

## **Protecting the Nation, State and Government: ‘Traditional Islam’ in Azerbaijan**

Sofie Bedford, Uppsala University, Ceyhun Mahmudlu, Indiana University, Shamkhal Abilov, Baku Engineering University

‘If my people must be Muslim, let them be this kind of Muslim. If my brother wants to be Muslim, I’d want him to follow Traditional Islam’.<sup>1</sup> This comment by a representative of the Azerbaijani State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) illustrates an ambitious state led project to counteract the spread of ‘foreign’ Islam by promoting ‘Traditional Islam’ to replace potentially radical religious ideas among the citizens of the country. Although a majority of the population in Azerbaijan identifies itself as Muslim, Islam is primarily perceived as an important part of the national ideology and an integral part of the new Azerbaijani identity. The state is strictly based on the principles of secularism and since independence the topic of religion has largely been missing on both the formal and informal political arenas. There have been few public manifestations of violent religious radicalism. Nonetheless, the fear of radicalisation as a result of foreign religious influences promoting a worldview where Islam plays a more prominent, ultimately political, role in society has been an important factor in the domestic policy since the beginning of the 2000s. This threat has been used to legitimize strengthened control over religious communities, education and literature in general, as well as harsh political action against certain groups and activities in particular. However, in recent years official discourses tend to focus less on the physical threat from potential sources of violent Islamic radicalism. Still, religion has not been ‘desecuritized’ in the traditional sense (Wæver 1993), e.g. the notion of ‘foreign Islamic ideas’ as dangerous and lurking on the country’s borders is still on the agenda. Rather, we propose, the state-actors accepted the prevalence of this threat and decided to take measures reduce its potential ideological impact. Under the banner of ‘Traditional Islam’ the secular authorities are, in discourse and practice, striving to establish an alternative, mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative to protect the national Azerbaijani manifestation of Islam and prevent the risk for radicalisation of its citizens through foreign Islamic ideals.

In previous research related to religion in Azerbaijan the risk for religious radicalisation is a recurrent theme. To this end studies have focused on, for example, the

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<sup>1</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

actual or unintended politicisation of Islam (Bedford 2016; Cornell 2006), the potential for Islamism (Nedea, Jafarov and Mamadov 2012; Wilhelmsen 2009), soft power of other Muslim countries (Aliyev 2017; Valiyev 2017) and the impact of the Islamic State (Lonardo 2016). Another line of inquiry has been the ambiguous relationship between state and religion, largely following from this perceived threat, and discussed issues such as mobilisation of Islamic communities as a response to repression (Bedford 2009; Ter-Matevosyan & Minasyan 2017), the securitisation of non-traditional Islamic movements (Bashirov 2018) and the interaction between secular and religious aspirations in the public space (Ismayilov 2017; Wiktor-Mach 2017). While the notion of Traditional Islam (TI) often features in these and other accounts it is yet to be the sole focus for any extensive investigation. This paper will contribute to a better understanding of this intriguing phenomenon by analysing how Traditional Islam is constructed in the discourses and practices of religious and secular elites in Azerbaijan, with the specific aim to shed light on the motives and methods of TI as a state-initiated and executed project. To this end we propose TI and its expression is in many aspects similar to counter-radicalisation initiatives in other countries, seeking to prevent members of a non-radicalized population from being radicalized in a largely non-coercive manner (Schmid 2013). Notably, religion in general and Islam in particular is often viewed as an important factor in such programs. Hence, our study of the motives and methods for this project to nationalize Islam will take place in the context of a broader literature on this topic and will, paraphrasing Baker-Beall et al (2014, p. 3), illustrate how counter-radicalisation ‘percolate through national political and cultural lenses’ of Azerbaijan.

### **Outline of the Study**

The study builds largely on ten in-depth, semi-structured elite and expert interviews conducted in Baku, Azerbaijan during the spring of 2018. The respondents were selected based on their expected ability to elaborate on state-religion relationships in general and the purpose and prospects of the ‘Traditional Islam’ phenomenon in particular, as well as their availability. One interviewee is worth particular mention as one of the creators of the Traditional Islam project – the Deputy Head of the SCWRA, the secular authority in charge of the initiative. Respondents also include prominent religious elites such as two representatives of the highest Muslim authority in Azerbaijan – the Caucasus Muslim Board, as well as a number of state-employed academics and/or experts with special insight either in the religious or political context of the country. In most cases profession and workplace rather than name is

used to define the interviewees, in order to protect their identity and integrity. The interviews were conducted by two of the authors in Azerbaijani and then translated to English and analysed. The questions focused on the role of Islam in Azerbaijan, perceptions of threat and security in relation to religion, nationalisation of Islam and Traditional Islam as a state project. Beside the interviews information from newspapers and websites of relevant government institutions have been used to track the official discourse and representation of TI.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows: the first part is an introduction presenting insights from previous studies on radicalisation and counter-radicalisation as the theoretical and conceptual point of departure for study, as well as a brief overview of the phenomenon of Traditional Islam as a counter-radicalisation strategy. Second, the context in which TI developed in Azerbaijan will be described and third, the study of TI as counter-radicalisation will be presented through an analysis of motives and methods for this initiative, as constructed by relevant elites and experts. Thereafter the Azerbaijani case will be considered in the light of some critical perspectives in previous literature, focusing specifically on the tension between effective counter-radicalisation policies and respect for tolerance and individual freedoms and Muslims becoming ‘suspect communities’ as a result of counter-radicalisation efforts. Linked to this the article will feature a discussion about counter-radicalisation’s differences and similarities in democratic and non-democratic contexts, so far largely missing in the literature. The final section provides a concluding summary.

### **Understanding and Preventing Radicalisation**

A large part of studies on radicalisation has been linked to the perceived threat from home grown Islamist terrorism and violent extremism in Western Europe and the USA (Kosseim 2011; Lindekilde 2012; Vidino & Brandon 2012; Precht 2007) often addressing the question why young Muslims with Western socialisation join militant Islamist groups (Della Porta & LaFree 2012) or participation of so called foreign fighters from different European Muslim communities in the Syrian or other wars (Hegghammer 2010; Duyvesteyn & Peeters 2015; van Ginkel & Entenmann 2016). Despite its frequent use the lack of a ‘one fits-all’ definition of the term radicalisation is amply documented in previous research (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; Githens-Mazer & Lambert 2010; Neumann 2013; Hegghammer 2013; Sedgwick 2010; Vidino 2010). Scholars agree in its broadest sense the term describes a socialisation process through which groups and/or individuals develop the propensity to employ violence in order

to achieve social or political change (Borum 2011; Schmid & McAllister 2011). Some see this process as a result of immigrant youngsters' socio-economic and political grievances vis-à-vis their native peers and the policies of their host-countries (Nesser 2006; Slootman & Tillie 2006). The most prevalent view on Muslim radicalisation, and the most relevant for the study at hand, links it to religious-ideological motives. Notably, many radicalized Muslims give religion as reason, or even the moral obligation, to take up arms (Juergensmeyer 2005; Payne 2009; Kühle & Lindekilde 2010; Wiktorowicz 2005). Convinced a war is being waged against Islam also in their host-countries, as they experience Muslim conviction and way of life are threatened (van San 2015; Crone 2016), feelings of humiliation and anger leading them to join milieus where violence is considered a legitimate tool (Slootman & Tillie 2006; van San 2015).

### **Traditional Islam to Counter Radicalisation**

The notion of counter-radicalisation responds to the above and the by now well-established perception of radicalisation as a non-linear process (Neumann 2013; Silber & Bhatt 2007). In essence counter-radicalisation is based largely on the assumption radicalisation can be avoided through preventing 'young people from entering the radicalisation process in the first place' (Precht 2007, p. 85). Most counter-radicalisation programs in Europe as well as increasingly in the United States are merging security and integration policies with social cohesion and community building programs (Lindekilde 2012; Vidino & Brandon 2012; Neumann 2011). Notably, counter radicalisation in this context builds on 'providing alternatives and incentives and shaping individual choices in a preferred direction, rather than by restrictions, bans and hard interventions' (Lindekilde 2012, p. 338) and is directed towards potential internal rather than external radicals. Initiatives often zoom in on 'at risk segments' of society – mostly Muslim youth living in segregated areas under the auspice lack of integration is making them particularly vulnerable to radical influences.

Other programs are challenging extremist thought and influences at large by promoting tolerant, moderate and democratic principles to make societies and individuals resilient to radical ideas. Over all, resilience, broadly understood as a form of governmentality (Rogers 2013) related to the capacity of society to positively or successfully adapt to external problems or threats has emerged as a key concept featured in a number of national security strategies as a way to counter violent extremism (Fjäder 2014; Joseph 2013; Reid & Botterill 2013; Dalgaard-Nielsen & Schack 2016). Focus here is more on preventing radicalisation

than on de-radicalisation and disengagement of already committed extremists. In Muslim-majority states, e.g. Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan, counter-radicalisation programs tend to be more engaged in the latter through post-crime rehabilitation initiatives and preventive programs (Briggs & Febe 2013; Vidino 2010). These programs share an emphasis on considering jihadist ideas as corruptive and the major important motivation for radicalisation. Thus, exposure to alternative narratives, in the shape of moderate or mainstream interpretations of Islam is present in the counter-radicalisation strategies of some Western countries, especially those ‘where the state and religion are constitutionally intertwined’ (Vidino & Brandon 2010, p. 170). It is to this end some Muslim populated states have introduced ‘Traditional Islam,’ e.g. its own interpretation as an antidote – a way to make the population more resilient to radical interpretations of Islam (Vidino 2010).

In most western scholarship, Traditional Islam is conceptualized through its dichotomy between fundamentalism and modernism. In the literature of Islamic Studies it is defined as an entity established by Islamic scholars in the early foundation of theological and legal institutions (Fauzi 2012). In general, Traditional Islam does not contain integration of Islamic values with local traditions, however, recently it has been noted in some cases Traditional Islam is perceived and introduced by the ruling elite in this capacity – as a combination of Islam and local traditions, behavioural norms and even with pre-Islamic religions (Fauzi 2012; Omelicheva 2011; Khalid 2003; Edelbay 2012). The Azerbaijani case in focus of this study is one example but the trend is noticeable in other post-Soviet Muslim states as well. In Kazakhstan, where nomadic culture resisted the spread of canonical Islam a Kazakh Islam, blended with local customs, was established and now officially recognized (Omelicheva 2011). In Uzbekistan Islam originally developed close to the basic principles of Traditional Islam, but now, officially due to security concerns, the government is making efforts to construct its own Traditional Islam on a secular and official base (Khalid 2003).

## **Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation in the Azerbaijani Context**

### ***Threat from Foreign Influence***

Over 90 per cent of the population in Azerbaijan define themselves as ‘Muslims’ (Wiktor-Mach 2017). However as a result of historical processes in general and the Soviet anti-religious campaigns in particular, the knowledge about Islam was at the time of independence low among the Azerbaijani Muslims. In its initial stages Iranians, various representatives of

the Arab world and Turks were providing hands-on help to restore religious life in the country by establishing, and sometimes even constructing, a great number of mosques and *madrasas* as well as disseminating religious knowledge through literature, teaching, and preaching. After first welcoming the Islamic missionary activity Azerbaijani authorities started fearing its impact, believing ‘imported’ Islamic ideas could prove harmful for the Azerbaijani context. At this point in time the political leaders saw the Turkish state’s relation to religion as a role model for Azerbaijan (Bedford 2009). While the activities of the Iranians and Arabs were suspended the late President Heydar Aliyev encouraged Turkish activities as a counterweight to ‘radical Sunnism’ (Cornell 2006; Yunusov 2004). It is worth noting our interviews revealed this is not the case anymore. Turkey’s President Erdogan’s instrumentalisation of religion is not seen as fit for Azerbaijan although, interestingly, his perception of the Fetullah Gülen movement as violent radicals has seemingly been embraced by the Azerbaijani state that has taken actions to close down the movement’s activities (Bedford 2016).

The authorities’ notion Azerbaijan is threatened by radical Islamic ideologies and movements echoes in many academic articles (e.g. Mirzayev 2013; Nedeia, Jafarov & Mamadov 2012; Wilhelmsen 2009; Cornell 2006; Fuller 2002). Overall foreign radical influence in Azerbaijan seems to be implicit rather than explicit. There have in fact been only few physical incidents indicating violent Islamic radicalisation in Azerbaijan (Lonardo 2016). In recent time there was only one – the 2008 explosion in Abu Bakr Mosque in Baku caused by a grenade being thrown in during prayer time killing two worshippers and wounding a dozen including the Imam. The attack is believed to have been carried out by the *jihadi* group ‘Forest Brothers’ as a result of an ideological disagreement between two Salafi currents (Gasimov 2017). Another incident occurred in the end of 2015 in Nardaran, a settlement just north of Baku, known in essence for the high level of religiosity among its inhabitants and some large anti-government protests. On orders of the interior ministry armed riot police conducted a raid against a building where Imam Taleh Bagirzade, a prominent Shiite cleric, educated in Iran, was celebrating the religious Muharram holiday together with community members. Seven people, including at least two police officers, were killed, and several others were wounded in the raid that left Bagirzade arrested together with 17 members of his Muslim Unity Movement, accused of planning a violent coup to seize power (Runey 2016). Yet, details of developments remain unclear and the fact Bagirzade is not only a theologian but also a political activist, and an outspoken regime critic at that, has caused many observers to question the official version of events. Access to objective information about what

happened is near enough impossible to obtain. It is worth noting it was not the first time Bagirzade was arrested.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, his activities are described as having accomplished an unprecedented bridging of the gap between secular and religious opposition in Azerbaijan (Ismayilov 2017) something likely to have made him seen as a particular challenge to the authoritarian system.

### ***Traditional vs. Non-Traditional Religious Movements***

The Nardaran-events<sup>3</sup> did not appear in a vacuum but as part of an increasingly harsh crackdown on some religious communities in the name of anti-radicalisation. A number of legal, practical and administrative measures have been taken by the government to gradually strengthen their control over religious life in the country. These include, for example, a number of changes to the registration processes for religious communities, limitations on the use, production and distribution of religious literature and other materials, restrictions in the sphere of religious practices and installation of surveillance cameras in mosques (Corley & Kinahan 2018; Ter-Matevosyan & Minasyan 2017). A number of mosques and prayer rooms throughout the country have been closed or demolished in recent years for not complying with regulations and a large number of theologians, religious figures, activists, journalists, and heads of religious organisations and communities arrested on various charges (Corley & Kinahan 2018; US Department of State 2017; Ter-Matevosyan & Minasyan 2017). Suggestively, on the most recent list over political prisoners in Azerbaijan (published in February 2019) a majority are in the ‘religious activists’ category.<sup>4</sup>

For the purpose of our study the shift that occurred to this end around 2012, both in discourse and practices, is of particular interest. First, instead of labelling potential religious threats to the state ‘radicals’ a distinction was now for the first time made along the lines of ‘traditional’ vs. ‘non-traditional’ religious movements (Bashirov 2018; Ter-Matevosyan & Minasyan 2017). While ‘traditional’ Islam was described as ‘non-political’, ‘Azerbaijan-born’, and ‘not imported from outside’, an image of ‘non-traditional’ movements were constructed as representing a ‘destructive’ ‘political’ Islam ‘exported by foreign

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<sup>2</sup> He had recently served a two and a half year in prison sentenced on drug charges, which his followers (and most others) suspect is bogus. Instead a fierce anti-government sermon is believed to have been the real reason for his arrest.

<sup>3</sup> Notably there has also been other ‘Nardaran events’. In June 2002 for example there were serious clashes between police and the inhabitants of Nardaran as a result of their social protests.

<sup>4</sup> Compiled by the Working Group on a Unified List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan, which brings together human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists and experts. Available at: <https://www.humanrightsclub.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Political-Prisoners-Report-Azerbaijan-WG-20.02.2019.pdf>, accessed on 5 April 2019.

interests.’ According to Bashirov (2018, p. 2) the Non-Traditional Religious Movements (NTRM) were portrayed as an ‘existential threat to national security and the national identity of Azerbaijan’ and included all ‘unwelcome Islamic communities, groups and organisations’. From our interviews we gather this includes largely the same categories, which have been viewed with suspicion since independence e.g. both Iran-inspired Shiites and certain Sunni groups, Salafis in particular – still referred to by some as Wahhabis. ‘Wahhabism will take us back to Middle Ages’, one respondent claims.<sup>5</sup> ‘Radical Islamic teachings such as Salafism preach violence and intolerance. There is no place for them in Azeri society,’ explains another.<sup>6</sup> These communities are commonly described as dangerous because they are ‘controlled from abroad,’ ‘by foreign powers,’ et cetera. Additionally, representatives of Turkish Sunnism, particularly the previously highly respected Gülen movement, is now included in this category, which reflect a more critical attitude to ‘Turkish Islam’. Additionally, one person mentions the ideology spread by the Islamic State (ISIS) as a potential danger to Azerbaijan.<sup>7</sup>

With the introduction and promotion of TI the state actors’ focus shifted from identifying and neutralizing physical threats i.e. *behavioral* radicalisation, in the terminology of the literature, to preventing the development of extremist beliefs i.e. *cognitive* radicalisation (Neumann 2013; Vidino 2010). Below we will try to better understand this initiative by looking into different features of Traditional Islam, focusing specifically on its perceived functions.

### **Traditional Islam: Old Narratives in a New Project**

‘On this prayer call, the Prayer for Unity, for the first time in the world, all Muslims, no matter which branch of Islam they claim to belong to, gathered together at one time, in one place, making prayers to God.’<sup>8</sup> These words by Shahin Hasanli, a representative of the Caucasus Muslim Board, describes a novel initiative in Azerbaijan – holding prayers officially led by representatives of Shi’a and Sunni communities together. The Unity Prayers are a good illustration of the authorities’ undertaking to promote a national Islam or, as it is officially called *ənənəvi* – ‘Traditional,’ or ‘Classic’ Islam – in the Azerbaijani context. The

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<sup>5</sup> Faculty member, Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Aqil Shirinov (Head of Department Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyat Institute), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Head of Department, Baku Engineering University, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Prayer for Unity in Baku, *Islamic Voice*, 32-02, 386, Jumadul Awwal/Jumadul Aakhir 1440 H, 17 February 2016, available at: <http://islamicvoice.com/prayer-for-unity-in-baku/>, accessed on 25 March 2019.



discourse of TI was developed and promoted by the SCWRA and is becoming increasingly popular among the political elites of the country. According to Gunduz Ismayilov, the Deputy Head of the Committee, Traditional Islam is an entity was created throughout the history of the Azerbaijani people. According to him, TI in the Azerbaijani context does not contradict the principles of Islam, such as the *Quran*, *Hadith* and *Sharia*, but supplements these with traditions, family structures, behavioural norms and customs of the Azerbaijanis. In his definition, TI is purely local and opposes Islam introduced from abroad and, crucially, is ‘the only choice for the religious policy of Azerbaijani government’.<sup>9</sup>

Traditional Islam in the Azerbaijani context is unofficial. According to the 48<sup>th</sup> provision of the Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic, the government does not have the right to intervene to religious affairs. Still, with the launch of TI the state is undeniably increasingly involved in religious issues. For example, the setting for the first Unity Prayers, the Heydar Mosque – named after the former president as a ‘monument to his vision of a unified religious community under strong state supervision’ (Koch, Valiyev & Zaini 2018, p. 6) underlines this is a state led initiative to publically manifest and institutionalize TI. The Heydar Mosque was officially created to remove the barriers between the Shi’a and Sunnis in Azerbaijan and thus is catering to neither of these communities exclusively. As pointed out by Koch et al (2018), its opening came at a time when the State has been actively closing down other mosques. Moreover, while in the 1990s some mosques were built or restored by different individuals and by the support of foreign organisations and governments from Iran, Turkey, and Arabic countries it has during the last two decades become increasingly difficult to get official permission for the construction of mosques in Azerbaijan. Actively supporting the construction and restoration of mosques in ‘traditional’ architectural styles (seen as more relevant to local customs) with financial assistance from the Heydar Aliyev Foundation<sup>10</sup> is one way the government is trying to increase the impact of TI. The government has also been sponsoring the celebration of anniversaries of historical religious figures. For instance in 2013, on the initiative of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation UNESCO declared 2013 the ‘Year of Yahya Bakuvi’, a prominent member of the Khalvetilik *Tariqa* founded in Azerbaijan and later spread throughout the Islamic world.

Another illustration of increased state engagement in religious affairs is the

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<sup>9</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>10</sup> A charity foundation started in the honor of the former President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, currently run by the Vice President Mehriban Aliyeva (also the wife of the incumbent), <https://heydar-aliyev-foundation.org/en/content/index/47/>, accessed on 9 April 2019.

Heydar Mosque not being supervised by the Caucasus Muslim Board, to which all Islamic religious communities in Azerbaijan just as in Soviet times are traditionally subordinated. It will instead be run directly by the Executive Powers of Baku. While the SCWRA is the one in practice regulating religious activity in the country, according to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief, the Caucasian Muslims Board has not only been responsible for the mosques but also for all Islamic education. Until recently the Board was running the single official higher Islamic education facility, the Islamic University of Baku, whose graduates – until now – have been the only ones who can be appointed to work in the mosques subordinated to the Board. The creation of the Azerbaijan Theology Institute, administered instead by the secular authorities, e.g. the SCWRA, shows, according to most of our respondents, the State's wish to be more involved in this process. A majority of the interviewees believe this is correct.

Another interesting initiative to support TI is the establishment of the Moral Values Promotion Fund where money from the state budget is used for 'support of religious confessions, protection and development of moral values, as well as ensuring the state support to this field' through various social projects (Baghirova 2017). Moreover a number of seminars were conducted all over the country on the topic of *ənənəvi islam*. Importantly, in addition the Fund will be used to pay Imams educated at the new Institute. This payment, one respondent explains, is however not to be seen as a salary – because the state cannot finance religious activity – but as an allowance necessary to incentivize people to serve as 'a man of religion'.<sup>11</sup> This development is both underlining and institutionalizing the preferred strong connection between the state and Islamic expression in Azerbaijan.

As mentioned initially the idea about a special Azerbaijani version of Islam is not new. The question is why Traditional Islam only recently turned in to a political project. One suggestion is the initiative is in fact part of an even bigger state undertaking, namely to promote Azerbaijan internationally as a showcase for multiculturalism and peaceful multi-religious coexistence. It is most likely no coincidence the launch of 'Unity Prayers' coincided with President Ilham Aliyev's announcement of 2016 as 'The Year of Multiculturalism.' In the words of the President 'multiculturalism is a state policy in Azerbaijan and, at the same time, a public order. For us it is a normal way of life'.<sup>12</sup> The idea is that in a world shaken by religious radicalism and terrorism Azerbaijan and its inhabitants, being located on a unique

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<sup>11</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted at the Azerbaijan Multiculturalism Project's homepage: [http://multiculturalism.preslib.az/en\\_testimonials-ie.htm](http://multiculturalism.preslib.az/en_testimonials-ie.htm), accessed on 25 March 2019.

crossroad, not only between different continents but also between ‘empires’, ‘civilisations’, ‘religious directions’, ‘ethnic groups’, and ‘languages’. Here not only different Muslim sects, but also different religious groups live peacefully together. A State Counsellor on Multiculturalism, Inter-ethnic and Religious Affairs as well as the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre was officially created to support the ‘recognition of Azerbaijan in the world as the centre of multiculturalism.’<sup>13</sup>

Although these two initiatives go hand in hand the multiculturalism campaign is explicitly targeting an international audience and thus seemingly more about nation branding – offering Azerbaijan’s model of tolerance and multiculturalism to the world. TI instead seems geared towards spreading a new narrative among the national Muslim population, especially those who are practicing or potentially practicing, with the purpose of preventing radicalisation. The next section of the article will highlight the motivation behind and the function of Traditional Islam to this end.

### **Traditional Islam as an ‘Anti-Virus’ Program**

In general most of our respondents agree religion and religious people at large are not a threat in Azerbaijan. But, at the same time, they concur if believers are under ‘influence of foreign powers’ this could potentially be dangerous. The fact Azerbaijanis are increasingly thinking of themselves as more religious (Liles 2012) our respondents fear increases the vulnerability of the society and consequentially the state. An important aspect of this line of thought, to some extent recognizable from mainstream counter-radicalisation literature, is that the Azerbaijani population is particularly vulnerable and thus ‘easy targets’ for these radicals with various interests who may ‘fool people, or buy them’. In the USSR the Soviets regulating everything, says one respondent and elaborates: ‘now it’s up to us to protect our independence, our ideology, the stability, even our alphabet. We also have to protect the people’s thoughts’.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly in the case of Azerbaijan this perceived vulnerability extends to the whole state. Lacking strong religious traditions the country has long been portrayed by academics, analysts and journalists alike as particularly susceptible to the potentially radical foreign religious influences. TI is believed to play an important role to counteract this

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<sup>13</sup> According to the projects official website: [http://multiculturalism.preslib.az/en\\_a1.html](http://multiculturalism.preslib.az/en_a1.html). Another interesting fact is that classes in ‘Multiculturalism of Azerbaijan’ have been exported to a number of universities worldwide.

<sup>14</sup> Head of Department, Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

development. ‘Azerbaijan can be ‘bit in the religious side’ by other countries. ‘Traditional Islam is the Islam that will protect the interest of Azerbaijan,’ explains one respondent.<sup>15</sup> The Deputy Head of SCWRA eloquently used the analogy of lacking infrastructure to describe the situation:

Imagine an X country with no railways. .... we saw another power wants to create another railway structure here. You see that this railway will take you to somewhere else, and you must invest in your own. So, we need to form that structure in accordance with our people’s minds and interests by restoring Traditional Islam here....One can analyse it from many perspectives, from security, global processes, regional, political, moral aspects, et cetera but this is self-protection in every case. If we do not care enough for it the consequences could be harsh on us and on our state.<sup>16</sup>

These notions of vulnerability is a particularly important feature of the outline below of the different ways in which Traditional Islam is constructed in the discourse and practice of religious and secular elites as counteracting religious radicalisation in Azerbaijan.

### ***Protecting the Secular State***

Azerbaijan is in earlier research often described as a secular state, or even the most secularized of the post-Soviet Islamic republics (Dragadze 1994; Tohidi 2000). This seems to be related to the people, as well as to the official position of the state. After Azerbaijan became a self-governing republic the authorities decided, on the one hand, the country would be secular, but, on the other, it would distance itself from the atheist politics of the Soviet Union. As pointed out by former President Heydar Aliyev ‘...it is important to note that neither is Azerbaijan an Islamic state nor is Islam a state ideology of it. Islam is not the ideology of the government of Azerbaijan. Church and state are separated’ (quoted in Sattarov 2009, p. 128). Hence, one important function of TI is protecting the state’s secular structure. In this regard so-called non-traditional movements are seen as ‘fundamentalist’ and as such considered a security concern for the Aliyev regime. In contrast to ‘traditional religious movements’ fundamentalists are believed to strive to establish an Islamic regime with *Sharia*

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<sup>15</sup> Professor, National Academy of Sciences, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

rule, even though neither Shi'a nor Sunni groups in Azerbaijan have stated any intention to change the secular governmental structures (Bedford 2009; Ismayilov 2017). There are different reasons for this. First, practices observed in neighbouring countries, Iran in particular, raise the government's suspicion and prompt them to develop preventive policies against these groups. Second, there is widespread understanding that for a secular society the combination of religion and politics is something dangerous that must be controlled. To some extent this notion is related to a Soviet path-dependency still abound in the Azerbaijani, as well as many other post-Soviet cases (Bedford 2009). Moreover, in the light of this many of our respondents claim the fact Azerbaijanis are predominantly Muslim increases the risk for politicisation of religion. 'In the case of Christianity religion does not intervene in everything, but in Islam it does,' says one person.<sup>17</sup> 'We are not the US, not Europe. There Christians do not have a claim to power, but Muslims do,' notes another.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Preventing Sectarianism***

According to most estimates, circa 65 per cent of Azerbaijani Muslims are assumed to be Shia and 35 per cent Sunni (ex. Yunusov 2004). Throughout the course of history differences between the followers of the two branches was blurred and a special kind of relationship developed between the two groups. The idea of tolerance between Sunnis and Shi'as as something unique in the Azerbaijani context was first established by Azerbaijani intellectuals in the Russian Empire, then reinforced as a result of the Soviet religious policies and finally inherited by the political leaders of independent Azerbaijan. Now it is one of the cornerstones of TI as well as Azerbaijan's international nation branding efforts, as vividly illustrated in this interview extract:

In Germany, I was asked whether there is tension between Sunnis and Shias in Azerbaijan. I responded I am a cleric belonging to the Shia sect, but my wife she is Sunni. This wasn't hindrance for us to get married. So, from this perspective you can assess that whether we have tension between the sects or not? We have created an Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism for the world. In the case of

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<sup>17</sup> Professor National Academy of Sciences, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Aqil Shirinov (Head of Department Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyat Institute), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

the religious tensions and wars all around world, in Azerbaijan there is peace and stability.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly the situation is becoming more complex as Muslims in Azerbaijan are becoming more aware (Bedford 2009; Balci & Rovshenoglu 2013; Mamedov 2107). In rare instances it has even resulted in sectarian violence (Mirzayev 2014). This development highlights the risk of dangerous foreign influences leading to a radicalisation of believers according to one respondent: ‘...historically we did not have any divisions like this [Sunni/Shia], not even in the Tsar period. These people are not against each other to begin with, but imagine these groups all radicalizing – what would happen? Could they live together? No.’<sup>20</sup>

The TI of the Azerbaijani government is in essence a secular concept. In fact one religious leader even says ‘Traditional Islam is theoretically impossible – Islam is Islam’. But, he continues, ‘practically it exists. Religion must become a part of a culture in order to be nationalized and a nation cannot live without religion.’<sup>21</sup> The construction of new types of Islamic centres of worship like the Heydar Mosque, as well as initiatives such as Unity Prayers suggest the creation and promotion of TI is expected to institutionalize an Azerbaijani ‘non-sectarian’ version of Islam and subsequently counteract dogmatic influences, reinforce the heterogeneousness of Islam in Azerbaijan and ensure stability among the believers as well as in society at large.

### ***Preserving National Identity***

Traditional Islam’s notion of mixing religious and national traditions is not in itself new in Azerbaijan. In their recent research Siroky and Mahmudlu (2016) found a direct relationship between religiousness and national identity of the Azerbaijanis. A few of the respondent point out religion is important in the Azerbaijani national identity but that the lifestyle is not based on religion. Another respondent elaborates on this: ‘Islam is everywhere in the person’s life, but living the religion is up to the person himself. For some people it’s only there when they are in the graveyard. For others it’s everywhere. Here [in Azerbaijan], as I said, national traditions and Islamic traditions have been matched to each other, and have been mixed for

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<sup>19</sup> Fuad Nurullayev (Deputy Head Caucasus Muslim Board), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Aqil Shirinov (Head of Department Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Aqil Shirinov (Head of Department Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

years.<sup>22</sup> To this end the short lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) 1918-20 left behind an important legacy both in the political and religious spheres, in terms of the intellectual's strong secularism narrative including Islam only as a cultural component of the national identity. This was reinforced by Soviet anti-religious and nationality policies, which ensured Islam was present in people's life primarily as a form of national culture and tradition (Bedford 2017). One role of TI appears to be to protect this heritage.

Most of our respondents do not only see non-traditional movements as a threat to state security, but to Azerbaijani identity. For instance, most Salafis reject the celebration of the Novruz Holiday, which has an important place in traditional Azerbaijani culture. Azerbaijani Salafis perceive Novruz as an element of Zoroastrianism and even criticize the cooking of traditional Novruz food and pastry like *shekerbura*, *bakhlava* and *gogal*, which for most Azerbaijanis are main symbols of the holiday. Azerbaijani government sees Novruz as part of TI and therefore believes the attitude of Salafis is challenging its identity policy. The Deputy Head of SCWRA believes this development is worrying:

Imagine if this type of religiosity increase, says— there will be ghettos everywhere. People will not share the same values – then this is not a society, like in Lebanon. In this sense I see Salafis as a threat. Maybe they are not against the state, they don't intend armed conflict but they are still a danger to national identity.<sup>23</sup>

He identifies TI in this sense as a 'shield' or an 'anti-virus program' to withstand this kind of foreign influences and protect Azerbaijani identity. 'Traditional Islam ensures when a nation gets more religious it doesn't lose its national identity. It stays Azerbaijani,' he explains.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Providing Proper Education***

Within the limited theological education system allowed in the Soviet Union there was few if any possibilities for Shia clerics. This is believed to have contributed to the severe lack of local well-educated Islamic elite haunting Azerbaijan since independence. Consequently foreigners came to play an important role in the re-education of Azerbaijani Muslims. Most

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<sup>22</sup> Head of Department, Baku Engineering University, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Aqil Shirinov (Head of Department Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyat Institute), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

religious books and the majority of the *ulama* came from abroad and young people went to Iran, Turkey or Arab countries to study religion (Bedford 2009). TI is perceived as a way to end this process once and for all. From the interviews it becomes clear controlling the education process is seen as highly important in this regard. Thus, the creation of Azerbaijan Theology Institute is a distinctive feature of the TI project as it will create a local cadre who is ‘intellectual, Muslim and Azerbaijani at the same time’.<sup>25</sup> Providing high quality education locally is seen as a way to vaccinate the system against foreign dangerous ideology other wise guaranteed to penetrate the rank of believers. ‘Any person educated abroad will work against this state. This is true based on history. We need to educate the people by ourselves’, clarifies one respondent.<sup>26</sup>

Azerbaijan does already have some higher institutions for higher religious studies. In 1992 Turkey’s Ministry of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) – in collaboration with the Azerbaijani Ministry of Education – opened the Department of Religion at the Baku State University (BSU), modelled on the faculty of theology at Turkey’s University of Marmara. In the same year the Baku Islamic University, operated by the Caucasus Muslims Board, was established as the main provider of religious specialists to work in the mosques subordinated to the Board. Today, however out of the University’s four branches only one still operates, in Zagatala in the north-western part of Azerbaijan. Interestingly, according to some sources the around 300 students are being taught the Sunni Hanafi school of Islam (Mammadli 2018) thus leaving the Shia majority, yet again, without access to higher education. Furthermore, university has long struggled with a bad reputation and not been attractive enough to prospective students. At Baku Theological Institute education will be paid. The government hopes this will increase the incentives for students with high scores to choose this institute instead of more popular ones. That way it will be able to produce more high quality Imams than the Islamic University.

With the creation of Baku Theological Institute as a state institution the Azerbaijani government is showing it wishes to be more involved in the education of new religious representatives. One reason is to control the content of education to avoid the negative impact of foreign influences on an increasingly religious population. ‘If people need something they will buy it anyway, that is why you have to provide the people with what they want. That is a cadre prepared and educated locally not in Arabia, nor Iran, nor Turkey,’

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<sup>25</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.



explains the Deputy Head of SCWRA. Still, religious education is not the main point. Rather it is about breeding religious cadres with the right values – who will spread TI wherever they are appointed. The ambition is the new Institute will make Muslim believers more streamlined in Azerbaijan, more in line with the state image of TI.<sup>27</sup> ‘If the state manages to create the specialists it plans, then yes, society will be more homogenous,’ the Muslim Board representative points out.<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, the way religious and secular elites in Azerbaijan explain the motives and methods of TI in many ways resembles counter-radicalisation ideas and strategies in other contexts. Under the banner of Traditional Islam secular authorities in Azerbaijan are actively striving to establish an alternative, mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative, controlled and institutionalized by the state. This is expected to protect the tolerant character of Azerbaijani Islam, Azerbaijani national identity as well as the secular state and its citizens by serving as an antidote to foreign dangerous Islamic ideologies and subsequent radicalisation of the believers. A brief discussion on how the observed increased state control over Islamic thought and expression might affect the rights and freedom of individual believers is in order. On the one hand such concerns are not uncommon in previous literature – both the foundation and implementation of counter-radicalisation is often criticized to this, and other, ends. On the other, as most previous research on counter-radicalisation focused on democracies the discussion below offers some interesting insights into in differences observed in an authoritarian context to this end.

## **Critical Perspectives on Counter-Radicalisation**

### ***Creation of ‘Suspect’ Communities***

Previous literature expresses strong concern counter-radicalisation initiatives are ‘Othering’ Muslim communities in Europe. Particularly in the United Kingdom such programs, despite admirable aims such as striving for better community cohesion, strengthened integration and less discrimination are still notably targeting a specific faith (Islam) and a certain religious ethnic group (Muslims) thereby making them ‘suspect communities’ (Awan 2012; Kundnani

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<sup>27</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Aqil Shirinov (Head of Department Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

2012; Pantazis & Pemberton 2009). The feeling of alienation that follows from such ‘securitisation,’ it is said, might inspire rather than prevent radicalisation (Rascoff 2012). Moreover, in his highly critical account Rascoff describes initiatives in the USA and the UK to promote what he refers to as ‘Official Islam.’ That is, he writes, a ‘mainstream Islam’ that ‘denotes the Islam in the imagination of national security professionals who seek to interpose a state-sponsored account of Islam as an alternative to radical variants’ (2012, p. 130). Supporting one strand of Islamic ideology (for example Sufism) to out voice another (not seldom Salafism) is not only a task not fit for secular authorities it can also contribute to creating and reinforcing categorisation of ‘good’ and ‘bad Muslims’ (Birt 2006; Brown & Saeed 2015; Maira 2009; Vidino 2010).

In the Azerbaijani case there has in fact long been a notion that state-controlled religion is apolitical and good while ‘other’ religion is political and crafty (Bedford 2009; Jödicke 2017). As for example noted by Jödicke (2017, p. 534) ‘the stereotype of ‘Iranian influence’ has become a trope used in domestic politics to legitimize political action. It is extremely difficult to distinguish between security concerns and the oppression of political opposition.’ This illustrates the securitisation (Bashirov 2018) of certain Islamic groups, which has long been the norm among Azerbaijani secular and religious authorities. Another well documented such case are Salafis who are regularly negatively depicted as one single group in the media, by experts, officials and journalists as ‘‘Wahhabis,’ ‘terrorists,’ ‘fundamentalists,’ and ‘long-bearded radicals’ striving to establish an Islamic state in secular Azerbaijan’ despite the fact that only a small portion of the Salafi population can be said to support radical ideas (Gasimov 2017). The Salafi branch, despite its current popularity among the population, is not classified as ‘traditional’ in Azerbaijan – in difference to Jaferi (Shia), Hanafi and Shafi (Sunni) schools of Islam. Overall it is slightly difficult to understand exactly how the government determine which Muslim groups are ‘traditional’. Sufi teaching is accepted as part of the TI project, but not the revival of *tariqas* originally from Azerbaijan, since these practically disappeared from Azerbaijan during the Soviet time and only returned with the help of ‘foreign influence’. Interestingly also Turkish origin groups such as ‘Nurchular’, ‘Suleymancilar’ and other groups of Hanfi origin from Nagshi *tariqas* are seen as ‘non-traditional’.<sup>29</sup> Thus it appears to be neither their country of origin nor their religious belongingness but somehow their relation to ‘foreign’ interlocutors that determine if they are ‘traditional’ or ‘non-traditional’. To sum up, despite its claim to be inclusive TI appears to be

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<sup>29</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

reinforcing the ‘good’ and bad’ Muslim categories, and even creating new ‘out-groups’ to this end.

### ***Controlling the Population***

‘I think the state prefers neither Shias nor Sunnis,’ says one former Imam among our respondents. ‘The best choice for the state is to get religion out of the game. The aim of the state is to weaken Islam and then to control it. It does not matter which religion it is. Since religious people are in groups, the state needs to control them.’<sup>30</sup> Ideology and control stands out as the two single most important aspects of the TI project. A vulnerable population needs to be ideologically educated because otherwise it is at risk of being lost, radicalized in the hands of foreign powers. While education and raising awareness of potential target groups are main features also in democratic states’ attempt to be resilient against radicalism (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Schack 2016) resilience in these contexts builds on an idea to make security more inclusive with empowerment and participation as end goals. In the Azerbaijani counter-radicalisation efforts there appears to be no such notion. Rather it is making the state more resilient through being in control that is most important. Most notably, not only is the counter-radicalisation process instigated by the state, the state is in a sense the solemn actor. Almost all of our respondents<sup>31</sup> find extensive state control of religious development necessary to prevent foreign radicalism. ‘State is the owner of everything, it has responsibilities, otherwise various streams [of Islam] would come and influence, they could cause chaos. The primary goal of state is to prevent these dangers, to establish norms,’ one person explains.<sup>32</sup>

Importantly TI is not only about controlling religion but about ensuring the dominance of a narrative resonating the government’s ideal state-religion relations. For this purpose messengers need to be generated who are truly fit for this mission – ‘Azerbaijani patriots’<sup>33</sup> who understand concerns of the state and are ready to support it.<sup>34</sup> The education of local cadres is never described in terms of empowerment. Instead the idea is to create ‘a religious person who takes the state's values as his own, who is loyal,’ as expressed by one

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<sup>30</sup> Former Imam, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Only one out of ten explicitly said the way to prevent radicalisation of believers was to give as much freedom as possible and provide conditions for people to find work, the respondent who is the founder of a private think-tank.

<sup>32</sup> Head of Department, Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Fuad Nurullayev (Deputy Head Caucasus Muslim Board), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

respondent. This embodiment of a perceived collective loyalty through the merging of individual and state values can be said to provide a significant representation of the authoritarian regime in general, and how it handles threats in particular.

### ***Strengthening Authoritarian Tendencies***

In mainstream counter-radicalisation research a tension is often detected between counter-radicalisation (both as idea and policy) and the foundation of liberal democracy ensuring citizens' right to think, believe in and do what others may disagree with. As noted by Lindekilde (2012, p. 336) '...the effectiveness of counter-radicalisation policies is intimately related to the maintenance of limits of tolerance in ways which ensure that violent extremism is prevented and fundamental security is obtained, while individual freedoms are respected.' As for Azerbaijan previous research by, for example, Bedford (2009), Bashirov (2018), Gasimov (2017), Jödicke (2017), Ter-Matevosyan and Minasyan (2017) in different ways illustrate the tension and apparent clash between the state's policies and the believers' freedom of religion. In fact, one of our more critical interviewees suggests the State's ambition to control Islam is in order to control the population. Islamic groups are a threat, he says, not against the state security in the first hand, but against the security of the government:

Historically the mosques haven't been a place for worshipping only. It was also a place for exchanging thoughts, to evaluate the events and processes from the religious point of view. Thus people gathered in the mosque not only to worship but also to discuss the matters of life. In a country like ours, these kinds of discussions are dangerous. Our government, the existing regime, cannot accept others' opinions. Therefore, it is trying to prevent the proliferation of these discussions. That is why they interfere in the religious matters, as well. /.../ First, in our conditions, this is about the security of the government. The security of the state comes second.<sup>35</sup>

Overall there is a general tendency for the Azerbaijani authoritarian state to view any independent group as 'oppositional' and thus a threat to be controlled and marginalized (Bedford 2014). In the light of the authoritarian rulers monopolistic control over civic activities counter-radicalisation could indeed make one part of the population – the majority

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<sup>35</sup> Founder of private think-tank, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

who accept the political and religious status quo – more resilient against radical forces. At the same time it has the potential to harm another one – those who are seen as questioning the ideological hegemony.

### ***Constructing ‘State-Islam’***

Probably the confusion in the Azerbaijani authorities’ definition of traditional movements mentioned above stems from the fact TI is in essence a secular phenomenon, constructed by secular elites. It does not feature any clearly identifiable religious aspects. The government labelling religious organisation traditional or non-traditional is not driven by a motivation to determine which Islam is ‘true’ but, it could be suspected, to preserve a status quo on the religious market that is acceptable, e.g. not challenging its interests. Rascoff (2012) notes this type of what he calls ‘proselytisation counter-radicalisation,’ makes a government take on a role as ‘a kind of official theologian’ for which they lacks the capacity, expertise and, importantly, credibility. Similarly, Sedgwick (2012) suggests, the propositions of such ‘Official Islam’ makes more sense to Western governments than to the Muslim community at large. In his opinion to have impact counter-ideology should not be targeting a *jihadist* narrative that is, in fact, mainly accepted among Muslims. It should instead, he writes, be directed against the jihadist course of action – *jihad* – that is not accepted (Sedgwick 2012).

As for the Azerbaijani case one of our respondents, a former Imam, was expressing similar concerns. He was heavily criticizing the content and the motives for this initiative claiming first, tolerance and other idea has no foundation in the *Quran* and are ‘simply nonsense’. Second, he was objecting to the definition of Salafis as non-traditional and thus radicals as they, in his opinion, in fact are the only ones in Azerbaijan promoting ‘true Islam.’ According to him trying to promote a state-version of Islam is going down a dangerous path:

It is possible that they [who implement TI] can be successful. But in reality the Islam they want to create is not true Islam. When the Prophet spoke to his followers he drew many lines in the sand and said ‘there is only one way that Muslims to follow. Other ways will lead to hell’.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Former Imam, interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

It is not possible to say if others share the interviewee's critical stance towards TI. So far little is known about how the idea and project of Traditional Islam is perceived by different Islamic communities in the country. More research to this end, especially focused on non-traditional groups, is highly encouraged as it promises to be of both great academic and normative interest and importance.

## **Conclusion**

This article has strived to provide a better understanding of 'Traditional Islam,' an ambitious state led project in Azerbaijan featuring the creation of an alternative narrative, based on the idea of a unique national version of Islam, to counteract foreign radical Islamic ideologies among believers in the country. The study suggests the way Traditional Islam (TI) is constructed in practice and discourse the initiative largely resembles counter-radicalisation programs in other countries trying to prevent the development of extremist beliefs through changing the dominant discourse. To this end four main features of TI have been extracted from interviews with religious and secular elites. First, TI has no political ambitions, and is thus seen as protecting the secular nature of the Azerbaijani state. Second, TI embraces both Shi'a and Sunni branches of Islam and is expected to preventing sectarianism from developing in the Azerbaijani context. Third, TI incorporates local traditions and customs and hence will help preserve the Azerbaijani national identity. Fourth, through the provision of in-country education based on TI, a new religious elite will be created who ensures the dominance and sustainability of the project.

The concept and policies of counter-radicalisation have been highly criticized in previous literature. It is, among other things, considered under-theorized, too open-ended and difficult to 'measure'. A number of authors also stress normative concerns arising from the relationship between a government's attempt to effectively prevent radicalism and still respecting the individual freedom of citizens as well as certain groups – Muslims in particular, specifically targeted by the counter-radicalisation policies. It is noted in democratic contexts state strategies to prevent radicalisation sometimes feed authoritarian tendencies as it opens for increased control and too much state involvement in private matters of individuals and organisations. In an authoritarian regime, like the one in Azerbaijan, this risk is yet more tenacious. It is possible or even likely the 'Traditional Islam project' will serve to counter-act the growth of radical Islamic ideology in Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, because of the state's ideological and physical hegemony there is a risk it silences any voice not accepted by the

secular authorities as mainstream. The promotion of Traditional Islam is reinforcing an already pre-existing notion of some Muslim communities as ‘good’ and others as ‘bad,’ based on a definition constructed not by religious but by secular authorities. ‘Traditional Islam is our only option to choose, there is no alternative. It’s not possible to have another kind of Islam here,’ says a representative of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations.<sup>37</sup> When the state control over Islamic thought and expression is strengthened through the introduction and promotion of the rather ambiguously defined ‘Traditional Islam’ those Muslims categorized as ‘non-traditional’ is in danger of becoming more vulnerable. Moreover, as state monopoly and control is already present in most sphere of life its wider extension to the religious domain lead sceptics to suspect it is as much a way to prevent the build-up of any organized dissent against the government as it is preventing radicalisation.

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<sup>37</sup> Gunduz Ismayilov (Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations), interviewed by author, Baku, Azerbaijan, April 2018.

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