II Asking Turkish Authorities to Resume Services at Georgian Churches”, *Provaslivie.ru*, 13 September 2014, [www.pravoslavie.ru/english/73691.htm](http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/73691.htm), accessed 10 January 2015.

madrassa never became fully operational.<sup>24</sup> Although Adjara's government promised to issue a decision on 22 October 2014 regarding the school's opening, the building's status remained unresolved, prompting Muslim students to hold a protest in Batumi in early November demanding a resolution.<sup>25</sup>

Another major public debate took place in Mokhe, a village in Adigeni municipality in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti. On 18 October 2014, local Muslims gathered to demonstrate against the dismantling of a half-ruined building, which they claimed was a mosque that had been converted to a storage shed under Soviet rule.<sup>26</sup> The Muslim population had repeatedly requested the local government in Adigeni to transfer the building to Muslim ownership, although the municipality head maintained that the structure would become a cultural centre. On the same day, local Orthodox residents began a counter-demonstration.<sup>27</sup> The situation deteriorated rapidly on 22 October 2014, when Mokhe's Muslims began another protest. According to eyewitnesses, one young protestor insulted a policeman, after which the police initiated a brawl and arrested 14 protestors on charges of hooliganism and disobedience.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, police knocked a 59-year-old Muslim woman unconscious

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<sup>24</sup> "V Kobuleti mestnye zhiteli provodyat akciju protesta protiv otkrytiya medrese", *Kavkazskij uzel*, 17 September 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/249290/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/249290/), accessed 2 December 2014.

<sup>25</sup> "Students demand decision about Kobuleti madrassa", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 12 November 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/students-demand-decision-about-kobuleti-madrassa-60615>, accessed 2 December 2014.

<sup>26</sup> "Sobytiya v Mohe sozdajut opasnost' religioznogo protivostojanija, zajavljajut chleny musul'manskoj obshhiny i ombudsmen Gruzii", *Kavkazskij uzel*, 24 October 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251248/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251248/), accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>27</sup> "Locals demonstrate for and against turning mosque into culture center", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 20 October 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/locals-demonstrate-for-and-against-turning-mosque-into-culture-center-33689>, accessed 25 October 2014.

<sup>28</sup> "Sobytiya v Mohe sozdajut opasnost' religioznogo protivostojanija, zajavljajut chleny musul'manskoj obshhiny i ombudsmen Gruzii", *Kavkazskij uzel*, 24 October 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251248/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251248/), accessed 1 November 2014.

during the fight, while Muslim parents in and around Mokhe kept their children from attending school the next day due to safety concerns.<sup>29</sup>

The Mokhe incident solidified religious cleavages. First, relations between the official Muftiate in Batumi and the Muslim clerical establishment in Samtskhe-Javakheti further deteriorated. Samtskhe-Javakheti's Muslim population expressed disappointment at the absence of Jemal Paksadze during the protests. Three days after the initial demonstration, local Muslim leaders even announced a petition to dismiss Paksadze as Mufti, citing an unfulfilled joint promise by Paksadze and the municipal government prior to the 15 June 2014 local elections to grant ownership of the building to Mokhe's Muslims. Shortly thereafter, a delegation led by Samtskhe-Javakheti Mufti Mamuka Vashakmadze travelled to Tbilisi to plead local Muslims' case before the Prime Minister Garibashvili.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, on 28 October 2014, representatives from the Association of Azerbaijani Students protested in front of the State Chancellery in Tbilisi against the State's handling of the Mokhe events.<sup>31</sup>

The GOC's stance further reinforced the narrative of Mokhe's Orthodox residents. In a public statement, Akhaltsikhe-based Bishop Teodor said that no mosque had ever existed in Mokhe. He claimed that a monastery was established on the disputed area in 1595, but that the current building was never transformed into a mosque despite ostensible Bolshevik plans

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<sup>29</sup> "School children stay home in Mokhe as politicians explain conflict", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 23 October 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/school-children-stay-home-in-mokhe-as-politicians-explain-conflict-15184>, accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>30</sup> "Sobytiya v Moxe sozdayut opasnost' religioznogo protivostoyaniya, zayavlyayut chleny musul'manskoj obshhiny i ombudsmen Gruzii", *Kavkazskij uzel*, 24 October 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251248/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251248/), accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>31</sup> "V Gruzii studenty iz Azerbaidzhana vystupili protiv zakrytiya mecheti v sele Moxe", *Kavkazskij uzel*, 29 October 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251475/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251475/), accessed 1 November 2014.

in the 1920s to replace the structure with a Muslim place of worship.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Teodor called on the government to transfer the building's ownership to the Patriarchate.<sup>33</sup>

Events in Mokhe also underlined the lack of coordination among state actors in addressing interreligious conflict. Following clashes between Muslim protestors and local law enforcement on 22 October 2014, Prime Minister Garibashvili claimed that the building's proposed status as a cultural centre was necessary to avoid conflict over ownership claims.<sup>34</sup> When asked about the possibility of transferring the building to Muslim ownership, Garibashvili passed responsibility for the issue to the State Agency for Religious Issues. Agency representatives subsequently expressed concern about recent events and voiced support for a resolution that would take the rights of all religious communities into account.<sup>35</sup>

The Public Defender took a stronger stance. In late October 2014, Ucha Nanuashvili called on Adigeni authorities to halt the dismantling of the building and to solve the issue "with maximum involvement of the population..."<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the Adigeni municipality announced the creation of a special commission to study the origins of the building,<sup>37</sup> which was subordinated to the State Agency for Religious Issues and comprised 11 representatives from the Muslim and Orthodox communities as well as from the Ministry

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<sup>32</sup> "V Gruzii sud oshtrafoval 11 uchastnikov akcii v sele Moxe", *Kavkazskij uzel*, 24 October 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251279/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251279/), accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>33</sup> "Georgian bishop says the Mokhe building was never a mosque", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 25 October 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/georgian-bishop-says-the-mokhe-building-was-never-a-mosque-10551>, accessed 2 December 2014.

<sup>34</sup> "Sobytiya v Moxe sozdayut opasnost' religioznogo protivostoyaniya, zayavlyayut chleny musul'manskoj obshhiny i ombudsmen Gruzii."

<sup>35</sup> "School children stay home in Mokhe as politicians explain conflict", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 23 October 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/school-children-stay-home-in-mokhe-as-politicians-explain-conflict-15184>, accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>36</sup> "V Gruzii studenty iz Azerbajdzhana vystupili protiv zakrytiya mecheti v sele Moxe", *Kavkazskij uzel*, 29 October 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251475/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251475/), accessed 1 November 2014.

<sup>37</sup> "V Gruzii studenty iz Azerbajdzhana vystupili protiv zakrytiya mecheti v sele Moxe", *Kavkazskij uzel*, 29 October 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251475/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251475/), accessed 1 November 2014.

of Culture.<sup>38</sup> In mid-December 2014, Nanuashvili announced plans to become an active participant to increase the public's confidence in the commission, although as of late December 2014 there were no major developments related to the building's status.<sup>39</sup>

## **Transnational Links**

Ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq—and particularly the establishment of a “caliphate” by self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in June 2014—underlined the importance of transnational links among Georgian Muslim communities, although this trend is largely confined to those ethnic Kists from the Pankisi Gorge who profess Salafism. While ethnic Georgian and Azerbaijani Muslims largely eschewed ISIS in 2014, transnational links between the Adjaran clerical establishment and Turkey continued to thrive, as did extant financial and religious ties between Shi‘i Azerbaijani communities and Iranian donors.

The absolute number of Pankisi Kists fighting in Syria and Iraq is comparatively small, with an estimated 50-70 fighters in the region.<sup>40</sup> According to reports, a total of eight Pankisi residents have died in the conflict, with three casualties in 2013 and five in 2014.<sup>41</sup> Local officials in Pankisi claim that, due to poverty and unemployment, many young Kists travel to Turkey to search for work. Subsequently, some Kists make their way to Syria to join jihadi groups. However, local residents indicate that the majority of fighters departed for

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<sup>38</sup> “Ombudsman to study progress of Mokhe commission”, *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 16 December 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/ombudsman-to-study-progress-of-mokhe-commission-66422>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>39</sup> “Ombudsman to study progress of Mokhe commission.”

<sup>40</sup> Lebanidze, Giorgi, “Poyavyatsya li v Gruzii bazy podgotovki dobrovol'cev dlya bor'by s IGIL”, *Golosa so vsego mira*, 27 September 2014, <http://m.ru.rfi.fr/kavkaz/20140927-poyavyatsya-li-v-gruzii-bazy-podgotovki-dobrovoltsev-dlya-borby-s-igil/>, accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>41</sup> See “One more Georgian jihadist dies in Syrian war”, *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 27 December 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/one-more-georgian-jihadist-dies-in-syrian-war-99679>, accessed 5 January 2015.

Syria several years ago, when the fight against Bashar al-Assad's government was just escalating, and that in recent years no new recruits have gone to Syria.<sup>42</sup>

Although Georgian Kist involvement is low in absolute terms, Pankisi natives play a disproportionately influential role in the leadership of armed groups in Syria and Iraq. The most famous Pankisi native currently active in the conflict is Tarkhan Batirashvili (a.k.a. Omar al-Shishani), who hails from the village of Birkiani and is the son of an ethnic Georgian, Orthodox Christian father and an ethnic Kist, Sunni Muslim mother. After travelling to Syria in 2012, he became the leader of *Jaish al-Muhajirin wal Ansar* (Army of Emigrants and Supporters) in 2013. Batirashvili formally joined ISIS in late 2013,<sup>43</sup> while a faction under the leadership of another Pankisi native, Feyzulla Margoshvili (a.k.a. Salahuddin al-Shishani), continued to lead the independent *Jaish al-Muhajirin wal Ansar*. Batirashvili has become notorious for his fighting prowess and, as of late 2014, serves as ISIS's military commander in Syria.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to Batirashvili and Margoshvili, Pankisi native and Russo-Chechen War veteran Murad Margoshvili (a.k.a. Muslim al-Shishani, no relation to Feyzulla Margoshvili) leads the *Junud al-Sham* faction, which consists primarily of Chechens and is based in the Syrian port city of Latakia. Before arriving in Syria, the now-deceased Ruslan Machalikashvili was also purported to play a crucial role in encouraging Chechens to fight in Syria through his work with the Turkish charity IMKANDER.<sup>45</sup>

Members of Georgia's non-Kist Muslim communities have shown little interest in fighting in Syria and Iraq, apart from a very small number of ethnic Georgian Sunnis from

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Rimple, "Georgia: Locals Say Pankisi Gorge Isn't Jihadist Hotbed", *Eurasianet.org*, 10 July 2014, [www.eurasianet.org/node/68956](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68956), accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>43</sup> "Vyxodcy s Kavkaza v ryadax IG (IGIL)", *Kavkazskij uzul*, 29 December 2014, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251513/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251513/), accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>44</sup> "Georgian Militant Fighting with IS Reportedly Killed in Kobani."

<sup>45</sup> Paraszczuk, Joanna, "Georgian Militant Fighting with IS Reportedly Killed in Kobani", *RFE/RL*, 8 December 2014, [www.rferl.org/content/georgian-killed-fighting-with-islamic-state/26731657.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/georgian-killed-fighting-with-islamic-state/26731657.html), accessed 20 December 2014.

Adjara, according to one Georgian analyst.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, all Muslim groups maintained some form of transnational link with the wider Muslim world throughout 2014, particularly in terms of financial and theological support.

Turkey continues to serve as an important transnational link for Georgia's Muslims, especially in Adjara. As of 2013, 18 youths in Adjara had participated in Turkish-funded, higher theological education in Ankara, Istanbul, Samsun, and other cities, with dozens more expected to return to Adjara from religious training in Turkey in the near future. Similarly, Turkish state institutions—including the *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Presidency of Religious Affairs)—sponsor free secular higher education<sup>47</sup> and Qur'an courses for Adjarans, the latter of which are particularly popular among younger Adjaran Muslims.

In addition to sponsoring educational opportunities abroad, Turkish actors directly finance some Muslim institutions in Adjara. As underlined by the September 2014 incident in Kobuleti, Adjaran Muslim organisations have traditionally relied on Turkish financial support to administer local madrasas. Likewise, it is not unusual for Turkish citizens to donate money for the renovation of mosques in Adjara, although the exact amounts of financial support are difficult to calculate. *Diyanet* also cooperates with the official Muftiate in Batumi and Adjara's district-level clerical establishment.<sup>48</sup> According to one local religious official, Adjara's imams and muftis receive between 100-400 lari (\$60-240) per month in direct financial support from Turkish sources.

Turkey also maintains relations with Adjaran economic migrant communities in Samtskhe-Javakheti.<sup>49</sup> In predominantly Shi'i, Azerbaijani-populated Kvemo-Kartli, Turkish

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<sup>46</sup> Lebanidze, Giorgi, "Poyavyatsya li v Gruzii bazy podgotovki dobrovol'cev dlya bor'by s IGIL", *Golosa so vsego mira*, 27 September 2014, <http://m.ru.rfi.fr/kavkaz/20140927-poyavyatsya-li-v-gruzii-bazy-podgotovki-dobrovoltsev-dlya-borby-s-igil/>, accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Menagarishvili, Irakli, Giorgi Lobjanidze, Netal Sakhokia, and Giorgi Gvimradze, *Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia*, Strategic Research Institute (2013), p. 81, [www.src.ge/3%20publications/ISLAM.pdf](http://www.src.ge/3%20publications/ISLAM.pdf), accessed 4 July 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Liles, "Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara", p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Menagarishvili et al., *Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia*, p. 81.

fundings sponsored the construction of a Sunni mosque in the village of Meore Kesalo<sup>50</sup> and continue to support the operations of a neighbouring madrasa.<sup>51</sup> In the Sunni, Avar-populated village of Tivi (Kvareli district), the Dagestan-based Shamil Foundation is administering the construction of a mosque with Turkish funding.<sup>52</sup>

Georgia's majority-Shi'i Azerbaijani population maintained and developed transnational links with Iranian religious actors throughout 2014. Significant informal links and financial flows already existed between a number of independent Shi'i organisations in Georgia and Iran for at least 10-15 years, and this financing largely continues unabated.<sup>53</sup> Such independent organisations include Ahli-Beyt, Alul-Bayt, the Iman Foundation, the Imam Ali Charitable Foundation, and the Supreme Religious Administration of Georgia's All Moslems (ÜGMADİ). On a related note, sectarian events in the wider Muslim world caused resonance among local Shi'i communities. In Tbilisi, in November 2014, Shi'i activists held a protest against the imprisonment of Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, a Shi'i sheikh in eastern Saudi Arabia whom the Saudi government sentenced to death in October 2014.<sup>54</sup> Independent Shi'i leaders made similar pronouncements during an '*Ashura*' celebration in Marneuli.<sup>55</sup>

AMAG's Shi'i personnel developed closer relations with Iranian religious structures through high-level visits during 2014. In early September, AMAG Sheikh Ramin Igidov and the Director of the State Agency for Religious Issues, Zaza Vashakmadze, completed a three-day visit to the Iranian cities of Qom and Tehran, where they met with Iranian religious

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<sup>50</sup> Menagarishvili et al., *Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia*, p. 81.

<sup>51</sup> Prasad, Conor, *Georgia's Muslim Community: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?*, ECMI Working Paper No. 58, February 2012, p. 4, [www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx\\_lfpubdb/Working\\_Paper\\_58\\_En.pdf](http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_lfpubdb/Working_Paper_58_En.pdf), accessed 28 February 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Menagarishvili et al., *Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia*, p. 71.

<sup>53</sup> Author's telephone interview with Elbrus Mammadov (Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic Minorities, Tbilisi, Georgia), January 2015.

<sup>54</sup> "Tiflisdə Baqir Nimrə dəstək, Səud rejiminə etiraz aksiyası", "*Əhli-Beyt*" *İnternet Qəzəti*, 28 November 2014, [www.ahlibeyt.ge/georgia/3204-tiflisdə-baqir-nimrə-destek-seud-rejimine-etiraz-aksiyasi-foto.html](http://www.ahlibeyt.ge/georgia/3204-tiflisdə-baqir-nimrə-destek-seud-rejimine-etiraz-aksiyasi-foto.html), accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>55</sup> "Gürcüstanın Marneuli Şəhərində tasua yürüşü keçirildi", "*Əhli-Beyt*" *İnternet Qəzəti*, 4 November 2014, [www.ahlibeyt.ge/georgia/3037-gurcistanin-marneuli-seherinde-tasua-yurusu-kecirildi.html](http://www.ahlibeyt.ge/georgia/3037-gurcistanin-marneuli-seherinde-tasua-yurusu-kecirildi.html), accessed 20 December 2014.

officials and verbally agreed to cooperate on educational exchanges.<sup>56</sup> In November 2014, Igidov returned to Qom to attend a two-day “World Congress on Takfiri Movements,”<sup>57</sup> which was attended by a wide range of international Shi‘i scholars and sought to combat the growing influence of radical Salafism in Syria and Iraq.<sup>58</sup>

Ties between AMAG and Iranian representatives in Georgia also strengthened. In February 2014, Davud Qashaman, who directs the Georgian branch of the Al-Mustafa International University in Marneuli, met with Igidov and Iasin Aliyev to congratulate the officials on their recent appointments to AMAG leadership positions.<sup>59</sup> In October 2014, Igidov held a *Ghadir Khumm* celebration<sup>60</sup> at Tbilisi Juma mosque, where Qashaman and the Iranian ambassador to Georgia delivered remarks.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Qashaman and Tabriz-based scholar Mohammed Baqir Saiver took part in a November 2014 religious conference on “The Role of Women in the Karbala Events,” which was hosted by Igidov at Alul-Bayt’s conference centre in Tbilisi.<sup>62</sup> In December 2014, Iranian and Turkish embassy representatives attended another AMAG conference dedicated to combating domestic violence in Georgia.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> “Gürcüstan Müsəlmanları İdarəsi və İranın dini qurumları əməkdaşlığa başlayır”, *Nardaran Piri*, September 2014, [www.nardaranpiri.com/7/1/gurcistan-muselmanlari-idaresi-ve-iranin-dini-qurumlari-emekdasliga-baslayir-fotolar-9070h.html](http://www.nardaranpiri.com/7/1/gurcistan-muselmanlari-idaresi-ve-iranin-dini-qurumlari-emekdasliga-baslayir-fotolar-9070h.html), accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>57</sup> “Qum şəhərində ‘İslam ümməti’ konfransı keçirilib”, *sruliad sakartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, November 2014, [http://amag.ge/view\\_text.php?lang=az&id=93](http://amag.ge/view_text.php?lang=az&id=93), accessed 24 November 2014.

<sup>58</sup> “World Congress on Takfiri Movements kicks off in Qom”, *mehrnews.com*, 23 November 2014, <http://en.mehrnews.com/detail/News/104764>, accessed 24 November 2014.

<sup>59</sup> “‘Al-Mustafa’ Beynəlxalq Universitetinin Nümayəndəliyi GMİnin Şeyxini təbrik etdi”, *sruliad sakartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, February 2014, [http://amag.ge/view\\_text.php?lang=az&id=6](http://amag.ge/view_text.php?lang=az&id=6), accessed 24 November 2014.

<sup>60</sup> *Ghadir Khumm* refers to a speech by Muhammad in 632 AD, which Shi‘is interpret as the Prophet’s appointment of Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor.

<sup>61</sup> “Tbilisi cümə məscidində ‘Qədir Xum’ bayramı qeyd olunub”, *SalamNews.ru*, 13 October 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/146520>, accessed 20 October 2014.

<sup>62</sup> “Gürcüstanda ‘Kərbəla hadisəsində qadınların rolu’ adlı elmi seminar keçirilib”, *SalamNews.ru*, 7 November 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/149977>, accessed 8 November 2014.

<sup>63</sup> “Tbilisidə ‘Qadına qarşı zorakılığa yox!’ adlı konfrans keçirilib”, *SalamNews.ru*, 22 December 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/156086>, accessed 22 December 2014.

## Law and Domestic Politics

Two prominent legal and government initiatives affected Georgia's Muslim population in 2014. First, the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG)—which was established by Saakashvili-era officials in 2011 and is viewed among many of Georgia's Muslims as a form of state interference into Muslim affairs<sup>64</sup>—underwent restructuring and personnel changes, while asserting greater control over Muslim affairs in Kvemo-Kartli. Second, the Georgian government created the State Agency for Religious Issues to coordinate the government's relations with minority religious communities. On a lesser note, the Parliamentary Defence and Security Committee announced legislative measures to discourage Georgian Muslims from participating in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

AMAG witnessed important personnel changes and internal restructuring during 2014. These developments indicate AMAG's increasing organisation along ethno-territorial and sectarian cleavages, as well as a trend toward centralised control of Muslim personnel and property. From its creation in 2011 until December 2013, AMAG was dominated by two spiritual representatives. Vagif Akperov, a Shi'i sheikh, formally represented the ethnic Azerbaijani, Shi'i population in Kvemo-Kartli and other parts of eastern Georgia. Jemal Paksadze, a Batumi-based Sunni mufti, officially represented Georgia's entire Sunni population, including a small number of Azerbaijani Sunnis in eastern Georgia. Additionally, Iasin Aliyev, an ethnic Azerbaijani Sunni imam based at Tbilisi's Juma Mosque and possessing lower spiritual status than Paksadze, accounted for another layer of representation

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<sup>64</sup> Author's telephone interviews with Zaur Khalilov (Civic Integration Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia) and Elbrus Mammadov (Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic Minorities, Tbilisi, Georgia), January 2015.

among Azerbaijani Sunnis. Resan Gogitidze, a secular, ethnic Georgian government official, has served as AMAG's executive director since 2011.<sup>65</sup>

Major personnel changes within AMAG began in late December 2013, when Ramin Igidov—a young Qom-trained Gardabani native who previously served as a madrasa Director and Chief Editor for the Iman Foundation—replaced Vagif Akperov as sheikh. In January 2014, the Muftiate was restructured along ethnic lines. Accordingly, Paksadze continued to formally represent ethnic Georgian Sunnis in Adjara and other regions. Iasin Aliyev was promoted to the position of Mufti of eastern Georgia, thus bringing Azerbaijani Sunnis under the direct spiritual leadership of a co-ethnic.<sup>66</sup> Soon thereafter, Aliyev embarked on a number of working visits to Muslim communities throughout eastern Georgia.

Following the Mokhe events in October 2014, Paksadze resigned as Mufti of western Georgia on 22 November. Despite speculation over the circumstances of his resignation, Paksadze claimed that he left the position due to longstanding health problems. The western Georgian Muftiate's religious council then elected Beglar Kamashidze—who previously served as mufti of Adjara's Khelvachauri district—as Paksadze's replacement.<sup>67</sup> The new mufti soon began visiting Georgian Muslim communities. In late December, Kamashidze and the Deputy Mufti visited several Muslim-populated villages in Adigeni, where they held sermons and promised to help resolve longstanding interreligious problems.<sup>68</sup> Kamashidze also visited Muslim-majority Khulo, where he spoke with congregation members about local

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<sup>65</sup> Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic Minorities, *Report II: Muslim Community of Georgia 2010-2011*, pp. 9-13.

<sup>66</sup> "Georgian Muslims to have two muftis", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 16 January 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/georgian-muslims-to-have-two-muftis-85534>, accessed 20 November 2014.

<sup>67</sup> "Muftij Upravleniya musul'man Gruzii Dzhemal Paksadze pokinul dolzhnost'", *Gruzia Online*, 24 November 2014, [www.apsny.ge/2014/soc/1416861879.php](http://www.apsny.ge/2014/soc/1416861879.php), accessed 5 January 2014.

<sup>68</sup> "Muptis shekhvedrebi mrevltan samtskhe-javakhetshi", *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 24 December 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSaqartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 25 December 2014

religious problems and promised assistance in rebuilding a partially-ruined boarding school for Muslim girls.<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile, AMAG's eastern branch asserted greater control over religious life among Azerbaijani communities. In early August 2014, AMAG staged mock attestation exams for Azerbaijani clergy in the eastern regions of Tbilisi, Kakheti, Shida-Kartli, Mtskheta, and Kvemo-Kartli. In mid-August 2014, Sheikh Ramin Igidov announced the signature of a memorandum of understanding between AMAG and a number of Azerbaijani religious communities in Georgia. According to Beka Mindiashvili, a Tbilisi-based specialist on religious issues, these measures were intended to establish AMAG's status as the dominant Muslim spiritual body in the region, although the memorandum's other signatories were not particularly influential, and many independent Shi'i organisations refused to take part.<sup>70</sup>

AMAG continued its coordination initiatives on 30 November 2014, when Igidov held a meeting with members of the body's newly-created Supreme Religious Council. The Council was comprised of over 20, primarily Shi'i Azerbaijani spiritual representatives. At the meeting, Igidov discussed AMAG's accomplishments and future agenda, while the Council's representatives brought attention to various problems in the sphere of religion.<sup>71</sup>

In an increasing effort to establish its authority in eastern Georgia, AMAG began formally appointing Azerbaijani religious officials throughout Kvemo-Kartli. On 10 December 2014, Igidov and Iasin Aliyev appointed 14 Azerbaijanis as imams and *akhunds*<sup>72</sup> to mosques in

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<sup>69</sup> "Muptis vizit'i zemo ach'arashi", *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 28 December 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSakartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 28 December 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Author's correspondence with Beka Mindiashvili, January 2015.

<sup>71</sup> "Ali Dini Şuranın Üzvləri ilə görüş keçirildi", *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 30 November 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSakartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>72</sup> The term *akhund* refers specifically to Shi'i clerics who lead prayers at mosques, deliver sermons, perform religious ceremonies, and/or teach in madrasas.

Dmanisi and Bolnisi.<sup>73</sup> AMAG officials appointed ten clergy members in the town of Gardabani on 13 December 2014,<sup>74</sup> and four days later yet another round of appointments took place at the Imam Hussein Mosque in Marneuli, where AMAG leaders officially appointed 46 regional clerics in a meeting attended by local political leaders and government representatives.<sup>75</sup>

On 7 February 2014, the Georgian government announced the creation of the State Agency for Religious Issues, which was mandated to “implement state policy on religion.” The Agency was subordinated directly to the Office of the Prime Minister, which maintained the prerogative to appoint its head. One of the Agency’s initial priorities was to oversee the disbursement of a 4.5 million lari (\$2.25 million) government grant to four minority religious groups, including Georgia’s Muslim, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic communities.<sup>76</sup> In December 2014, the Agency announced that the government intended to double its financial support for minority religious organisations in 2015.<sup>77</sup>

The Agency was formally launched on 9 June 2014 under the leadership of Zaza Vashakmadze.<sup>78</sup> During the second half of 2014, the body played an increasingly active role in coordinating Muslim affairs. In early August 2014, Vashakmadze and Agency officials held a meeting with a number of Muslim leaders at AMAG’s headquarters, where they discussed legal issues in the sphere of religion and fielded questions and comments from

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<sup>73</sup> “V Gruzii 14 azerbajdzhancev naznacheny axundami i imamami”, *SalamNews.ru*, 11 December 2014, <http://ru.salamnews.org/ru/news/read/154719>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>74</sup> “Gürcüstanın Qardabani rayonuna din xadimləri təyin olunub”, *SalamNews.ru*, 15 December 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/155118>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>75</sup> “Gürcüstanın Marneuli rayonuna din xadimləri təyin olunub”, *SalamNews.ru*, 18 December 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/155630>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>76</sup> “Voshlo v silu postanovlenie pravitel'stva o gosudarstvennom finansirovanii chetyreh religioznyh konfessij dopolnitel'no”, *Civil.ge*, 31 January 2014, [www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=25630](http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=25630), accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>77</sup> “Finansirovanie religioznyh konfessij v Gruzii budet udvoeno v 2015 g”, *SalamNews.ru*, 24 December 2014, <http://ru.salamnews.org/ru/news/read/156589>, accessed 25 December 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Vashakmadze formerly worked as a lawyer with the Patriarchate. See “Ssip’ ‘religiis sak’itkhta sakhelmts’ipo saagent’o’-s p’rezent’atsia”, *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 9 June 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSaqartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 5 January 2015.

Muslim leaders.<sup>79</sup> In addition to facilitating the August memorandum of understanding between AMAG and regional Muslim communities, Vashakmadze presented Igidov, Aliyev, Paksadze, and other top clerics with certificates of registration to reflect their official religious status.<sup>80</sup> Likewise, Vashakmadze accompanied Igidov to Iran in September 2014,<sup>81</sup> represented the Agency during *Diyanet* President Görmez's trip to Tbilisi,<sup>82</sup> participated in Kamashidze's official appointment within AMAG in late November 2014,<sup>83</sup> and attended a number of major Muslim holidays throughout the rest of the year.

At a session on religious property in December 2014, the Agency transferred 23 mosques in Kvemo-Kartli and 21 mosques in Kakheti to AMAG's ownership.<sup>84</sup> Officially, the transfer was partly intended to define better the legal status of mosques, since the majority of Georgia's mosques are simply registered as houses or other buildings.

Following the death of Pankisi native Zelimkhan Chatiashvili in Syria in early December 2014, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Defence and Security, Irakli Sesiashvili, announced legislative measures to discourage any additional outflow of Georgia's Muslims to conflicts in Syria and Iraq.<sup>85</sup> Although Sesiashvili gave few details about the legislation, he indicated that it would be a "preventative mechanism" to ensure

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<sup>79</sup> *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 6 August 2014,

<https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSakartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 7 August 2014.

<sup>80</sup> "Tbilisinin "Cümə" məscidində din xadimləri təyin olundu", *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 30 August 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSakartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 20 November 2014.

<sup>81</sup> "Gürcüstan Müsəlmanları İdarəsinin və Dini Məsələlər üzrə Dövlət Agentliyinin İran İslam Respublikasına səfəri", *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 13 September 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSakartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 20 November 2014.

<sup>82</sup> "Turketis religiis sakmeta sammartvelos tavnjdomaris vizit'i sakartveloshi", *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 15 September 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSakartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>83</sup> "Sruliad sakartvelos muslimta sammartvelos akhali mupti hqavs", *sruliad saqartvelos muslimta sammartvelo*, 28 November 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/SruliadSakartvelosMuslimtaSammartvelo>, accessed 29 November 2014.

<sup>84</sup> "Musul'manskoj obshhine budet predostavleno pravo pol'zovat'sya 23 mechetyami", *Civil.ge*, 17 December 2014, [www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=26724](http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=26724), accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Lomsadze, Giorgi, "Georgia mulls Anti-Islamic State Law", *Eurasianet.org*, 10 December 2014, [www.eurasianet.org/node/71276](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71276), accessed 20 December 2014.

potential recruits were aware of the legal implications associated with fighting in foreign religious conflicts.<sup>86</sup> As of the end of 2014, no new details had emerged about the legislation.

### **Activities and Initiatives of Main Muslim Organisations**

State initiatives vis-à-vis the Muslim population in 2014 drew criticism from many of Georgia's independent Muslim leaders and organisations. In addition to criticism and policy debates, however, many Muslim organisations pursued positive initiatives to address social issues and cultivate better interfaith relations. Moreover, all major Muslim organisations held events on religious holidays, while a few additional mosques opened.

State religious initiatives in 2014 sparked criticism from many independent Muslim communities. In particular, the Batumi-based Georgian Muslim Union (GMU)—a respected Muslim and interfaith advocacy organisation—criticised AMAG's personnel changes. Following the establishment of the Muftiate of eastern Georgia in January 2014, GMU Deputy Chairman Tariel Nakaidze stated that the Muftiate's division was caused by the Batumi Muftiate's incompetence and distrust among ethnic Azerbaijanis.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Nakaidze criticised Beglar Kamashidze's appointment as Mufti in November 2014, claiming that the Ministry of the Interior had orchestrated his appointment.<sup>88</sup>

Prominent Azerbaijani voices also criticised state religion policy. In a 22 January 2014 meeting with the Public Defender, several Azerbaijani clerics expressed dissatisfaction with the recent appointment of Ramin Igidov as Sheikh, who they claimed was chosen by law

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<sup>86</sup> “Kartvelebi siriashi - p'arlament'i akhal k'anonp'roekt's amzadebs”, *Rustavi 2 Broadcasting Company*, 8 December 2014, <http://rustavi2.com/ka/news/5062>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>87</sup> “Georgian Muslims to have two muftis”, *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 16 January 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/georgian-muslims-to-have-two-muftis-85534>, accessed 20 November 2014.

<sup>88</sup> See Siradze, Giorgi, “Novyj glavnyj muftij ne isklyuchaet peremen v upravlenii musul'man”, *Pirveli Information Agency*, 24 November 2014, [http://new.pia.ge/show\\_news.php?id=28690&lang=rus](http://new.pia.ge/show_news.php?id=28690&lang=rus), accessed 24 November 2014.

enforcement agencies. The Supreme Religious Administration of Georgia's All Moslems (ÜGMADİ), an independent religious structure created in opposition to AMAG in 2013,<sup>89</sup> also protested Igidov's appointment around the same time.<sup>90</sup> Despite attempts to restructure AMAG's eastern branch, many Azerbaijani clerics in Kvemo-Kartli do not support the new sheikh and claim that he does not sufficiently represent their interests.<sup>91</sup>

Many Azerbaijani clerics criticised AMAG's attestation exams. According to one local expert, a swathe of authoritative, independent clerics in Kvemo-Kartli simply refused to take part in the exams, thus solidifying competing centres of religious influence in the region. Similarly, AMAG's official appointment of *akhunds* and imams throughout Kvemo-Kartli in December was reportedly achieved at the expense of the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), a state-sponsored spiritual body located in Baku, Azerbaijan, that officially retained spiritual jurisdiction over Georgia's entire Muslim population via a local representative until AMAG's creation in 2011. Local CMB officials claimed that AMAG co-opted CMB clerics through better wages and pressure from local law enforcement bodies.<sup>92</sup>

Independent voices also criticised the transfer of mosques to AMAG. Haji Hajiyev, an influential Shi'i cleric who leads the Imam Ali Mosque in Marneuli, stated that "no department in Georgia has the right to take mosques into its own control," adding that mosques should operate under the supervision of local clerics and congregation members independent of the government.<sup>93</sup> Niyaz Ismailov, who serves as chairman of the Imam Ali

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<sup>89</sup> "Gürcüstanda dini idarələrə qısa bir baxış", *Muslims in Georgia Gündəlik İnternet qəzeti*, no date given, <http://mgeo.ge/post/27398-gurcustanda-dini-idarelere-qisa-bir-baxis.html>, accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>90</sup> "Muslims in Georgia feel pressured by law enforcement", *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 24 January 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/muslims-in-georgia-feel-pressured-by-law-enforcement-97373>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Author's telephone interview with Elbrus Mammadov, Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic Minorities, 6 January 2015.

<sup>92</sup> Author's telephone interview with Elbrus Mammadov.

<sup>93</sup> "Məscidlər xalqındır və müstəqil şəkildə fəaliyyət göstərməlidir", *Muslims in Georgia Gündəlik İnternet qəzeti*, December 2014, <http://mgeo.ge/post/7156-mescidler-xalqindir-ve-musteqil-sekilde-fealiyyet-gostermelidir.html>, accessed 20 December 2014.

Charitable Foundation, criticised AMAG's affiliation with the government and opined that state-affiliated institutions should have no control over mosques. Similarly, Rasim Mammadov, an influential Qom-educated Shi'i scholar who heads the Marneuli-based organisation Ahli-Beyt, held a meeting with Igidov in December 2014, during which he stated that AMAG had no authority to register mosques and advocated for a more "delicate approach" that would take the views of local clerics into account.<sup>94</sup>

In response to an increasing number of domestic violence cases in Georgia,<sup>95</sup> AMAG officials hosted and participated in events aimed at combating violence against women in 2014. In October, President Giorgi Margvelashvili met with various minority religious representatives—including Ramin Igidov and CMB representative Ali Aliyev—to discuss the role of religious leaders in discouraging domestic violence.<sup>96</sup> Subsequently, Igidov participated in an event highlighting the positive role of women in Islam and the events of Karbala.<sup>97</sup> High-ranking officials from AMAG and the State Agency for Religious Issues took part in two similar events hosted by the Patriarchate and Alul-Bayt in December 2014.<sup>98</sup> Various religious leaders held an inter-confessional event entitled "Islamic Unity" on the occasion of Imam al-Sadiq's birthday in January 2014. The event was attended by independent Shi'i and Sunni leaders as well as Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili of the

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<sup>94</sup> "Bu gün Tiflisdə Məscidlərin qeydiyyat məsələsi muzakirə edilib", "Əhli-Beyt" İnternet Qəzeti, 21 December 2014, [www.ahlibeyt.ge/georgia/3399-bu-gun-tiflisde-mescidlerin-qeydiyyat-meselesi-muzakire-edilib.html](http://www.ahlibeyt.ge/georgia/3399-bu-gun-tiflisde-mescidlerin-qeydiyyat-meselesi-muzakire-edilib.html), accessed 22 December 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Jegorova-Askerova, Regina, "Georgian Murders Highlight Violence Against Women", *Institute of War & Peace Reporting*, 30 October 2014, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgian-murders-highlight-violence-against-women>, accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>96</sup> "Gürcüstan prezidenti ölkədə yaşayan din xadimləri ilə görüşüb", *SalamNews.ru*, 21 October 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/147528>, accessed 22 October 2014.

<sup>97</sup> See "Gürcüstanda 'Kərbəla hadisəsində qadınların rolu' adlı elmi seminar keçirilib", *SalamNews.ru*, 7 November 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/149977>, accessed 20 November 2014.

<sup>98</sup> "Gürcüstanda 'Qadın Zorakılığına yox!' adlı konfrans keçirilib", *SalamNews.ru*, 5 December 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/153885>; "Tbilisidə 'Qadına qarşı zorakılığa yox!' adlı konfrans keçirilib", *SalamNews.ru*, 22 December 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/156086>, accessed 22 December 2014.

Evangelical Baptist Union of Georgia.<sup>99</sup> In July 2014, GMU and Baptists hosted an interfaith *iftar* dinner, in which various ambassadors and Sunni and Shi‘i Muslim leaders took part.<sup>100</sup> Although essentially all Muslim organisations celebrated major religious holidays, Shi‘i organisations were particularly active in organising religious celebrations, including a blood drive in honour of Fatima;<sup>101</sup> events honouring Imam Mahdi’s birth (CMB and AMAG);<sup>102</sup> and an ‘*Ashura*’ procession in Marneuli (Ahli-Beyt, Imam Ali Charitable Foundation, ÜGMADİ);<sup>103</sup> In December 2014, ÜGMADİ, the Imam Ali Charitable Foundation, and the Imam Ali Mosque hosted a religious conference in Marneuli dedicated to the events of Karbala.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, CMB representative Ali Aliyev opened a new mosque in the village of Garabaglar in April 2014.<sup>105</sup>

## Demographics and Statistics

Unless otherwise specified, all statistics in this section are from *Political Aspects of Islam in Georgia*, a 2013 report published by the Tbilisi-based Strategic Research Centre (SRC) with

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<sup>99</sup> “Gürcüstanda ‘İslam Vəhdəti’ adlı konfrans keçirilib”, *SalamNews.ru*, 23 January 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/111433>, accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>100</sup> *kartvel muslimta k'avshiri*, 7 July 2014, [https://www.facebook.com/georgianmuslimsunion?ref=br\\_tf](https://www.facebook.com/georgianmuslimsunion?ref=br_tf), accessed 8 July 2014.

<sup>101</sup> “Gürcüstanda xanım Fatimənin (s.ə) şəhadət ilə əlaqədar qanvermə aksiyası keçirilib”, *SalamNews.ru*, 2 April 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/120325>, accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>102</sup> “V Gruzii provedeno meropriyatie po sluchayu movluda Imama Mexdi”, *SalamNews.ru*, 13 June 2014, <http://salamnews.org/ru/news/read/130524>; “Gürcüstanda İmam Mehədinin (ə) mövludu qeyd olunub”, *SalamNews.ru*, 16 June 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/130807>, accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>103</sup> “Gürcüstanın Marneuli Şəhərində tasua yürüşü keçirildi”, “*Əhli-Beyt*” *İnternet Qəzeti*, 4 November 2014, [www.ahlibeyt.ge/georgia/3037-gurcistanin-marneuli-seherinde-tasua-yurusu-kecirildi.html](http://www.ahlibeyt.ge/georgia/3037-gurcistanin-marneuli-seherinde-tasua-yurusu-kecirildi.html), accessed 20 December 2014.

<sup>104</sup> “Marneulidə Ərbəinlə bağlı elmi-dini konfrans keçirilib”, *SalamNews.ru*, 15 December 2014, <http://salamnews.org/az/news/read/155128>, accessed 5 January 2015.

<sup>105</sup> “V Gruzii sostoyalos' otkrytie novoj mecheti”, *SalamNews.ru*, 22 April 2014, <http://salamnews.org/ru/news/read/123138>, accessed 20 November 2014.

support from the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation.<sup>106</sup> The report provides religious data based on the 2012 census results. The “Ethnic/National Backgrounds” section, on the other hand, was extrapolated using both the SRC’s 2012 data and the 2002 census data on Georgia’s ethnic groups.<sup>107</sup> This method is imperfect and assumes identical ethnic proportions in both 2002 and 2012, despite overall population growth and likely variance in ethnic representation. Given the lack of current data in Georgia, however, this approach provides a general idea of the ethnic composition of Georgia’s Muslim population.

**Muslim Population** 433,775 (9.5% of the population, 2012).

**Ethnic/National Backgrounds** Largest ethnic/national groups:

Azerbaijani: 65.7%

Georgian: 31.7%

Chechen-Kist: 1.6% (7,110)

Avar: 0.97% (4,200)

**Inner-Islamic Groups** There are no official statistics on the sectarian make-up of Georgia’s Muslim population. However, Shi‘ism predominates among the Azerbaijani population in Kvemo-Kartli, Shida-

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<sup>106</sup> [www.src.ge/3%20publications/ISLAM.pdf](http://www.src.ge/3%20publications/ISLAM.pdf).

<sup>107</sup> “Ethnic Groups by Major Administrative-Territorial Units”, *National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2002*, [www.geostat.ge/cms/site\\_images/files/english/census/2002/03%20Ethnic%20Composition.pdf](http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/files/english/census/2002/03%20Ethnic%20Composition.pdf), accessed 5 January 2015.

Kartli, and Mtskheta-Tianeti. There is also a strong Shi‘i presence in Tbilisi, although the Azerbaijani-populated suburb of Ponichala has been dominated by Salafi Azerbaijanis in recent years. A certain number of Shi‘i Azerbaijanis also live in Kakheti, although this region is also home to Sunni Azerbaijanis; Sunni Avars in three compactly-settled villages in the Kvareli district;<sup>108</sup> Sunni Kists in the Pankisi Gorge, who espouse Salafism and Sufism; and several Sunni Adjaran economic migrant communities. Meanwhile, Sunni Islam predominates among ethnic Georgian Muslims in Adjara, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Guria.

### **Geographical Spread**

Kvemo-Kartli: 52%

Adjara: 25.5%

Kakheti: 11.8%

Guria: 3.2%

Tbilisi: 2.6%

Samtskhe-Javakheti: 1.4%

Shida-Kartli: 1.3%

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<sup>108</sup> Prasad, *Georgia's Muslim Community*, p. 4.

Mtskheta-Tianeti: 0.5%

Imereti: 0.4%

Samegrelo: 0.2%

Racha-Lechkhumi: 0.02%

## **Number of Mosques**

According to 2010-11 estimates, a combined total of 197 mosques and madrasas operate in Adjara,<sup>109</sup> while there are 79 operational mosques in Kvemo-Kartli, Shida-Kartli, and Kakheti.<sup>110</sup>

## **Muslim Burial Places**

Essentially rural areas and towns with significant Muslim populations have Muslim cemeteries.<sup>111</sup> There are two Muslim cemeteries in Tbilisi.<sup>112</sup> One is located near Tbilisi's Juma Mosque, and in 2013 ethnic Azerbaijanis sent a request to Tbilisi's mayor to expand the cemetery into the nearby Tbilisi Botanical

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<sup>109</sup> Baramidze, Ruslan, *The Georgian Muslims in the Context of Modernity* (Batumi, Georgia: Niko Berdzenishvili Institute, 2010), p. 538.

<sup>110</sup> Prasad, *Georgia's Muslim Community*, p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Mkrtchyan, Satenik, and Ketevan Khutsishvili, "Georgia", in Jørgen S. Nielsen, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, and Egdūnas Račius (eds.), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Vol. 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 255.

<sup>112</sup> Mkrtchyan, Satenik, "Georgia", in Jørgen S. Nielsen, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, and Egdūnas Račius (eds.), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 273.

Garden.<sup>113</sup> Cemeteries are prevalent around many mosques in Adjara.<sup>114</sup> Most Avar villages in Kakheti usually feature unofficial cemetery chapels.<sup>115</sup> Likewise, many ethnic Azerbaijani and Kist villages have Muslim burial places and shrines. One shrine of especial significance is that of the Sufi saint Isa Efendi, an ethnic Azerbaijani from Dagestan who was buried in the village of Kabal in eastern Georgia. Isa Efendi's tomb is a popular pilgrimage site for Sunni Kists, Sunni Azerbaijanis, and Shi'i Azerbaijanis alike.<sup>116</sup>

### **Places of Islamic Learning and Education**

A number of Shi'i educational institutions operate in eastern Georgia and Tbilisi. Ahli-Beyt runs a madrasa in Azerbaijani-populated Marneuli.<sup>117</sup> Marneuli is also home to a madrasa headed by Haji Aziz Nabiyeu and

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<sup>113</sup> "Georgian Azerbaijanis ask Tbilisi Mayor to expand Muslim cemetery", *Islam.ru*, 20 April 2013, <http://islam.ru/en/content/news/georgian-azerbaijanis-ask-tbilisi-mayor-expand-muslim-cemetery>, accessed 12 May 2015.

<sup>114</sup> Mkrtchyan, "Georgia", pp. 273-274.

<sup>115</sup> Sanikidze, George, and Edward W. Walker, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia", *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series* (2004), p. 25.

<sup>116</sup> Sanikidze and Walker, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia", p. 24.

<sup>117</sup> Prasad, *Georgia's Muslim Community*, p. 6.

formerly affiliated with CMB.<sup>118</sup> Shi'i organisation Alul-Bayt runs a small madrasa in Tbilisi's Ortachala neighbourhood.<sup>119</sup> A Turkish-funded Sunni madrasa operates in Meori Kesalo, an ethnic Azerbaijani village near the border with Azerbaijan.<sup>120</sup> In Sunni Adjara, there are 79 madrasas according to the Niko Berdzenishvili Institute in Batumi. Of these, 52 are small madrasas attached to local mosques; 19 are free-standing madrasas; and eight are boarding school madrasas.<sup>121</sup> In Pankisi, there is a Salafi mosque in the village of Duisi hosting 50-60 students, as well as smaller Salafi mosques in surrounding villages.<sup>122</sup>

## **Muslim Media and Publications**

Many Muslim organisations convey information through Facebook pages. In addition to Facebook, the most prominent Muslim media outlets are listed below.

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<sup>118</sup> Mkrtchyan and Khutsishvili, "Georgia", p. 254

<sup>119</sup> Prasad, *Georgia's Muslim Community*, p. 7.

<sup>120</sup> Mkrtchyan and Khutsishvili, "Georgia", p. 254.

<sup>121</sup> Liles, "Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara", p. 15.

<sup>122</sup> Prasad, *Georgia's Muslim Community*, p.13.

- Amag.ge (Administration of Muslims of All Georgia official site)
- “Əhli-Beyt” İnternet Qəzet, <http://ahlibeyt.ge/> (Ahli-Beyt’s online newspaper)
- Imanmedia.ge (Spiritual portal run by Azerbaijani Shi’is)
- Islam.ge (Georgian Muslims Union online portal)
- Muslims in Georgia Gündəlik İnternet Qəzeti, [www.mascid.com](http://www.mascid.com) (Imam Ali Charitable Foundation’s online newspaper)

## Main Muslim Organisations

- Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG, საქართველოს მუსლიმთა ადმინისტრაცია, *Gürcüstan Musəlmanları İdarəsi*, 32 Botanikuri Street, Tbilisi, tel.: +995 577623002, [www.amag.ge](http://www.amag.ge)). Based near the Juma Mosque in Tbilisi, AMAG is an officially independent Muslim organisation, which in reality represents “official” Islam in Georgia due to its close ties with the State and perceived illegitimacy many by Muslim communities. Established by the Saakashvili government

in 2011, AMAG cooperates with state institutions on a range of Muslim issues, including funding, appointment of religious officials, and mosque registration, among others. The organisation is *de facto* divided along ethno-sectarian lines, with a Sunni Adjara mufti representing ethnic Georgian Muslims in western Georgia; a Shi'i Azerbaijani sheikh representing the Shi'i Azerbaijani community in Kvemo-Kartli and other areas of eastern Georgia; and a Sunni Azerbaijani mufti representing Sunni Azerbaijani, Kist, and Avar communities scattered throughout Kvemo-Kartli and Kakheti.

- Ahli-Beyt (*Ahli-Beyt*, Marneuli, ahlibeyt-014@mail.ru, [www.ahlibeyt.ge](http://www.ahlibeyt.ge)). Established in Marneuli in 2001, Ahli-Beyt is a predominantly ethnic Azerbaijani, Shi'i organisation that runs a madrasa and offers courses on Islam and Shi'i theology, information technology, and Georgian and English languages. Haji Rasim Mammadov, who received religious training in Qom, Iran in the 1990s, has served as the organisation's head since 2001 and has been a vocal critic of AMAG and state policies on religion in general.<sup>123</sup>
- Alul-Bayt (10 Kalandadze Street, Tbilisi, tel.: +995 558618653, +995 593966966). Established in 2005 and headed by Haji Faig Nabiyeu, Alul-Bayt is a Tbilisi-based Shi'i organisation that runs a small madrasa and organises classes on religion, information technology, and Georgian language for Azerbaijani students. Alul-Bayt received funding from Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani to construct a house with a madrasa, classrooms, and conference centre in Tbilisi's Ortachala neighbourhood in 2009.<sup>124</sup>
- Delegation of the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) in the Republic of Georgia (*Qafqaz Məsəlmanları İdarəsinin Gürcüstan Respublikasındakı Nümayəndəliyi*, Tbilisi, <https://www.facebook.com/GurcistanQMİ>). This organisation is the official representation of the Baku-based Caucasus Muslim Board, which was created in 1943 and has been led by Sheikh al-Islam Allahshukhur Pashazade since 1980. Officially,

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<sup>123</sup> Prasad, *Georgia's Muslim Community*, p. 6.

<sup>124</sup> Prasad, *Georgia's Muslim Community*, p. 7.

CMB retained spiritual jurisdiction over Georgia's entire Muslim population through this representation until AMAG's creation in 2011. The body's representative in Georgia is Haji Ali Aliyev, an ethnic Azerbaijani Shi'i from Marneuli who was based in Tbilisi's Juma Mosque until his expulsion in summer 2011.<sup>125</sup>

- Georgian Muslims Union (GMU, [info@islam.ge](mailto:info@islam.ge), [www.islam.ge](http://www.islam.ge)). The Batumi-based Georgian Muslims Union (GMU) is a predominantly Sunni organisation that advocates for Muslim rights and the improvement of interreligious relations in Georgia. Zurab Kemal Tsetskhladze and Tariel Nakaidze serve as GMU's chairman and deputy chairman, respectively. GMU is critical of many government policies on religion and cooperates closely with the Evangelical Baptist Union of Georgia, the Delegation of CMB, and other Muslim organisations not affiliated with the State.
- Imam Ali Charitable Foundation (*İmam Əli (ə) adına xeyriyyə fondu*, [www.mascid.com](http://www.mascid.com), tel.: +995 593313313). The Imam Ali Charitable Foundation was established in Marneuli in 2004 and participates predominantly with Kvemo-Kartli's ethnic Azerbaijani Shi'i communities on a range of religious and social issues. With over 400 participants, the foundation supports the renovation of mosques, organises events on religious holidays, and provides financial support for needy Kvemo-Kartli residents.<sup>126</sup> Given its close cooperation with organisations such as ÜGMADİ and Ahli-Beyt, the Foundation could be considered an independent Shi'i organisation.
- Iman (Faith) Foundation (35 Botanikuri Street, Tbilisi, tel.: +995 532721786). Located near Tbilisi's Juma Mosque, the Iman Foundation caters to ethnic Azerbaijani Shi'is and

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<sup>125</sup> Prasad, *Georgia's Muslim Community*, p. 15.

<sup>126</sup> "İmam Əli (ə) adına xeyriyyə fondu", *Muslims in Georgia Gündəlik İnternet qəzeti*, <http://mgeo.ge/page/imam-eli-e-adina-xeyriyye-fondu.html>, accessed 12 May 2015.

maintains close links to the Iranian clerical establishment. Managed by an Iranian expatriate and a local Azerbaijani, the organisation provides religious courses, houses a library with Shi'i literature, and organises celebrations on major religious holidays.<sup>127</sup>

- Supreme Religious Administration of Georgia's Muslims (ÜGMADİ, *Ümum Gürcüstan Müsəlmanları Ali Dini İdarəsi*, საქართველოს მუსულმანთა ალი დინი იმამთა საბჭო, Kvemo-Kartli. ÜGMADİ is an ethnic Azerbaijani, Shi'i organisation created in 2013 in opposition to AMAG and then sheikh Vagif Akperov. Based in Kvemo-Kartli, the body elected Haji Mirhussein Asadov as a parallel sheikh in 2013. ÜGMADİ cooperates closely with the Imam Ali Charitable Foundation to organise religious events and charitable activities among the Azerbaijani community.

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<sup>127</sup> Balci, Bayram, and Raoul Motika, "Islam in post-Soviet Georgia", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2007), p. 343.