

Bureaucratization and engineering of Islam in Azerbaijan

Since the early years of independence, all new political elites tried to regulate religious space in Azerbaijan. Both, the first President Ayaz Mutallibov and the second President Abulfaz Elchibey used religious rhetoric, as well as local Islamic groups and organizations to gain support for their internal and foreign policies¹. However, it was only during the reign of Heydar Aliyev that the “Muslim politics”, which entails the competition and contest over the interpretation of Islamic symbols and control of formal and informal institutions that produce them², has been systematically formed.

Although Aliyev, like previous presidents, claimed for legitimacy mainly through the secular sources and nationalist symbols, he, nevertheless, successfully employed Islamic idioms in his political rhetoric. He represented Islam as an integral part of the national values of Azerbaijanis, and the state as a protector of these values and the faithful. Pilgrimage to holy places in Mecca and Medina, which was widely covered by the media as a symbolic return of Islam after the collapse of the atheistic Soviet regime, references to Quran as well as Shi‘ite imams in public speeches, construction and renovation of mosques and shrines and organization of Islamic conferences were all part of the President’s “Muslim Politics”³. Aliyev also used Islam in his cultural diplomacy aimed to establish links with Muslim countries, especially for receiving humanitarian aid from the Gulf countries and, political support for Organization of Islamic Conference in the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

If during the period of the first two presidents the religious policy was not yet fully formulated and the religious space was open: religious communities were not subordinated to one particular structure, foreign preachers were allowed to proselytize, while the external funding was

¹ Rufat Sattarov. *Islam, State and Society in Independent Azerbaijan: Between Historical Legacy and Post-Soviet Reality*. (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2009) 87-103; 103-122.

² Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori. *Muslim Politics*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, 5.

³ Rufat Sattarov. *Islam, State and Society*; 124-129

uncontrolled, since Aliyev centralized the power, religious space became much more restrictive, especially toward transnational flows.

Laws passed in 1995 and later on, as well as variety of political actions, led to the closure of the foreign Islamic and non-Islamic NGOs, the expulsion of foreign preachers from the country, and the elimination of a number of terrorist groups connected to international *jihadism*¹. Such policies can be explained by the fact that as Aliyev signed the oil contract of the century with Western companies in 1994, he needed firstly to demonstrate the Western (secular and European) vector of his foreign policy, and secondly to prevent any threat to the economic interests of his international partners². Consequently, these policies required the restriction of external religious flows and suppression of local politically active religious actors. In this context, persecution of oppositional Islamic groups considerably intensified after the events of 9/11.

However, after centralization of power, the state slowly shifted from the securitization of the religious sphere to its subordination to the state apparatus and bureaucracy. The bureaucratization became the main facilitator of nationalization of Islam and making it a part of the cultural hegemony of the new political elites. This process was initiated by Heydar Aliyev, and was actively developed during the reign of the next president, his son, Ilham Aliyev.

THE POWER OF BUREAUCRACY

This paper argues that the state, especially since 2011, from the regulation gradually shifted to the direct administrative and symbolic intervention into the sphere of religion. It does not seek to account state's relationships or policies toward Islam per se. Many scholars has already produced profound research on this topic³. Rather, it examines the practical and discursive implications of the bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan, the process in which the state accumulates religious

¹ Rufat Sattarov. *Islam, State and Society*, 131-132.

² Altay Goyushev and Elchin Asgarov. *Islam and Islamic education in Soviet and independent Azerbaijan*. In: *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successors State*, ed. Michael Kemper, Raoul Motika, Stephan Reichmuth. London: Routledge Curzon, 202.

³ See: Rufat Sattarov. *Islam, State and Society*, Sofie Bedford, *Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan: Repression and Mobilization in a Post-Soviet Context* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Studies in Politics 129, 2009, Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach. *Religious Revival and Secularism in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*. Berlin/Boston, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2017.

authority within its own institutions and transforms religious leaders into bureaucrats¹. The state usually represents the bureaucratization as a natural process of administrative regulation and provision of a variety of services to citizens. The classical definition of bureaucracies is that they are systems of administration characterized by hierarchical structure, division of labor, fixed rules and duties, “staff of subaltern officials”, aspiration for efficiency etc². But some scholars went beyond this definition provided by Max Weber, saying that bureaucracies are actually “means to an end, ways of carrying out the work of shaping and controlling other human beings”, and “above all, instruments of power (material, coercive, ideological)”³.

Bureaucratization is a hegemonic process, as it allows the state to classify, communicate, regulate and discipline its subjects⁴. There is “a significant program of social engineering” behind bureaucratization of Islam⁵, which entails instilling in people certain “orthodox” religion. In case of Azerbaijan, this bureaucratically initiated tradition is defined as “Traditional Islam” (*ənənəvi İslam*), which is represented as very progressive, enlightened and inclusive Muslim tradition. This highly eclectic discourse incorporates various fragmentary ideas and often mutually contradictory beliefs shared by a considerable part of the population. By integrating their worldviews or “philosophies” into a new whole, – using Antonio Gramsci’s concepts – the state creates a new “common sense” or “conventional wisdom”. At the same time, it reflects and reproduces the language of Azerbaijanism – the political ideology of the ruling elites serving their legitimacy.

The bureaucratization of Islam intensified rapidly after the events of the Arab uprisings that shook the Arab world in 2011. It was during this period that the ideological discourse of Traditional Islam was shaped and numerous activities diffusing it all over the country organized. Surely, this trend towards bureaucratic and ideological intervention in the religious politics of the state was long before the Arab uprisings. However, from the mid-1990s to 2000, it was in its formative period, although the state mostly preferred regulation, and, from time to time, coercion. But since the period of İlham Aliyev's rule, the process of bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan has highly

¹ Ann Waincott. *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco and the War on Terror*. Cambridge University Press, 2017, 14.

² Max Weber. *Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1946, 197-198.

³ Josiah Heyman. The Anthropology of Power-Wielding Bureaucracies. *Human Organization*: Winter 2004, Vol. 63, No. 4, 488-489.

⁴ Müller, Dominik M. The Bureaucratization of Islam and its Socio-Legal Dimensions in Southeast Asia: Conceptual Contours of a Research Project, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Paper, 187. 2018.

⁵ Ann Waincott, *Bureaucratizing Islam*, 17.

increased, and the Middle Eastern turmoil seems to have been offered a wide opportunity to systematically formulate, organize and enhance this administrative and normative politics of Islam.

Although external security threats induce the state's intervention into the sphere of religion, they do not determine it. In other words, bureaucratization affects domains that go far beyond or unrelated to security. Appropriating Islam, the state is not just trying to eliminate religious opposition, it seeks — as far as possible — to naturalize the regulation of Muslim subjects just as it naturalizes other daily bureaucratic rituals. In so doing – as this study argues – the state aims to eliminate the very potential of opposition within the sphere of religion.

Setting the context

Since Heydar Aliyev came to power, the Soviet-era Caucasus Muslims Board (CMB) and its head, Sheikh al-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, have been once again entrusted with managing Islamic practices, interaction between Muslim communities, education of imams and their appointment to the mosques. According to the law on freedom of religion, all Islamic communities and organizations are subordinated to CMB¹.

In addition to the CMB, in 2001 the government created the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA). This institution has been endowed with the task of regulating along with Islamic communities, the entire religious space in the country². If CMB is a semi-official structure subordinated to the state, SCWRA is a part of the state apparatus.

Allocation of CMB's duties to the state structure was inevitable. First, CMB lacked professional and educated clergy, and could neither influence nor control the faithful. Second, the creation of a strong religious institution was in no way a long-term plan of the closed illiberal regime that eventually emerged in the county. One would not expect that political elite, which was formed in Soviet times and constituted a part of Soviet bureaucracy, would invest in preparation of a new generation of highly-educated clergy. Especially, unlike some other post-colonial Muslim contexts – such as Turkey, Egypt or Morocco, the state in Azerbaijan had not found itself in a position of

¹ Raoul Motika, *Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*. Archives de sciences sociales des religions, Vol. 115, 2001, 5.

² Rufat Sattarov. *Islam, State and Society*, 176-179.

coming in terms with or coopting an influential and long-standing Islamic educational institutions (like al-Azhar, for example) or authoritative *‘ulama* with thousands of followers. There is always a possibility of their transformation into competitors with the state over the political power.

In addition, the empowerment of the CMB or any other religious organization entails investing in the development of certain forms of Sunnism and Shi‘ism, which is not something that the state wants or wanted to do. It always tried to avoid hegemonization of a particular historical Islamic tradition. Rather, the state has imagined Islam as an “empty signifier” free from any specific fixed definition or certain theological content. The state constantly defines Islam as a “lack”, purest and the most “orthodox” form of which it promises the population to achieve.

Thus SCWRA, shapes state’s public policy toward religion and serves as communication channel between the faithful and the government. It also provides money to religious groups and finances their different projects. However, its main “power technique” is the registration of religious communities. For the state, registration determines existence. If SCWRA grants registration to a group, it means that the group is recognized by the state, it is “safe” and “loyal”. Consequently, denial of registration means that the state considers a religious group not merely dangerous per se, but non-existent and illegal at all.

SCWRA is dissatisfied with the fact that most mosques and places of worship in the country lack registered communities, and therefore it strongly encourages Muslim groups to seek for registration¹ as it allows to coopt more Muslims and replace disloyal or uncontrolled communities in places of worship by loyal and controlled ones. Here one can see not only the eternal desire of the state to classify, arrange and distribute its Muslim subjects in space in order to facilitate their control and management, but also the fact that “bureaucrats do not just record social groups, as Weber implied, but in significant cases they create and promote social groups to fit their records”².

Since its creation by the mid-2000, SCWRA was mostly engaged in controlling and regulating the religious space. However, after 2011, it became the main medium and facilitator of the bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan. The state was gradually empowering SCWRA while increasing its legal and financial capabilities. In 2014, SCWRA was granted 2.5 million manats,

¹ “Gunduz Ismayilov: Religious education in Azerbaijan should be free of charge” <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2480765.html>

² Josiah Heyman, *The Anthropology of Power-Wielding Bureaucracies*, 490.

and religious communities started receiving financial help directly through SCWRA, rather than through CMB, as it has been the case previously¹. Eventually, in 2018, the SCWRA became the main structure to which the state delegated the creation of public discourse on Islam, Islamic education and the training of religious scholars who are expected to reproduce the state interpretation of Islam for future generations.

The accelerated process of bureaucratization entailed not only the ramification of additional institutions from the SCWRA, which expanded the scope of control and regulation of Islam, but also SCWRA's active engagement in formation of a new theological discourse. After mid-2000s, especially by 2011, SCWRA started intervene into debates within Islamic communities, expressing its views on purely theological issues and competing with religious actors for the monopoly over articulating the "correct" understanding of Islamic principles. In other words, the state's regulatory policies – such as registration, control over religious literature (SCWRA decides which textual, video or audio materials with religious content can be published or imported) and financial assistance to local religious communities has gradually evolved into a consistent politics of engineering the state Islam by means of an active manipulation of Islamic symbols and language. This discursive intervention has increased after the new security challenges that the government has faced since 2011.

Security challenges and state's "additional gaze"

The events triggered by the Arab uprisings, namely the civil war and emergence of transnational jihadist organizations in the territories of Iraq and Syria had a direct impact on Azerbaijan. Information about Azerbaijani citizens who left the country to join ISIS and al-Qaeda began to appear in the media as early as 2013 - that is, during the period when both organizations were actively establishing their control over large swathes of land in the aforementioned regions². According to the local media, over 1000 Azerbaijanis joined various jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria

¹ "The State Committee for Religious Associations has begun allocating financial aid to religious communities", Azertag.az, 2015
<https://azertag.az/xeber/859068>

² See, for example: "Number of Azerbaijanis fighting in Syria announced – photo + video", Modern.az, 2013
<http://modern.az/az/news/42445#gsc.tab=0> ; "The identity of the Azerbaijanis killed in Syria has been established", Pia.az, 2014
<http://www.pia.az/news.php?id=14177>

(mainly to the ISIS and some groups affiliated with al-Qaeda). Periodically, Azerbaijani fighters were disseminating videos online calling Muslims to join them and threatening to cut off the heads of religious leaders loyal to the state and promising to establish *shari'a* law in Azerbaijan soon¹.

Another security challenge is the growth of politically active Shi'ite opposition. In the context of Iran's involvement in conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Along with the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, which the state has been persecuting since the mid-90s, the state had to deal with a new generation of young Azerbaijani preachers who received a profound religious education in the major centers of Shi'ite learning in Iran and Iraq. Some of such preachers, led by the young charismatic theologian Taleh Baghirzade, organized the "Muslim Unity Movement" (MUM) in January 2015². This organization for a short time managed to turn into an active social movement with expanding networks in all major cities of the country. Its political activism based on invocation of Shi'ite theology and sharp social criticism led to a direct collision with the authorities in November 2015, which ended with the arrest of Bagirzade, and almost all members of his organization³.

There is another translocal competitor with the state in the religious field, who is largely has been undermined by the scholars. A number of Azerbaijani students, who reside in Iran and study in various religious institutions, were able to organize in scholarly communities and create online platforms through which they diffuse their religious and political discourse. These oppositional actors criticize Azerbaijani government for the oppression of the Shi'ite activists and organize public conferences in Iran, inciting Iranian authoritative religious figures to support their cause⁴.

As a response to the new challenges, the Azerbaijani authorities employed a set of security measures as arresting those who took part in the military conflicts abroad, conducting anti-terrorist

¹ For example, the video "Message from the lands of Ribat to the occupied Azerbaijan" (video is no longer available online but its copy preserved in author's personal archive).

² "The Muslim Union Movement was established in Azerbaijan" Faktxeber.com, 2015; <http://www.faktxeber.com/azrbaycanda-mlsman-birliyi-hrkat-yaradld-h454703.html>

³ "6 people were killed in the Nardaran clash", BBC 2015, https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan/2015/11/151126_nardaran_clashes

⁴ "Nardaran Martyrs commemorated in Tabriz near Azerbaijani consulate", ABNA 2016, <http://azl.abna24.com/service/iran/archive/2016/01/06/729034/story.html>

operations¹, tightening up the criminal laws on terrorism and mercenary², and increasing the length of the prison sentences³. The government even adopted an amendment to the citizenship law allowing deprivation of citizenship in case of participation in the foreign military conflicts⁴. In addition, police conducted a broad security operation in one of the most religious villages and the center of political Shi‘ism Nardaran. The village were purged of Shi‘a symbols, religious posters and educational circles.

State legitimizes coercive actions as necessary to protect national sovereignty and guarantee public security. In this context, the SCWRA closely cooperates with the law enforcement agencies and regularly participates in joint operations with the police and state security services⁵. Although SCWRA insists that the state does not interfere in religion⁶, it stipulates that it must have “an additional security gaze” surveilling the religious sphere⁷. The fight against radicalism, according to SCWRA is conducted at three levels: ideological, legal and economic⁸. Consequently, this work involves a whole bureaucratic apparatus and its agents reproducing both power and knowledge – that is, CMB, Academy of Sciences, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Internal Affairs etc., as well as SCWRA’s experts, mullahs, academics, scholars of Oriental Studies (*şərqşünaslar*), local municipal authorities and police.

SCWRA represents local oppositional Islamic actors as agents of influence of external forces, as a part of a political game to impose its will on Azerbaijan and to ruin its energy projects. In this regard, SCWRA supports one of the most popular official narratives: Azerbaijan occupies an important geographical position, has rich energy resources and pursues an independent foreign

¹ “As a result of anti-terrorist operations carried out by the Ministry of National Security five suspects were detained” Azertag.az 2015, https://azertag.az/xeber/Milli_Tehlikesizlik_Nazirliyinin_kechirdiyi_antiterror_tedbirleri_neticesinde_bes_nefer_subheli_sexs_qisminde_tutulub_VIDEO-886821

² See amendments on “The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the struggle against terrorism” made in 2016-2018, <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/3855>

³ “Azerbaijan legally tightens punishment for mercenary and terrorism”, Interfax.az 2014, <http://interfax.az/view/602965>

⁴ See amendments on the law on citizenship adopted in 2015, <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/3187>

⁵ “The Ministry of Internal Affairs, State Security Service and the Religious Committee held a joint operation”, Kaspi.az 2016, <http://kaspi.az/az/din-dtx-ve-dini-komite-birge-emeliyyat-kecirib/>

⁶ Azerbaijani constitution stipulates the secular nature of the state and separation of state and religion.

⁷ Gündüz İsmayilov. *Azərbaycanda dini məsələ: təhdidlər və hədəflər* [The Issue of Religion in Azerbaijan: challenges and goals]. Baku, 2016, 177

⁸ “Mubariz Qurbanli: We are fighting against religious radicalism ideologically, economically and legally”. Amerikaninsesi.org 2016, https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/mubariz_qurbanli/3403740.html

policy. That is why external powers (“Islamic” and “Western”) at pains to destabilize it diffusing their hostile ideologies (political Islam, jihadism, human rights, democratization etc)¹.

However, behind the securitization, there is a systematic attempt to subordinate the whole religious sphere to the bureaucracy and impose on it state’s own interpretation of Islam. The “fight against terrorism” and resistance to “Islamist forces financed by the external enemies” have provided the state with wide opportunities to manipulate with the language, symbols and discourses of Islam, facilitating and legitimizing its intervention into the sphere of religion. The state started allocate a lot of efforts and resources to oppose all the alternative Islamic discourses that it finds dangerous by availing itself of the ideological discourse of Traditional Islam.

Traditional Islam and the state’s political imaginary

As alluded to above, Traditional Islam supports the main ideological narrative and the political imaginary of the ruling regime. The discourse of Traditional Islam is packaged into the rhetoric of the official neo-conservative ideology of Azerbaijanism, which is based on the idea of the existence of common and unique moral values and identity uniting all Azerbaijanis, regardless of their religion and ethnicity, protecting them from the challenges of globalization and hostile ideologies. If the ideology of Azerbaijanism “unites all ethnic groups” living in Azerbaijan based on “national interests”, and protects them from “attempts of their moral and physical weakening”², the ideology of Traditional Islam supports this protection with its unique Islamic component.

Both ideological constructs – Azerbaijanism and Traditional Islam is an assemblage of images, stories, myths and narratives utilized to address specific political issues and serves to maintaining the existing order. For example, in the context of criticism by European politicians of an influx of refugees from Syria and Iraq to Europe, the Azerbaijani government declares multiculturalism as a state policy and ideology³, while in the situation of rising violence in the Middle East and wars

¹ For this frequently repeated ideological trope, see: “Gündüz İsmayılov. Azərbaycanca dini məsələ”, 118-119; “Interview of Deputy Chairman of the State Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan Siyavush Heydarov to Moderator.az”, Moderator.az 2016, <https://moderator.az/news/159004.html>

² Ramiz Mehdiyev. Yeni məfkürə, dövlətçilik, müstəqillik yolu ilə, yanvar 2002 - dekabr 2006 [New ideology, statehood, the way of independence, January 2002-december 2006]. Vol. 2, Bakı: Şərq-Qərb, 2006, 27.

³ “Azerbaijan declares 2016 Year of multiculturalism”, Azernews.az 2016, <https://www.azernews.az/nation/91533.html>

between Muslim states, the government declares 2017 a year of “Islamic unity”¹. It undertakes numerous projects and events in order to implement these concepts. Both concepts – “multiculturalism” and “Islamic unity” are defined as inseparable elements of Azerbaijanism². At the same time, they are explained through appeal to the values and beliefs that many Azerbaijanis perceive as natural or commonsensical. Such politics is not an ideological shift, but a “real politics” evoked by the urgent political context, which serves state’s legitimacy.

As follows from numerous speeches and references of state’s officials, ideologists and scholars, the genealogy of both Azerbaijanism and its ideological ramification Traditional Islam stems from the intellectual heritage of Heydar Aliyev, who appears as its ideological “personification” or “embodiment”. It means that all discussions about Traditional Islam are legitimized and normalized within the official ideological discourse by Aliyev’s utterances on national traditions, religion, values and moral norms.

The regime’s dominant political narrative of exceptional role of Heydar Aliyev as the savior of the nation from war and economic collapse, as well as his posthumous status as a great “national leader” (*Ulu Öndər*) is presented by the state as a natural consensus any contestation of which is deemed as unthinkable. Such discourse is buttressed by the popular support that Aliyev possessed during his lifetime, as well as his personal charisma. In his political imaginary Islam was an identity marker, a part of Azerbaijani culture and customs, but never a structured ideology or theological system, which interferes in politics or exist independently from the state control.

In addition to his views on religion, Aliyev’s politics of restoring and building mosques after the independence formed the basis of state’ symbolic use of religious landscapes. The current president Ilham Aliyev, as well as representatives of SCWRA, CMB and other institutions that contribute to government’s cultural hegemony, often emphasize that state protects Islam and cares about its Muslim citizens by creating more than 500 mosques since independence. The state’s symbolic use of religious landscapes had its final development in December 2014, when it built the largest mosque in the Caucasus named after Heydar Aliyev. This mosque is a spatial representation of the ideology of Traditional Islam, which is “strategically positioned as a

¹ “Baku hosted "2017- Year of Islamic Solidarity: Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue" international conference”, Aztv.az, 2017,

² “Multiculturalism as an integral part of the ideology of Azerbaijani”, Scwra.gov.az, 2016, <http://scwra.gov.az/az/view/news/1310/>

monument to Aliyev's vision of a unified religious community under strong state supervision"¹. The practice of joint collective "Unity Prayers" of Shi'ites and Sunnis ("*Vəhdət namazı*"), which is practiced in Heydar Aliyev mosque, but gradually being transferred to other mosques around the country as well, symbolizes state's imaginary of ecumenical unified Islam without any sectarian connection and transnational linkages.

Thus, the model of state-religion relationship that the national leader has established after independence is represented as an unquestionable public good, pre-political and one met with an undeniable consensus². In this regard, SCWRA reformulated the regime's popular ideological trope "any alternative to the existing political system will lead to the collapse of the state itself" as "any alternative to state's religious politics will lead to the sectarian civil war". Consequently, any form of Islam that tries to challenge this discourse is declared as alien and dangerous as it challenges the state's sovereignty itself. The relations with religious groups, therefore, build not based on any exact ideational, theological or legal criteria, but according to whether groups or individuals dispute or recognize – openly or indirectly - the established boundaries between unchallengeable "truths" and the field open for discussion, which determined by the state's ideological hegemony.

Invention of tradition

Discussing how the authorities are representing Sufism as a form of moderate and humanist Islam and using it for their legitimization in contemporary Uzbekistan, Adeeb Khalid writes that "Post-Soviet Sufism is not a return to the past but the creation of something new"³. Similarly, when the state in Azerbaijan insists that one of its most important tasks is the revival and protection of Traditional Islam, it does not revive a specific historical form of Islam that had existed in the region in the pre-modern or modern periods. Rather, it engaged in creation of something essentially new.

¹Natalie Koch, Anar Valiyev, Khairul Hazmi Zaini Mosques as monuments: an inter-Asian perspective on monumentality and religious landscapes, Vol 25, Issue 1, 2018, 188

² For comparison with Uzbekistan see: Andrew March, State ideology and the legitimization of authoritarianism: the case of post-Soviet Uzbekistan, Journal of Political Ideologies (2003), 8(2), 209–232

³ Adeeb Khalid. Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 119-120.

Traditional Islam is an invented set of ideas and practices that the state persistently represents as a centuries-old natural consensus of the entire Azerbaijani nation. And although it is usually portrayed in the state narrative as Sunni and Shi'ite forms of Islam historically present in Azerbaijan, it developed into a selectively inclusive ecumenical discourse that shuns involvement in politics, never contradicts, but, in fact, supports and legitimizes the foreign and domestic policies of the government. In SCWRA's discourse, the problems between the faithful and the state arise when Islam is perceived as a political ideology different from the national one. This Islam also recognizes the multi-confessional, multi-ethnic and secular nature of the state and is free from sectarian contradictions. Finally, it has no connection whatsoever to external Islamic institutions and foreign Muslim states.

The main elements of traditional Islam – secularism, multiculturalism, inclusiveness and tolerance, are explained as the primordial, “biologically-spiritual” feature of Azerbaijanis, their genetic memory¹. SCWRA emphasizes that it is this deep-rooted secularism that external powers so strongly try to undermine in Azerbaijan. The very enmity to this primordial secularism unites such different religious groups as the Salafis and radical Shi'ites who all want to establish in Azerbaijan a theocratic state. The other force, which undermines secular regimes and creates chaos in the Middle East, is the West².

In my discussion below I will draw on the textual sources (publications and interviews) produced by the SCWRA to illustrate the major components of this ideology.

According to the book “Religious Question in Azerbaijan: Threats and Goals”, which SCWRA depicts as very important and pioneering, no other nation can be compared with Azerbaijanis in tolerance and secularism. It states that secularism was not imported into Azerbaijan, but is an indigenous phenomenon. A distinctive feature of the Azerbaijani Turks is their exceptional openness to secularism, science, education, literature, art and gender equality³.

¹ Interview of the SCWRA's chairman Mubariz Qurbanli to “SalamNews”, Scwra.gov.az 2016, <http://scwra.gov.az/az/view/news/2504/> ; Gündüz İsmayılov. Tolerantlıq. Bildiklərimiz və Bilmədiklərimiz [Tolerance: Known and Unknown]. Bakı, 2014, 119.

² Gündüz İsmayılov. Azərbaycanda dini məsələ, 135; Mubariz Qurbanli: “Great resources are allocated to export the situation in the Middle East to our country”, Trend.az, 2014 <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2341038.html>

³ Gündüz İsmayılov. Azərbaycanda dini məsələ, 132-133.

Moreover, the religious superstitions (*xurafat*) and the adherence to the norms of Islamic law or “Shariatism” (*şəriətçilik*), which “were never inherent in the Turks”, are used as synonyms¹. In other words, Islamic law and Islamic legal schools (*məzhəb*) acquire a pejorative connotation in the language of Traditional Islam. Other SCWRA’s publications also support this idea:

The difference in the existing sects should not prevent our unity and our integrity. The Muslim identity and the ideology of Azerbaijanism should surpass the sectarian difference. The importance of the Azerbaijani model of the state-religion relations is reflected in this approach. So, the state attaches importance not to a religion based on sectarianism, but to the religion, which is far from extremism and based on the orthodox and fundamental foundations. The policy pursued in this direction is of extreme importance for both the state and the public. This is one of the main ways to prevent religious extremism².

This passage is interestingly resembles some Salafi and revivalist narratives, which also take a very critical stance toward the Traditional Islamic schools of law and considers them the result of the distortion of the “once unified and pure Islam”. Similarly, SCWRA calls to go back to the authentic (“fundamental”) sources of Islam – Quran and Sunna, which it sees as fully compatible with the state ideology. In addition, the passage above shows how SCWRA, claiming to be a neutral institution of the secular state, in fact, enters into the eternal theological debate within Muslim milieu over the definition of the “orthodox” Islam.

Thus, the distinctive feature of Traditional Islam is that it is free from devotional attachment to any particular Islamic school (*məzhəbçilik*). Islam in this ideological discourse is claimed to be completely different from Islamic legal traditions, and defined as “the Qur'an, the life and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad”³, while shari‘a is just a product of subjective understanding of Islamic scholars. Muslim jurists, thus, are described in very negative terms, as a group that “frequently shies away from the true values of Islam and Quran”⁴. They are blamed for bloodshed and riots in the Middle East, “which are largely caused by their thoughtless and detached from reality fatwas”⁵.

¹ Ibid., 147.

² Mübariz Qurbanlı. Azərbaycanca dövlət-din münasibətləri: Tarixi baxış və müasirlik [State-religion relations in Azerbaijan: Historical perspective and modern times], Bakı: Tuna Printing, 2017, 27-28.

³ Gündüz İsmayilov. XXI Əsirdən baxış. İslam, Quran, Musəlman, Bakı, 18

⁴ Ibid. 19

⁵ Ibid 19-21

The shari‘a itself is depicted as a source of intolerance between Muslims “because when the faithful plunged in shari‘a more deeply, and delve into details, their immunity of tolerance weakens”¹.

The other idea, which SCWRA’s authors often emphasize, is that Traditional Islam in Azerbaijan is inseparable from the national cultures and values of its peoples. Consequently, Islam imported from Iran, Turkey and Arab countries reflects the cultural features of Iranian, Turkish, and Arab peoples, which do not suit Azerbaijanis at all. SCWRA’s intellectual and scholar of religion, Gunduz Ismayilov, explains this idea as follows:

“For example, think of an Azerbaijani who is a Shi‘ite and follows legal opinions (*taqlid*) of Ayatollah Sistani. At the same time, imagine Iranian, who follows Ayatollah Sistani as well. They both adhere to the same religion, Islamic current and even *mujtahid*. There is no difference between them in Shari‘a issues. But do they have a similar lifestyle? Certainly not! Because, after all, the Azerbaijani Shi‘ites have a lifestyle that is typical for the Azerbaijani people, while the Iranian Shi‘ite have a lifestyle that is typical for Persian people. There is another example. Juxtapose Azerbaijani who follows a Sunni-Hanafi school with an Arab following the same school. Although their religion is the same, their lifestyles are different. Azerbaijani and Arab have very different lifestyles”².

Another SCWRA’s expert writes that Traditional Islam expresses itself best when the local preachers or mullahs explain Islam through references not to “Arabic religious scholars or shaikhs of 9th or 10th centuries”, but rather to classical pre-modern Azerbaijani poets as Nizami, Fuzuli, or Nasimi.³

This discourse implies that Azerbaijani Muslims should not follow any form of Islam that is diffused by Arab, Persian or Turkic preacher, as this will transform them into an Arab, Persian or Turk. Diffusion of “the alien Islam” leads to “an increase in the numbers of the faithful, but to a decrease in the numbers of Azerbaijanis”⁴.

¹ Gunduz Ismayilov. Azərbaycanda dini məsələ, 148.

² Ibid., 142.

³ Mehman Ismayilov. İslamın hər hansı bir modeli var mı? [Does Islam have any particular form?] *Cəmiyyət və Din*, N 10 (315) October 2017, 13.

⁴ Gunduz Ismayilov. Azərbaycanda dini məsələ, 145

The idea is best explained through the example of the polygamy in Islam. Ismayilov writes that although Islam recognizes polygamy, it is the custom of the Arabs, and not of the Azerbaijanis. Consequently, Traditional Islam strongly prefers monogamy to polygamy. What is interesting is that polygamy is rejected not because it does not comply with the law of the country or the customs of Azerbaijanis per se, but because it does not correspond to the Traditional Islam (the state-imagined Islamic “orthodoxy”), which, according to the author, is followed by the majority of Azerbaijanis. Thus, according to him, the growth of polygamy in Azerbaijan, would not indicate the growth of Islam. What it would indicate is the weakening of Traditional Islam¹. In this context, Ismayilov concludes that Islam cannot be juxtaposed to national identity; it must be an inseparable part of Azerbaijanism.

The Soviet language of Traditional Islam

While the official historical narratives produced in Azerbaijan after independence, as well as SCWRA’s rhetoric condemn Soviet times as oppressive and radically atheist, the Traditional Islam actually replicates the practices and discourses of Soviet Islam, and draws on the tried Soviet methods of anti-religious propaganda.

Although one can agree with the thesis that the post-Soviet regimes in the context of declining legitimacy rejected “the Soviet brand of secularism they inherited, and manufacture their own”², it should be noted that what is usually rejected is the form not the essence. In addition to the fact that almost all post-Soviet Muslim states have revived their Soviet-era *muftiats*, they also established religious committees in the semblance of Soviet Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC). In time, these Soviet-style committees started receiving a larger financial assistance, political support and structural power than the *muftiats*. The painstaking politics of constructing of a “progressive and enlightened Islam,” it seems, is also stems from the Soviet-era CARC.

¹ Ibid. 144

² Pauline Jones, Introduction: Reassessing the “Islamic Revival” in Central Asia. In: Islam, Society, and Politics in Central Asia, ed. Pauline Jones Luong. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016,

To illustrate, one can again refer to the recent SCWRA's publication, which says that during the Soviet period and in the first years of independence (before the appearance of foreign preachers) nobody in Azerbaijan has been associating the image of a believer with the image of an Arab, Turkish or Iranian Muslim. Moreover, despite the fact that during the Soviet era there were few religious people, their Islam, nevertheless, reflected Azerbaijani values¹:

The best example of building an intensive propaganda mechanism in society can be the Soviet Union. During the Soviet era, citizen-oriented propaganda was being continuously implemented from kindergarten to higher school, university, workplace, Komsomol, Communist Party, and was continued even in the family. In fact, a citizen remained under the influence of the ideological propaganda every minute of his life. This propaganda was carried out consistently, systematically and intensively. It will sound strange, but we should intensify religious enlightenment in this precise way - covering all layers of society and individuals from the bottom to top"².

The rhetoric of the SCWRA reveals that the state has not been able to formulate a new language to communicate with its Muslim subjects. Instead, it largely reproduces the language of the Soviet state apparatuses and bureaucracy. For example, the rhetoric of ideology of Traditional Islam as well as "Azerbaijanism" is full of such formulaic expressions as "religious-ideological" (*dini-ideoloji*), "national-moral values" (*milli-mənəvi dəyərlər*), "superstition" (*xurafat*), "cadre" (*kadr*), "control process" (*nəzarət prosesi*), "nationwide interests" (*ümmillik maraqları*) and so forth³.

The state formulates Islam using the language of the bureaucracy, which it sees as the most natural communicative tool. Islam is expressed in the same idioms and formulaic expressions similar to the state narratives on Azerbaijanism, national identity, values and the absolute success of the ruling regime's domestic and foreign policies. Through this transformative rewriting process, public discourse and the local languages of Islam are harmonized with the language of the modern

¹ Gündüz İsmayılov. Azərbaycanca dini məsələ, 144

² İbid., 279-280

³ Here I draw on the analysis of Seraphine F. Maerz, who showed how the conceptualization of Uzbekistan's ideology of ma'naviyat is replicating Soviet ideological rhetoric linguistically and discursively. See: Seraphine F. Maerz, Ma'naviyat in Uzbekistan: an ideological extrication from its Soviet past? *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 23:2, 205-222.

state bureaucracy¹. During the numerous events that Muslim communities organize with the support of SCWRA, they reproduce or expected to reproduce this very language².

Theology of the state: “Back to Quran!”

SCWRA’s experts explaining Traditional Islam, almost never refer to the theological works of the most widespread legal schools in Azerbaijan: Hanafi, Shafi’i or Ja’fari (Shi’ite). There are practically no references to any premodern or contemporary authoritative theologians either, as this may indicate their approval and legitimation, as well as an acceptance of a particular Islamic school (*māzhāb*), and this is something that SCWRA avoids in every possible way. Meanwhile, SCWRA’s officials and experts frequently refer to the Quran to substantiate their arguments. For example, criticizing religious radicalism, SCWRA’s chairman Mubariz Qurbanli cites the verse “To you your religion, and to me mine! (109-6)” and refers to the history of peaceful relations between the Prophet and representatives of Judaism and Christianity³. He also backs up his criticism of the violence against women with the Quran⁴ and advises the youth “to learn Islam only in the framework of the Quranic verses”⁵. While his deputy says:

I am not saying that let's create a new religion in Azerbaijan or bring innovations to classical Islam, which is based on Quran [...] We say that let's take the Qur'an as a basis for ourselves. In this book there is no division into Sunnism and Shi'ism. The Quran is so great, it has so high level of spirituality that I cannot find words to describe it. From the beginning to the end, this book is the source of morality, ethics and science”⁶.

The slogan to leave sectarian disagreements and follow pure, orthodox and unified Islam of the Quran is one of the most famous tropes of the revivalist Muslim exegeses of 19-21 centuries. The other example is “A look at the Issue of Religion from the 21st Century”, one of the latest

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² For the titles and topics of such regular seminars and conferences one can refer to the SCWRA’s website scwra.gov.az: “National moral values and the traditional Islam”, “Islam against obscurantism and”, “The importance of upbringing new generation in healthy national-moral spirit” etc.

³ Interview of the SCWRA Chairman Mubariz Qurbanli to “SalamNews”.

⁴ “Mubariz Qurbanli: “All religions are against domestic violence”, Salamnews.com, 2015, <https://www.salamnews.org/az/news/read/196132>

⁵ Interview of Mubariz Qurbanli to the [Yap.org.az](http://www.yap.org.az), 2017, <http://www.yap.org.az/view/interview/455/>

⁶ Deputy Chairman of the State Committee: “There is no Sunni-Shi’ite separation in the Holy Quran...”, Moderator.az, 2016, <http://www.moderator.az/news/159825.html>

SCWRA's publications, which says that the view of Islam from the 21st century is actually an attempt to change and renew the Muslim, not the Quran or Islam¹. This slogan not only speaks of the state's goal of shaping a certain Muslim subjectivity, but obviously refers to the modernist interpretation of the Quranic verse "Allah does not change the position of people until they change themselves (13:11)", which is cited in the book as well. This verse became a part of a popular narrative of Islamic reformism of the early 20th century calling for the engineering of the new, hyper-active and highly moral Muslim subject, who is supposed to transform himself or herself before trying to change the world².

SCWRA frequently uses in its rhetoric the assemblage of revivalist interpretations, combined with the ideas of the Azerbaijani liberal Muslim intellectuals ("jadids") of the late 19th- 20th as, for example, rapprochement between the Islamic schools of law, criticism of rigorous imitation of Islamic authorities and law schools (*təqlid*), calls to not divide mosques according sectarian lines ("if a mosque belongs to Sunnis or Shi'ites, how then can it be the house of Allah?"³). However, these ideas are decontextualized, represented as the centuries-old practice and merged with the official ideological discourse.

Yet, SCWRA does not explicitly position itself as a proponent of a reformist Islam, since it insists on its status as a neutral regulator, who does not interfere into theological debates. According to its intellectual, "the very attempts to reform Islam have always ended in failure or the emergence of a new sect". Instead of reformation, he suggests to return to Islam's most correct understanding, which is again, speaks to revivalist slogan of "going back to Quran and Sunna": "As strange as it may seem, the solution is to convey to people the true Islam and to explain its revivalist essence"⁴.

To sum up, such exegesis suits state's project of construction of national Islam as it terminates any historical and discursive linkages of local Islam with the dominant transnational Islamic traditions (legal and theological schools). At the same time, appeal to Quran communicates a message to the public that the state's Islamic discourse is actually based on authentic sources of Islam and reflects the values of the Holy Scripture. In the Azerbaijani context, it is also an appeal to the "religion of

¹ Gündüz İsmayılov. XXI əsrdən baxış: İslam, Quran, Müsəlman. Pleyada: Bakı, 2017, 5

² See: Amir Shakib Arslan, Our decline and its causes. Trans. M. A. Shakoor. Lahore: Ashrafi, 1944, 8

³ Gündüz İsmayılov. XXI əsrdən baxış, 61

⁴ Ibid., 16-17

the people” – using Gramsci’ idioms – as oftentimes even the most secular and non-practicing Muslims, who probably have never read Quran, still show obeisance and deferential attitude toward the sacred text. Therefore, the SCWRA intellectuals harness the Quran, which is also a common cultural element, producing the ideological message connected to both: people’s “popular religion” and state’s Traditional Islam.

The state’s yearning for supervising courses on recitation of the Quran indicates that it sees the sacred text not only a source of the ideological rhetoric, but also a matter of security and sovereignty. In order to open Quranic courses, it is required to be a registered Muslim community and to receive a permission from the CMB¹. However, the entire teaching process, its forms, time and space are regulated by the SCWRA itself, which insists that the recitation of Quran must be taught in mosques, not in private apartments or offices, and it must not be accompanied with additional theological lessons². SCWRA shut down all educational institutions that combined the classes on recitation of the Quran with the exegesis³. Such regulative practices are in line with the state’s general religious policies: The teaching of recitation without theology embeds the Quran into the discourse of Traditional Islam securing the scripture and its readers from interpretation of dominant Islamic currents and foreign influence.

BUREAURACRATIC INTERVENTIONS: TRADITIONAL ISLAM APPLIED

When state shapes religion, its aim is not to depict the beliefs of the citizens as they currently are or as they once were. “Rather, a state’s religious identity is meant to reshape the beliefs of citizens into a form that serves the state and its interests”⁴.

Let us consider as an example the state’s politics of Ramadan. SCWRA, together with the CMB, requires that all Muslims in the country should begin and end fasting during Ramadan following a calendar issued by the state, which is based on astronomical calculations. In this case, the state is trying to pursue almost impossible task: to ensure that local Muslims, regardless of their

¹ “Official notice: about courses on Quran”, Trend.az, 2017, <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2758614.html>

² Gündüz İsmayilov. Azərbaycanda dini məsələ, 108-109

³ Ibid., 110

⁴ Ann Wainscott, Bureaucratizing Islam, 71

theological or sectarian affiliation, start fasting on the day defined by the state and not by the external religious actors or fatwas from other Muslim countries.

When it comes to fasting in Ramadan, many Shi'ites seek guidance from the Shi'ite *mujtahids* in Iran and Iraq, while the Sunnis follow the dates established by the official religious institutions of either Saudi Arabia or Turkey, or various religious authorities around the Islamic world. Muslims have never had a unified position on these issues. But, the bureaucratization does not approach beliefs and practices as they are, but unifies, standardize and reshapes them according to state's interests.

Thus, since the state tries to limit all external influences on the local Islam, it considers the Ramadan as an issue directly related to its sovereignty. Timetables of Ramadan published and imported to Azerbaijan from abroad are designated as a manifestation of "the very radicalism" and "perhaps the most obvious attempt to split the believers"¹. SCWRA announced that individuals are free to decide when to fast or celebrate the holiday (*ramazan bayramı*), but imams who will not follow the calendar established by the state will be punished². However, before employing administrative measures, the state tries to legitimize its policy in order to achieve minimum resistance and at least some level of consent. In other words, it appeals to the ideological hegemony. SCWRA capitalizes a discourse of "Islamic unity", shared by many Muslims. It declares that the individuals or groups rejecting the idea that all Muslims should start fasting on the same day, in fact, go against the idea of Islamic unity. And how do Muslims can be against the Islamic solidarity? The SCWRA tries to legitimize its intervention as a response on the tangible social demand for the unity and the unification of Islamic rituals³.

As it is the case with the rituals of Ramadan, the state is trying to control the Ashura processions. Every year on Ashura⁴, vast crowds of Azerbaijani Shi'ites engage in public flagellation and chest-

¹"Interview of deputy of SCWRA's chairman Siyavush Heydarov to Moderator.az, dqdk.gov.az, 2016, <http://www.dqdk.gov.az/az/view/news/2355/>

² "Mubariz Qurbanli: "If there would be a chaos in this sphere...", Trend.az, 2015; <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2417732.html> "Mosques that call for the pray during Ramadan at different times will be warned", Trend.az, 2018, <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/gundem/2907612.html>

³ "Those who distribute "religious calendars" apart from the official calendar of the Caucasus Muslim Board may be brought to justice by law", Azertag.az, 2015, <https://azertag.az/xeber/861445> ; "We understand Islam as a religion of unity, brotherhood and peace", Kaspi.az, 2016, <http://kaspi.az/az/islami-vehdet-qardasliq-sulh-dini-kimi-qebul-edirik/>

⁴ A tenth day of the Muharram (first month of Islamic calendar), when Shi'a commemorates the death of Prophet's grandson Husayn b. Ali at the Battle of Karbala, who opposed the policies of the caliph Yazid b. Muawiya.

beating commemorating the Shi'ite martyrs. Since independence, the number of participants in the procession has been growing rapidly. The SCWRA is well aware of the political significance of this ritual as even back in early 1990 this religious ritual was turned into a political protest against the Soviet regime¹. Ashura mass gatherings are often politicized by the Shi'ite political opposition, which harness it as a symbol of protest against the oppression of the authorities. SCWRA annually engages in contestation of this ritual, calling Muslims to perform it within the space of mosques and condemning flagellations as superstitions². Although it does not succeed, it still tries to depoliticize and reshape Ashura through its harmonization with Traditional Islam. Recently, the state employed the spiritual authority of one of the most popular Shi'ite preachers in Azerbaijan, Shahin Hasanli, who reinterpreted Ashura in line with the state's religious policies. In front of thousands of believers, Hasanli connected martyrs of Karbala to the soldiers who died fighting in Karabakh, for the local, national cause. A large poster with photos of fallen soldiers on the wall of the mosque strengthened the effect of his message³.

Another example of bureaucratic intervention into religious space is SCWRA and CMB's criticism of citizens for the excessive squandering during Traditional funeral rituals. Interestingly, the state, which is building its ideology on the national cultural elements, criticizes one of the most deeply rooted traditions that most Azerbaijanis perceive as an important religious and moral norm. To put a tent full of food during the funeral of a family member is considered to be one of the believers' most important and necessary lifetime obligations. The same applies to the ritual of the installation of the tombstone for the deceased. However, since 2014, the state has launched a vigorous campaign in the capital and regions to prohibit both rituals describing them as excessive and costly⁴. The SCWRA's chairman Qurbanli stated that Islam regulates the funeral process on the basis of progressive principles and does not put the family who has already suffered a loss in even more difficult situation. He backs up his criticism with the theological arguments (Quranic verses

¹ Rufat Sattarov. *Islam, State and Society*, 84.

² "The principles of tradition and modernity should be pursued in "Ashura" ceremonies", *Scwra.gov.az* 2018, <http://scwra.gov.az/az/view/news/8453/>

³ "Haji Sahin: Ashura will not be held in Azerbaijan until now", *Musavat*, 2018, <http://musavat.com/news/557498.html>

⁴ "Funeral ceremonies are taken under control", *Sherg.az*, 2014, <http://www.sherg.az/site/id-5512/details#.XCGj0lxKJIU>

and prophetic narrations), arguing that some traditions should be revised over time, especially since they contradict religious norms¹.

As for the practice of establishing expensive gravestones, Qurbanli asserts that according to Islamic law, all graves must disappear after a certain period as Islam condemns the construction of large and pompous graves. He adds that if such a tradition of installation of tombstones continues, then Absheron will soon turn into “a pantheon of graves, into one large cemetery”. Here, SCWRA using Islamic idioms legitimizes “the law on the construction and regulation of graves” that has been recently adopted by the government due to the SCWRA’s initiatives².

And again, as in the case with the Ramadan, SCWRA emphasizes that excessive wastefulness during funeral practices does not carry criminal responsibility. The eradication of these practices will be carried out through a series of educational projects, including religious ones, as, according to SCWRA, the squandering is also caused by a lack of proper religious education.

However, these policies did not lead to any real changes, although there were reports that in some regions, population supported these policies and local authorities succeeded in that the funerals were performed without squandering³.

Interestingly, the *muftiats* and state institutions controlling the religious sphere in Kazakhstan⁴, Tajikistan⁵, Uzbekistan⁶ and Kyrgyzstan⁷ produced exactly the same criticism of rituals, providing almost identical arguments.

¹ “Mubariz Qurbanli: “The initiative to eliminate wastefulness in ceremonies is a public order”, *Scwra.gov.az*, 2014, <http://scwra.gov.az/az/view/news/309/>

² “The Cabinet of Ministers has approved the rules for the establishment and management of cemeteries”, *Turan.az*, 2018, <http://www.turan.az/ext/news/2018/12/free/Social/az/77345.htm>

³ “Will the ban on luxury funeral ceremonies be effective? – public opinion”, *Xeberle.com*, 2014, <http://xeberle.com/cemiyet/2437>

⁴ See, for example: Kazakhstanis urged to abandon lavish mourning ceremonies, *Nur.kz*, 2016, <https://www.nur.kz/1141973-kazakhstancev-prizvali-otkazatsya-ot.html>; Counting funeral cakes and days of the wake. Kazakhstan introduces uniform rules of religious rites, *Radio Azzatyq*, 2017, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/22azakhstan-svod-pravil-religioznykh-obryadov/28781731.html>.

⁵ Tajikistan even adopted a law that imposes penalty for excessive funerals. See: On the regulation of traditions, celebrations and ceremonies in the Republic of Tajikistan, Committee for Religious Affairs, Ordering of National Traditions, Celebrations and Rites under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan <http://din.tj/?q=node/228>

⁶ Uzbekistan: weddings and wake ceremonies under the control of the authorities, Institute for Peace and War Reporting, 2012, <https://iwpr.net/ru/global-voices/uzbekistan-svadby-i-pominki-na-kontrolle-u>.

⁷ The introduction of restrictions on pompous celebrations, *Radio Azzatyq*, 2016 <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/torzhestva-prazdnovanie-centralnaya-azija/27780220.html>.

Such a policy can be explained by the desire of the authorities to communicate to the population a certain mode of behavior under the conditions of the country's economic stagnation¹. People who are not able to organize funeral ceremonies properly, are usually subjected to social ostracism, forced deeper into debt, and, as a result, often blame their troubles on the government, which, in their opinion, has failed to secure material well-being. At the same time, the state, in the face of growing urbanization and implementation of infrastructural projects, is trying to expand its control over the land and space under its jurisdiction (by regulating the size of tombs and graves). Paradoxically, the state that insists so vigorously on its secular nature deploys a religious discourse for legitimization of its social policy by representing it as rational, commonsensical and serving public interests, as well as corresponding to the norms and values of the dominant religion (which, of course, finds some positive response among certain laymen). At the same time, by carrying out its "moral economy" and politics of space, it uses its power to determine what a religion is, or, more precisely, what is right or wrong according to religious principles, whereupon it seeks to convince the faithful to follow its interpretation of Islam.

Bureaucracy against occultism

The bureaucracy in Azerbaijan not only shapes and diffuses state's "orthodox Islam", but it wields power into the domain of certain informal spiritual practices as well. SCWRA's approach of fortune-tellers could be an interesting case study in this regard. The SCWRA designates fortune-tellers as scammers wishing to seize people's minds and money. One of the SCWRA's representatives comments: "It is important to take into consideration that the struggle that we have initiated is against fortune-telling-sorcery and all kinds of black magic"². SCWRA wages an ideological war against black magic framing its arguments into Islamic idioms. Its experts insist that fortune-telling is incompatible with the very values and norms of Islam, while its chairman emphasizes that those who use Quran for fortune-telling go against the Quran itself, because the Holy Scripture cursed fortune-telling³.

¹ Especially after decline of oil prices since 2014.

² "SCWRA speaks about measures against fortune-telling (interview)", Trend.az, 2016. <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2568005.html>

³ "Mubariz Qurbanli: "Our intellectuals fought against superstitions, not against Islam" <http://musavat.com/news/455665.html>

The law does not prohibit people to practice magic, but those who practice it are a priori designated as fraudsters. SCWRA strives to save the people from the black magic through its mass education projects and the fight against superstitions (which we will discuss in the next section). Interestingly, any citizen swindled by fortuneteller has a legal right to report to both the police and the SCWRA, since according to its charter “one of the tasks of the State Committee is to look into relevant administrative offenses”¹. In other words, the structure that deals with the regulation of relations between the state and the faithful, also acts as a law enforcement institution. From time to time, together with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, SCWRA conducts raids against fortunetellers². What is interesting is that the secular structure, which insists that it does not interfere into the theology and people’s personal beliefs, performs, in fact, an old Islamic practice of “commanding the right and forbidding the wrong” – that is, advocating the right Islam and good mores and disparaging practices that contradict Islam³.

This unexpected and sporadic struggle against magic and spiritualism is an act of legitimization through demonstrating to the believers that the state struggles against phenomena that Islam severely condemns (Islam condemns witchcraft, thus, the state acts in accordance with the norms of Islam). One can also observe here a strong desire to establish a total control over all kinds of informal practices. Fortune-tellers like “unregistered” preachers operate in the sphere that SCWRA is trying to bureaucratize and put under its full control (through the prism of SCWRA, all “spiritual” practices fall under the category of “religious”). That is why SCWRA seeks to adopt a law that allows public religious performances (of any kind) to be conducted only by officially appointed religious or “spiritual” figures⁴.

Guided by the logic of bureaucracy, SCWRA tries to classify and arrange this phenomenon. First, it makes a distinction between psychics (*ekstrasenslər*) and fortune-tellers (*falçılar*). According to SCWRA’s chairman, the latter are similar to psychologists, while the former are primitive

¹ “SCWRA speaks about measures against fortune-telling (interview)”, Trend.az 2016, <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2568005.html>

² “Special operation against fortune-tellers was held in Azerbaijan”, Interfax.az 2016 <http://interfax.az/view/679801/az>

³ For the history of the concept, refer to Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁴ “Do not go to the fortune-teller: Why Azerbaijan declared war on magic and sorcery”, Lenta.ru, 2016, https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/08/20/fortune_teller/

scammers. In this regard, he suggests people who claim that they possess extraordinary abilities to demonstrate and prove everything in practice¹.

The attempt to identify, classify and control magic and magicians is a part of the process of bureaucratization of religion and the spiritual sphere that has been conducted since Soviet times. As it was mentioned earlier, SCWRA's discourses, language and practices are largely derived from Soviet institutions, in particular, the Council of the Affairs for the Religious Cults (CARC). Like CARC, it criticizes the practices of fortune-tellers using both the Soviet positivistic language and the language of Muslim revivalists (*jadids*)². Similar to CARC, it has created the conceptual apparatus of its own version of enlightened and the most "orthodox" Islam through which it criticizes all "religious deviations". Ascending for the most pure Islam, SCWRA compares its ideological struggle against obscurantism with both: the struggle of early Muslim community against ignorant Arab traditions and activities of the Azerbaijani Muslim intelligentsia of the 19-20th century as Mirza Fatali Akhundov, Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, Mirza Alakbar Sabir and many others, who according to the SCWRA's chairman, "never fought religion itself, but the obscurantism":

First, the superstition comes out when one misrepresents the religion. Second, when one tries to convey the Quranic verses to the people, not as they are, but mixing them with different myths. Third, superstition is a distortion of the history of Islam, misrepresenting the battles and historical events that took place during the diffusion of Islam. Such activities as using the Quran for fortune-telling and "prescription of special prayers" are nothing but superstition and obscurantism. There is a verse in the Quran: "O believers, wine and arrow-shuffling, idols and divining-arrows are an abomination, some of Satan's work; so avoid it; haply so you will prosper" (5:90). That is, the enlightenment is crucial here. A sound religious figure would never use Quran for fortune-telling. Today, educated religious figures have been already formed in Azerbaijan. One, thus, should not mix the true religious figures with the swindler mullahs, who do not have any official appointment and just put Quran in their hands and a mullah hat on their head. Therefore, the activity against superstitions must continue in ideological, spiritual, and scientific dimensions³.

¹ "Chairman of the Committee does not see psychics and fortune-tellers similar", A.24.az 2016, <https://a24.az/komite-sedri-ekstrasensi-falci-ile-eyni-gormur/2016>

² Eren Tasar. Soviet and Muslim. The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia. NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, 199-125

³ "Mubariz Qurbanli: Our intellectuals fought against superstitions, not against Islam", Musavat.com, 2017, <http://musavat.com/news/455665.html>

The explanatory categories of “enlightenment” and “superstition” are evoked by the logic of bureaucratization, which facilitates the work of the state, simplifying things for its convenience. Here one could make an analogy with James Scott’s notion of state’s internal principle of utilitarianism, which state employs classifying phenomena based on their usefulness and harmfulness, narrowing its field of vision and imposing its optic on the very reality it is observing. Thus, for example, the “plants that are valued become crops, the spices which compete with them are stigmatized as “weeds” [...] the animals which are highly valued become “game” and “livestock”, while those animals which compete with or prey upon them become “predators” or “varmints””¹. Thus, when the state determines any undesirable or disturbing phenomena, actor or activity, these binary categories potentially allow it to categorize them as manifestation of “religious superstition”. Consequently, the state tries to improve or naturalize all these undesirable factors through the bureaucracy, education and law, or, in case of resistance, eliminate them. In other words, the state simplifies its work by bringing all these “undesirable phenomena” (from fortune-tellers to political Shi‘ism and Salafism) to the category of “superstition”. At the same time, using the same logic, it incorporates into its mass project of Traditional Islam every Islamic group or figure that it finds useful.

Politics of spiritual enlightenment of masses

The state fights superstitions and obscurantism through a variety of public events. During this process, SCWRA in cooperation with CMB and other state and non-state institutions through numerous joint activities form one unified discourse of Islam, harmonized with the ideology of Azerbaijanism. Such joint activities are part of a broad educational project of “mass enlightenment and education” (*maarifçilik*) in which everyone – CMB’s mullahs, SCWRA’s experts, representatives of the intelligentsia, university professors, schoolteachers and various officials actively participate. *Maarifçilik* – is a direct work with the population in mosques, secondary schools, universities, seminars and round tables, where the representatives of the state explain the essence of Traditional Islam and radical non-traditional movements (Wahhabism, Salafism,

¹ James C. Scott. *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 13.

Gulenism, Nursism, etc. – all trends that do not fit into the picture of the world created by the political hegemony of the regime). Every year within the framework of this project, SCWRA organizes more than 600 events under such titles as “Traditional Islam and promotion of multicultural values”, “The role of Traditional Islam in prevention of radicalism”, “Protection of our traditional values from radical religious movements” etc¹.

As can be seen from the titles, the special attention is given to the criticism of radical currents. The politics of mass education implies that the masses are radicalized when they follow non-traditional trends because they are religiously ignorant and do not know the true essence of Islam, therefore it is a task of the state to educate them. Interestingly, activities aimed at combating religious radicalism and integrating radicals into the society are carried out alongside with activities against drug addiction and bad habits². Radicals are defined as infected people, who must be treated by the state Islam. The internal context of radicalization such as poverty, closed political space and poor quality of education are almost ignored, while radicalism is predominantly explained as a misunderstanding of the true meaning of Quran. SCWRA reveals its scripturalist approach to the problem of radicalism, that is, it believes that the religious texts have the “correct” interpretation capable of relieving Muslims who follow the “wrong” interpretation, from radicalism. In this case, possessing neither religious authority nor sufficient symbolic capital, SCWRA is engaged in theology and the apologetics of Islam.

In 2018, the state made another bureaucratic intervention by establishing a new Foundation for Propagation of National Values under the SCWRA. The task of the foundation is “to preserve the moral heritage, its moral values, and to convey the genetic memory, national identity and unique national features to the future generations”³. The Foundation helps to integrate people suffering from religious fanaticism, alcoholism and drug addiction into society. It also provides financial assistance to veterans, students, disabled people and low-income families. In addition, it finances construction of mosques and projects related to Islamic education. Financial aid takes various

¹ See the “Events” or “Enlightenment” sections of the SCWRA’s “Society and Religion” newspaper: <http://scwra.gov.az/docs/170/>

² “An event titled “Religious Radicalism and Ways to Combat Drug Abuse” was held in Yardimli”, Scwra.gov.az, 2018, <http://scwra.gov.az/az/view/news/8492/>

³ Mübariz Qurbanlı. Azərbaycanca dövlət din münasibətləri, 215

forms: from cars provided to the registered Muslim communities¹, to stipends granted to the ITI's students². Moreover, in 2018, the Foundation started paying salaries to imams of mosques and their assistants (the former receive more than 300, and the latter 400 manats, which is approximately the average wage)³. Making mullahs salaried employees is an important transformation in the religious space in Azerbaijan. If before the state indirectly provided financial assistance to mullahs through CMB, now it pays wages and determines who will receive them.

Foundation's multitude activities expand the state's possibilities for intervention into the religious space, which could be at any time justified as the protection of national values. Behind the numerous educational projects, there is a politics of cooptation of the religious communities. Foundation conveys them state's vision of national values.

In recent years, the state increased attempts to use new media for transmitting its spiritual enlightenment. For instance, the Foundation launched its weekly radio program "Moral values" in cooperation with the state-run Asan Radio station⁴. Such TV programs as "Faith" and "The Religion and Society" also contribute to making of Traditional Islam a part of public discourse. The other newly employed media that transmits state's spiritual enlightenment is cinema. The ideology of Traditional Islam is visualized through a number of documentary films, which are shown in all institutions of the country: in schools, universities, municipalities, prisons and ministries. "Fitna", "Martyrdom" and "Unity" became a kind of SCWRA's "ideological credo", which it brings to the masses⁵. All three films contain a different narrative united by a coherent ideological discourse. The first movie shows the inglorious and tragic fate of all who left their homeland, Azerbaijan for civil war in Syria. The second one tells the story about radicals who have been killed and imprisoned, while juxtaposing them to the real national heroes, the glorious soldiers who fell for the war in Karabakh. The trilogy is finalized with a narrative about tolerant and free from sectarian conflicts Azerbaijan.

¹ "Names of religious communities who have been granted cars were announced", Report.az 2018, <https://report.az/din/azerbaycanda-avtomobil-verilen-dini-icmalarin-adlari-aciqlanib/>

² "Fund allocates financial aid to students", Mdtf.az, 2018 <http://mdtf.az/xeberler/76-fond-tlblr-maddi-yardim-ayirib.html>

³ "Imams and their assistants will receive salaries beginning from the state next year", Musavat.com 2017, <http://musavat.com/news/491891.html>

⁴ "Moral Radio" program on ASAN Radio", Mdtf.az 2018, <http://mdtf.az/photo-gallery/36-asan-radioda-mnvi-dyrlr-verilisi.html>

⁵ All movies are available at SCWRA's Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE4tJ06NTxfSEjJzl-LBSnQ>

This politics of formulation of national values is a fairly recent phenomenon. If previously the symbolic politics of the state was rather sporadic and inconsistent, in recent years it became systematic and organized.

Expanding bureaucratization: monopolization of Islamic education

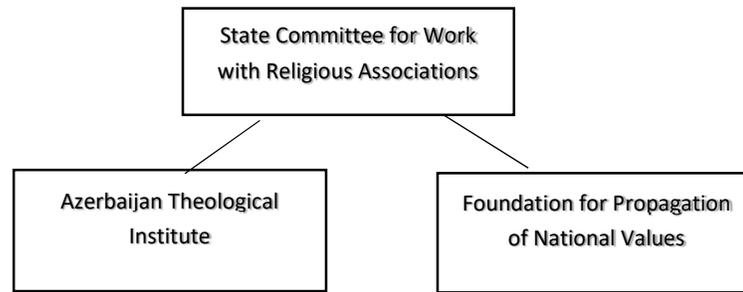
The bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan led to the state's extension of its pedagogical power into the sphere of the Islamic education. This expansion involves monopolization of knowledge production ensuring stable transmission of state's own form of Islam. The SCWRA, slowly takes under control and shapes the Islamic education in the country, replacing formal and extruding all informal Islamic educational networks.

Since 1990-th, the official Islamic education has been mainly represented by the Baku Islamic University (BIU) and Islamic madrassas both subordinated to the CMB. Although, in these intuitions, Islam has always been taught in accordance with "national interests", and discussions of Shi'ite-Sunni contradictions have not been welcomed and almost ignored, nevertheless, SCWRA from time to time made statements that the quality of education in BIU is very low and does not satisfy the state requirements¹. In addition, none of the BIU's graduates has been able to become a charismatic religious leader whom the state would support. For instance, the two popular preachers associated with the CMB – haji Shahin Hasanli and shaykh Javid Mammadov have no connections to BIU – the latter studied at Baku State University, and the former in Syria.

SCWRA usually employed its personnel not from BIU, but from the department of theology at Baku State University, where Islamic disciplines were taught along with the humanities and social sciences. The majority of its faculty received their education at various departments of religious studies in Turkey. Eventually, in the context of intensified bureaucratization of Islam, this department was transformed by the decree of President Ilham Aliyev into the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology in 2018, and included into the SCWRA².

¹ "Gündüz İsmayilov: Those who study at Baku Islamic University aims just to obtain a diploma of higher religious education", Mektebgushesi.az 2017, <http://mektebgushesi.az/2017/09/02/baki-islam-universitetind>

² "The Institute of Theology is being established in Azerbaijan", Turan.az, 2018, <http://www.turan.az/ext/news/2018/2/free/Social/az/69011.htm>



The main goal of this newly formed institution is to prepare a national specialist of religion, who have never studied in foreign religious institution and have no sectarian affiliation. These new specialists will not be mullahs or traditional theologians anymore, but salaried experts of religion “in ties and jackets” fully embracing the idea of Azerbaijanism¹. As for now, the Institute provides two majors in Islamic Studies and Religious Studies, in which, along with theological disciplines, such subjects as foreign languages, history, sociology, philosophy, information studies are also being taught. However, the goal is not to create an academic and critical religious studies department so much as to prepare specialists who would be able to support state’s cultural hegemony and respond to the challenges posed by the external religious ideologies. These specialists “will study the main sources of the Islam – the Quran and prophetic narrations, learn how to look at the events through a broader perspective and convey peaceful Islamic message to the society”². Unlike BIU, the education in AIT is free of charge. The new institution is also planning to provide students with free housing, clothing and food³.

ATI’s system of education is still under construction, and one of the state experts on Islam even proposed to increase its societal impact by preparing not only specialists and scholars of religion, but also a new generation of imam-*khatibs* – public theologians, who will directly work with the population in the mosques⁴. This indicates the possibility of SCWRA’s potential operation within the CMB’s direct domain – the mosques. It will give SCWRA wider opportunity to transmit its

¹ “Mubariz Qurbanli: Admission to the Institute of Theology can be held this year”, Interaztv.com, 2018, <https://interaztv.com/videos/xeberler/259059>

² “Ilham Aliyev’s valuable contribution to the Azerbaijani model of Islamic enlightenment”, “Azerbaijan” newspaper, 2018, <http://www.azerbaijan-news.az/view-155796/>

³Ibid.

⁴ “From this moment, theologians with national ideology will be prepared”, Kaspi.az, 2018, <http://kaspi.az/az/bundan-sonra-milli-mefkureye-sahib-ilahiyatcilar-hazirlanacaq/>

“enlightened traditional Islam” through the state-employed professionals, not mullahs, who possess neither authority nor knowledge (even the word itself has a pejorative connotation in the Azerbaijani language). Interestingly, two years before the creation of the institute, the SCWRA had already stated that it prefers that mullahs to be called imams, apparently anticipating a break with the old tradition¹.

In addition to Islamic higher education, the bureaucratization process also involved the Islamic madrassas. Most of them were built in the early 1990's by foreign foundations in which Iranian, Turkish and Arab educational practices were applied. Over time, the CMB gradually absorbed and re-registered these madrasas, changing either the administrative or the teaching staff. However, by 2017 the madrassas were renamed into Islamic colleges, and 10 of such colleges are functioning today². These colleges are also tasked with training “national cadres” who, after graduation, will preach Islam in accordance with national values. The very fact of renaming Islamic madrassas into colleges is symbolic, and reflects the expanding state intrusion into the sphere of religion.

Conclusion

This article argues that Azerbaijani government, in the context of the security challenges it faced after the Arab uprisings of 2011, gradually shifted from the regulation of the religious sphere to its bureaucratization. The increasing institutional power of SCWRA, transformation of religious actors into salaried employees, politics of mass enlightenment and creation of new Foundation for Propagation of National Values and Azerbaijani Theological Institute indicate an increased administrative and symbolic intrusion of the state in the religious space.

The government represents bureaucratization as a necessary measure that serves Muslims' interests. It legitimizes it by the fight against violent radicalism and protection of sovereignty, national values and peaceful coexistence between religious communities. However, security challenges provides the state with larger opportunities to exclude its oppositional competitors as well as reinvigorate the religious space itself. Behind state's narrative of securitization, there is a politics of social engineering and reshaping of Islam. In other words, the state, which insists on its

¹ “Mubariz Qurbanli: Henceforth, mullahs will not be called mullahs”, Azpolitika.info, 2017, <http://azpolitika.info/?p=357782>

² “Seven state religious education institutions have received their certificates”, Scwra.gov.az, 2017, <http://scwra.gov.az/view/news/2912/>

secular nature, tries to monopolize religious space encroaching into it as both regulator and a principal interpreter of Islam.

State sees and interprets Islam through the framework of its bureaucratically initiated “Traditional Islam”, which is embedded in elite’s nation-building project. It speaks the language of the state bureaucracy and reflects all political imaginaries, values and worldviews of the ruling regime. At the same time, it manipulates beliefs, traditions, customs and cultural symbols of the population utilizing them in accordance with state’s hegemonic goals.

The state tries to achieve a sustainable reproduction of its ideology of Traditional Islam through monopolization of Islamic education, excluding all other forms of Islamic knowledge transmission. Simultaneously, it engages in creation of a new generation of religious experts, who will become an employed bureaucrats competing for the position in the state hierarchy. This administrative and symbolic intervention allows state to neutralize, potentially, the very possibility of emergence any oppositional forces within the religious space in the future.

Bureaucratization considerably expands the scope of social control. But most importantly, it creates a situation, which imposes state’s rules, logic, language and visions upon the religious space. That makes this space predictable, less competitive and open for intervention.