The Bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan: State as the Principal Regulator and Interpreter of Religion

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Abstract

This article examines the politics of bureaucratization of Islam that the Azerbaijani government initially implemented in the mid-2000s and which has intensified after 2011. First, the state superimposed its bureaucratic categories on the Muslim communities of the country. Then, it proceeded to transform local religious figures into state employees. Yet, at the same time, the government insists that it does not interfere into theological issues and that all of its bureaucratic initiatives are aimed at ensuring freedom of belief and protecting the public order. However, with time, the process of bureaucratization has shifted from regulation to a direct administrative and ideological intervention into the religious space aimed at creating a state-imagined "orthodoxy" designated as *traditional Islam*. This article draws on previously untapped primary sources to discuss the different ideological and political aspects of this bureaucratically initiated tradition and its pervasive and transformative influence on the local religious landscape.

Keywords

Azerbaijan – Islam and the state – traditional Islam – bureaucracy – ideology – Islamic education

1 Introduction

Many secular states, which energetically emphasize separation between religion and politics, still regulate religious space. As Sezgin and Künkler have

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pointed out, modern states usually delegate this task to either the judiciary or bureaucracy. While "judicialization is a recurrent phenomenon in democracies," as it is believed that an independent judiciary would maintain balance between communities, trying to resolve conflicts peacefully, "bureaucratization is more frequently associated with authoritarian politics," as it subjugates communities to the state-imposed rules and definitions of "religion" and "religious."[1] This paper shows that Azerbaijan, which is often claimed to be "the most secular Muslim country in the world,"[2] has opted for the second strategy. The state implements the bureaucratization of religion when it delegates religious authority to bureaucratic structures with the aim to regulate relations between the state and the faithful and to define what constitutes "national religion." The structures, in turn, accumulate religious authority within their own institutions and transform religious leaders into bureaucrats.[3] Along with a "hierarchization of religious specialists,"[4] bureaucratization of religion engages in extensive knowledge and meaning production with the goal of determining how people understand and practice religion in society.[5]

The state represents the bureaucratization as a public good or neutral process of administrative regulation and provision of services to its citizens. The classical definition of bureaucracies provided by Max Weber is that they are systems of administration characterized by hierarchical structure, division of labor, fixed rules and duties, and aspirations for efficiency and rationalism.[6] As Eisenstaedt points out, the literature dealing with the Weberian definition is dominated by two points of view. The first defines bureaucracy as "the epitome of rationality and efficient implementation of services." The second considers bureaucracy as "an instrument of power for exercising control over the people and different spheres of life and of continuous expansion of such power either

1 See Y. Sezgin, M. Künkler, "Regulation of Religion and the Religious: The Politics of Judicialization and Bureaucratization in India and Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 2, (2014), 449–450.

2 S. V. Cornell, *Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan* (Washington, D.C., Uppsala, Sweden: The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program 2006), D. Wiktor-Mach, *Religious revival and secularism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan* (Berling: De Gruyter, 2017), 91–97.

3 A. M. Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam. Morocco and the War on Terror*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 14.

4 R. T. Antoun, "Fundamentalism, Bureaucratization, and the State's Co-optation of Religion: A Jordanian Case Study," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38, no. 3 (2006), 369–393.

5 Regardless of the original intentions of the state, "forces of bureaucratization" necessarily have a transformative impact on religious space. See M. M. Dominik, K. Stainer, "The Bureaucratization of Islam in Southeast Asia: Transdisciplinary Perspectives," in *Journal of Current Southeast Affairs*, 37, no. 1, (2018), 11.

6 M. Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds) (NY: Cambridge University Press 1946), 197–198.

in the interests of the bureaucracy itself or in the interests of some (often sinister) masters." The second approach focuses precisely on the possible out- comes of the process of bureaucratization, notably "the extension of power of a bureaucratic organization over many areas beyond its initial purpose."7 Substantial scholarship on the process of bureaucratization of Islam in different Muslim contexts has shown that bureaucratization transcends its initial goals when its management of religious diversity shifts into a subjugation of "alternative sources of meanings and beliefs"8 or policies of deradicalization turn to outright suppression of oppositional groups.9 Some states legitimize bureaucratic interventions as protection of freedom of belief but in fact impose "official" doctrine and criminalize "deviancy."10 As Muller and Stainer point out, all bureaucracies function through the imposition of classificatory taxonomies that "erase for the state ambiguities, gray zones and unregulated spheres." Bureaucratization transcends its organizational boundaries when it diffuses these standardized categories throughout society, and when social actors andinstitutions appropriate them.11

Since the mid-2000, the state in Azerbaijan has created specialized structures and generated a set of bureaucratic rules and procedures to regulate Is- lam and local Muslim communities. The government insists that it does not interfere into theological issues and that all its bureaucratic initiatives are aimed at ensuring the freedom of belief and protection of public order. How- ever, with time, the process of bureaucratization has shifted from regulation to direct intervention into the religious field aimed at creating a state-imagined "orthodoxy," which it designates as *traditional Islam* (*ənənəvi İslam*). This intervention intensified rapidly after the Arab uprisings that shook the Arab world in 2011. It was during this period that *traditional Islam* was shaped and numerous activities diffusing it all over the country were organized. Surely, this trend towards bureaucratic interventions has been in evidence long before the

7 S. N. Eisenstadt, "Bureaucracy, Bureaucratization, and Debureaucratization," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 4, no. 3 (1959), 302–320.

8 M. Künkler, "Law, Legitimacy, and Equality: The Bureaucratization of Religion and Conditions of Belief in Indonesia," in M. Künkler J. Madeley, S. Shankar (ed), *A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law, and the State in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 120.

9 A. M. Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam*, A. Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, (Berkeley: University of California 2007), 168–191.

10 S. Fenwick, "Eat, Pray, Regulate: The Indonesian Ulama Council and the Management of Islamic Affairs," *Journal of Law and Religion*, 33, no. 2 (2018), 271–290.

11 M. M. Dominik, K. Stainer, "The Bureaucratization of Islam in Southeast Asia: Transdisciplinary Perspectives," 14.

uprisings. Under Heydar Aliyev12 until the mid-2000, it was in its formative stage, although the government mostly preferred regulation, and, from time to time, coercion—but without a concerted ideological and institutional intervention into the religious field. But since the beginning of Ilham Aliyev's rule (H. Aliyev's son), the process of bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan has dramatically increased, and the Middle Eastern turmoil seems to have been offered a wide opportunity to systematically formulate, organize, and enhance this administrative and symbolic politics of Islam.

While much of the scholarship has focused on the state politics of religion, the relationship between the state and Islamic groups, and issues of radicalization and oppression in Azerbaijan, the phenomenon of *traditional Islam* has been overlooked or mentioned only in passing. Other aspects of bureaucratization of Islam, such as politics of mass enlightenment and reform of Islamic education, have also received insufficient attention. Therefore, this paper explores why the state embarks on the bureaucratization of Islam, also investigating what kind of meanings, language, and rhetoric the ideological discourse of *traditional Islam* contains and produces and asking what possible implications this bureaucratic Islam could have on the religious field in the country. It maintains that *traditional Islam* serves the cultural hegemony of the ruling elites and is employed to reshape the religious sphere in accordance with state's utilitarian interests. *Traditional Islam* is a form of *religion-making from above*: that is, a strategy of transforming religion into "an instrument of governmentality, a means to legitimize certain politics and positions of power."13 The very fact that the bureaucracy engineers an ideological–religious discourse and diffuses it through a variety of administrative means in society is an interesting phenomenon, since in Azerbaijan, religion is legally separated from the state14 and the authorities often emphasize their strict adherence to the principles of secularism. As some studies on Muslim societies have shown, the key

12 Heydar Aliyev (1923–2003) ruled Azerbaijan in the Soviet and post-Soviet period for almost thirty years. He was first secretary of the Republic's Communist Party for fourteen years from 1969 until 1982. After independence, the democratic and nationalist government due to incompetence and a deep political crisis handed over power to Heydar Aliyev in 1993. He was the president of independent Azerbaijan from 1993 to 2003. During his rule, Aliyev created illiberal and closed semiauthoritarian regime. Since 2003, his son Il- ham Aliyev has been the president of Azerbaijan. See F. Guliyev, "Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Transition to Sultanistic Semiauthoritarianism? An Attempt at Conceptualization," *Demokratizatsiya*, 13, no. 3, (2005) 414–415.

13 A. Mandair and M. Dressler, "Introduction: Modernity, Religion-Making and the Post-secular," in A. Mandair and M. Dressler (eds), *Secularism and Religion-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

14 See "the Constitution of Republic of Azerbaijan," Articles 7, 18.

feature of secularism could be "not simply a separation of religious and political" but "the claim of the modern state to classify and regulate the entirety of social space, part of which entails defining what constitutes the religious."15 The Azerbaijani case study provides empirical support to this thesis. It reveals that the state not only excludes religion from the sphere of politics but also actively renders religion and religious subjectivity—and therefore often itself acts as *de facto* theologian.16

2 Ascendance of Bureaucracy

Since the early years of independence, every new government tried to regulate religious space in Azerbaijan.17 However, it was only under Heydar Aliyev that the "Muslim politics," a term which entails competition over the interpretation of Islamic symbols and control of institutions that produce them, has been systematically formed.18 Since the former communist first secretary Aliyev consolidated political power in the country and established centralized presidential rule (since 1993), the Soviet-era Caucasus Muslims Board (CMB) and its head, Sheikh al-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, have been once again entrusted with the supervision of Muslim communities as well as appointment of imams and akhunds to the mosques.19 In 1996, due to the amendment made to the law called "On freedom of religious beliefs," the local Islamic communities and organizations became subordinated to the CMB. As during the Soviet times, CMB became closely linked to the ruling regime and the state bureaucracy. In 2001, a new institution, the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), was established. The SCWRA has been endowed with the task of regulating not just the Islamic communities, but also the entire religious space in the country.20 If CMB is a semi-official structure subordinated to the state, SCWRA is part of the state apparatus.

15 J. Rasayanagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), 100.

16 See S. Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006), 327.

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

18 D. F. Eickelman and J. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1996), 5.

19 R. Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 115 (2001), 5.

20 R. Sattarov, *Islam, State and Society*, 176–179.

Allocation of some of CMB's duties to a state institution was inevitable, as authorities preferred "to entrust bureaucrats with religious matters instead of men of religion."21 The CMB lacked legitimacy as well as authoritative clergy, and it could neither influence the faithful nor deter transnational religious flows. The state needed a new administrative mechanism that would impose on local Islamic discourses the state's vision of a meta-sectarian national religion, which would not only secure the local Shi'i and Sunni communities from foreign religious influences22 but would also put Islam to the service of political hegemony of the ruling regime.

Since its appearance, SCWRA shapes state's public policy toward religion and serves as a communication channel between the faithful and the government. In this regard—considering the dilemma of bureaucratization identified by Eisenstaedt as "whose interests does it serve?"23—it should be noted that Azerbaijani regime is described as a "semi-authoritarian," "neopatrimonial" and "sultanist."24 Such closed regimes "are not incompatible with bureaucratization," but they turn service-oriented bureaucracy into their instrument of domination.25 Current SCWRA chairperson Mubariz Qurbanli is simultaneously a member of the political council and of the governing board of the ruling hegemonic party "the New Azerbaijan Party," while one of his deputies is a co-founder of the same party. At various times, the SCWRA was run by an orientalist (2001–2006), a poet (2006–2012) and a diplomat (2012–2014). However, in 2014, the state decided to appoint an experienced bureaucrat and party ideologue.

As elsewhere in post-Soviet space, bureaucracy in Azerbaijan imposed on local Muslim groups its categorical apparatus of "registered" as opposed to "unregistered." If SCWRA grants registration to a group, it means that the group is recognized by the state: it is "benign" and "loyal." Denial of registration indicates that group does not exist legally and will not be tolerated. In 2009, SCWRA demanded that all religious communities in the country renew

21 B. Balci, "Between Sunnism and Shiism: Islam in post-Soviet Azerbaijan," *Central Asian Survey*, 23, no. 2 (2010), 212.

22 More than 90% out of 10 million of Azerbaijanis have a Muslim background. Official sources and some scholars indicate that there are 60–65% of Shi'a and 35–40% of Sunnis in the country. However, these numbers are approximate.

23 N. Eisenstadt, *Essays in Comparative Institutions*, (NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1965), 179.

24 F. Guliyev, "Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Transition to Sultanistic Semiauthoritarianism? An Attempt at Conceptualization," passim.

25 F. Guliyev, "Personal rule, neopartrimonisalism, and regime typologies: integrating Dahlian and Weberian approaches to regime studies," Democratization, 18, no. 3, (2011), 578– 579; see also: S. N. Eisenstadt, "Bureaucracy, Bureaucratization, and Debureaucratization," 318.

their registration. Dissatisfied with the fact that most mosques and places of worship in the country lack registered communities, it strongly encourages Muslim groups to seek registration.26 This politics allows for the co-opting of more Muslims and facilitates replacing disloyal or uncontrolled communities in places of worship with loyal and controlled ones. Here one can see not only the eternal desire of the state to classify, arrange, and distribute its Muslim sub- jects 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."27 The SCWRA also requires registration and approval of every religious object—clothing, texts, audio and video materials—produced in or imported into the country. Its officials together with the police periodically carry out raids in shops that sell religious goods and seize materials that do not have a special excise stamp issued by the SCWRA.28 The Section of Religious Expertise within the SCWRA decides which texts could not be imported or published as they preach "anti-state propaganda" and "religious intolerance."29 In this case, state officials perform the role of Muslim theologians, as they conduct their own interpretation of religious texts and decide which books on Islamic law, theology, or contemporary issues are "safe" and which are "dangerous" for the population. SCWRA issues permission for publication if authors accept proposed corrections and remove "dangerous" passages from the text. Here, bureaucratic intervention transcends its regulative and security rationale and enters into the sphere of Islamic exegesis. It rewrites Islamic texts, imposing on them the state's vision of tolerance and radicalism, its idea of true Islamic doctrine and its religious prejudices.

Since its creation by the mid-2000s, SCWRA was mostly engaged in regulating the religious space without considerable institutional and discursive interventions. However, the state was gradually empowering SCWRA while increasing its legal and financial capabilities. The administrative and discursive interventions have increased in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the security concerns they entailed. After the events of 2011, SCWRA became

26 "Gunduz Ismayilov: Religious education in Azerbaijan should be free of charge (video)," *Trend News Agency*, January 15, 2016, https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2480765.html.

27 J. Heyman, "The Anthropology of Power-Wielding Bureaucracies," *Human Organization*, 63, no. 4, (2004), 490.

28 See "How does the state control the shops selling religious items?," *SCWRA*, September 10, 2015, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/905/; "More than 421 religious literature has been identified that have no appropriate permission and not marked by a control mark," *SCWRA*, November 3, 2016, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/2254/.

29 R. Sattarov, *Islam, State and Society*, 179–181.

the main medium and facilitator of the bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan. Various legal amendments introduced from 2013 to 2017 increased SCWRA's control over the religious communities and their educational centers. When established, it had 5 regional branches and 5 internal departments in the capital office. By 2019, SCWRA had grown to operate fifteen branches and 9 departments. In 2014, SCWRA was granted 2.5 million manats, and religious communities started receiving financial help directly from it, rather than from CMB, as had been the case previously.30 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 transmit the state interpretation of Islam to future generations.

3 Security Challenges and the State's "additional gaze"

Starting from 1996, with the amendment to the law "On freedom of religious beliefs" prohibiting the activities of foreign preachers, the state defined religion as a matter of national security. After 9/11, notably in 2001–2005, almost all of the foreign Islamic charitable organizations that operated in the country were closed.31 In 2002, 2006, and 2007, the authorities detained different groups, some of which had participated in the Second Chechnya War (1999– 2009), maintained links to al-Qaida as well as radical Shi'ism.32 However, as some studies have argued, the state media discourse on domestic terrorist groups and their connection to al-Qaida was full of "myths" and ambiguous information.33 The war on terror provided the state with ample opportunities to suppress unwanted Islamic groups that it could not "domesticate."34 Those unwanted movements are the Shi'i political opposition, primarily the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (AIP), and various Salafi groups. I do not intend here to

30 "The State Committee for Religious Associations has begun allocating financial aid to religious communities," *Azerbaijan State News Agency*, May 29, 2015, https://azertag.az/xeber/859068.

31 R. Sattarov, *Islam, State and Society*, 143–147.

32 S. V. Cornell, *Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan*, 42–49; R. Sattarov, *Islam, State and Society*, 130–133.

33 A. Valiyev, "al-Qaeda in Azerbaijan: Myths and Realities," *Terrorism Monitor*, 4, no. 10, (2006), https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaeda-in-azerbaijan-myths-and-realities/; see also: Julie Wilhelmsen, "Islamism in Azerbaijan: How Potent?," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32, no. 8 (2009), 736–738.

34 Julie Wilhelmsen, "Islamism in Azerbaijan: How Potent?"; "Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State," *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report (2008).

describe the relationship between the state and Islamic groups in any detail, as it has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.35 However, the regime used the war on terror to portray itself as "an island of secularism, democracy and pro- Western sentiment … often depicting outbreak of social unrest as the work of Islamic extremism…."36

The events triggered by the Arab uprisings of 2011 brought new dynamics into the state politics of religion. The civil war and the emergence of transnational jihadist organizations in the territories of Iraq and Syria had a direct impact on Azerbaijan. According to local media, over 900 Azerbaijanis37 joined various jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria (mainly ISIS and groups affiliated with al-Qaeda). Periodically, Azerbaijani fighters were disseminating videos online calling Muslims to join them, threatening to cut off the heads of religious leaders loyal to the state, and promising to establish Islamic law (*shari'a*) in Azerbaijan soon.38 The growth of a politically active Shi'i opposition was another challenge to the state. Along with the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, which has been persecuted since the mid-1990s, 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'i learning in Iran and Iraq. Some of these preachers, led by the young charismatic theologian Taleh Baghirzade, organized the "Muslim Unity Movement" (mum) in 2015.39 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 an invocation of Shi'i theology and sharp social criticism, led to a direct collision with the authorities in November 2015, which ended with the arrest of

35 S. V. Cornell, *Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan*; R. Sattarov, *Islam, State and Society*; S. Bedford, *Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan: Repression and Mobilization in a Post-Soviet Context* (Stockholm: Stockholm University 2009); D. Wiktor-Mach, *Religious revival and secularism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan*, M. Ismayilov, *A Resacralization of Public Space and the Future of (Political) Islam in Azerbaijan: Quo Vadis?*, cap papers, 195 (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program 2017).

36 A. M. Valiyev, "Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: A Failed Revolution," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 53, no. 3 (2006) 32.

37 "The chairman of State Security Service: Nearly 300 Azerbaijanis have been killed in Iraq," *Amerikanin Sesi*, September 27, 2017, https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/tehlukesizlik/4042136.html.

38 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).

39 "The Muslim Union Movement was established in Azerbaijan," *Fakt Xəbər*, January 13, 2015, http://www.faktxeber.com/azrbaycanda-mslman-birliyi-hrkat-yaradld-_h454703.html; see M. Ismayilov, *A Resacralization of Public Space and the Future of (Political) Islam in Azerbaijan: Quo Vadis?*.

Baghirzade and almost all members of his organization.40 Police conducted a broad security operation in one of the most religious villages and the center of political Shi'ism, Nardaran. The village was purged of Shi'i symbols, religious posters and educational circles.

As a response to the new challenges, the Azerbaijani authorities employed a set of security measures such as arresting those who took part in the military conflicts abroad, conducting anti-terrorist operations,41 tightening the criminal laws on terrorism and mercenarism,42 and increasing the length of prison sentences.43 The new law "On the fight against religious extremism," which gives security forces broad powers, was introduced in 2015, right after the Nardaran events. The government even adopted an amendment to the citizenship law that strips citizenship from participants in foreign military conflicts.44 In line with the state's legal and security policies, SCWRA legitimizes coercive actions as necessary to protect national sovereignty and guarantee public security. In this context, it closely cooperates with the law enforcement agencies and regularly participates in joint operations with the police and state security services.45 Although SCWRA often emphasizes the separation of religion and state in Azerbaijan, it stipulates that "faithful are not separated from the state"46 and that the state must have "an additional security gaze" surveilling the religious sphere.47 The fight against radicalism, according to SCWRA, is conducted at three levels: ideological, legal, and economic.48 Consequently,

40 "Six people were killed in the Nardaran clash," *BBC*, November 26, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan/2015/11/151126_nardaran_clashes.

41 "As a result of anti-terrorist operations carried out by the Ministry of National Security five suspects were detained," *Azerbaijan State News Agency*, September 22, 2015, https://azertag.az/xeber/VIDEO-886821.

42 See amendments to "The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the struggle against terror- ism" made in 2016–2018, http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/3855.

43 "Azerbaijan legally tightens punishment for mercenary and terrorism," *Interfax-Azerbaijan*, March 13, 2014, http://interfax.az/view/602965.

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

45 "The Ministry of Internal Affairs, State Security Service and the Religious Committee held a joint operation," *Kaspi Newspaper*, December 10, 2016, http://kaspi.az/az/din-dtx-ve-dini-komite-birge-emeliyyat-kecirib/.

46 "Mubariz Qurbanli: While religion in our country is separated from the state, the faithful are not (interview)," Salamnews Agency, December 13, 2016, https://salamnews.org/az/news/read/248840.

47 G. İsmayılov, *Azərbaycanda dini məsələ: təhdidlər və hədəflər* (Bakı: dqidk, 2016), 177.

48 "Mubariz Qurbanli: We are fighting against religious radicalism ideologically, economically and legally." *Amerikanin Sesi*, June 4, 2016, https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/mubariz_qurbanli/3403740.html.

this work involves a whole bureaucratic apparatus with its agents producing both power and knowledge—that is, CMB, Academy of Sciences, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Internal Affairs, State Security Service, and numerous officials, bureaucrats, mullahs, journalists, and scholars of religious and Oriental Studies (*şərqşünaslar*). However, the facts that Muslim actors are often imprisoned for politically motivated reasons and that Azerbaijan lacks an independent judiciary and media make it difficult to estimate both the threat of radicalism and the effectiveness of state policies that aim to deter it.49

It should be noted that Arab uprisings did not cause or determine the politics of bureaucratization, but the regime took challenges (as well as opportunities) that they had posed seriously both in political and religious spheres. Sub- ordination of religion to the state apparatus was carried out along with the imposition of harsh restrictions on the political sphere (oppression against opposition, NGOs, activists, and journalists). By 2011, "Azerbaijan had arguably been a consolidated authoritarian state for several years," but in "the years after the Arab Spring, the level of repression against civil society and dissent reached even greater heights… with its harshest stage hitting in 2013–14, more than two years after the outbreak of the Arab Spring."50 If coercive actions against participants in political or social protests were legitimized as a response to coup attempts organized by "puppets" of external enemies, intervention in the sphere of religion was justified as the need to protect religious diversity and tolerance in the country from external threat.

Besides the securitization of religious field, which was the main strategy since 9/11, Arab uprisings evoked a systematic attempt to subordinate the whole religious sphere to the bureaucracy. In other words, recently employed politics of bureaucratization transcend policing and coercion and affect domains that go far beyond or are unrelated to security. The state strives to reshape the religious sphere, availing itself of strategies such as the co-optation of religious figures as well as the monopolization of Islamic education and religious meaning production. Bureaucratization and the co-optation of religion are closely intertwined processes.51 Some scholars have defined the latter as an intended goal of the former.52 However, if, by winning religious scholars, the state neutralizes political opposition, bureaucratization diminishes the very

49 See "Muslim Believers in Azerbaijani Prisons," *Baku Research Institute*, July 12, 2019, https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/muslim-believers-in-azerbaijani-prisons/.

50 C. Welt, "In the Shadow of Revolution: A Decade of Authoritarian Hardening in Azerbaijan," George Washington University, *Working paper* (2014), 26.

51 R. T. Antoun, "Fundamentalism, Bureaucratization, and the State's Co-optation of Religion: A Jordanian Case Study."

52 A. M. Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam*, 14.

possibility of it, turning religious scholars into state employees competing for position within the official hierarchy.53 Since 2014, the state has managed to co-opt several most authoritative Shi'i preachers. Popular Shi'i preacher Shahin Hasanli became the official representative of the CMB in 2014.54 Another authoritative Shi'i preacher, Javid Muhammadi, was appointed as imam of the Ajdarbay mosque in 2015.55 Both religious figures had been arrested and persecuted for their oppositional and theological activities in the past.56 In 2014, CMB was able to include in its scholarly council and appoint as imam of Taza Pir mosque an independent Shi'i theologian and graduate of Qom, Mirjafar Ayyubov.57 Although the law prohibits preachers who received their education in foreign institutions from performing religious rituals, in order to legitimize the new state's policies of co-optation, an amendment to the law allowing such activities was made in 2017.58

Once co-opted, religious figures are involved in the production and diffusion of state-promoted religious discourse, defined as *traditional Islam*. SCWRA started intervening into debates within Islamic communities, expressing its views on purely theological issues and competing with religious actors for a monopoly over articulating the "correct" understanding of Islamic principles.

4 Invention of a Tradition

4.1 *Genealogy of Traditional Islam*

The discourse of *traditional Islam* is suffused with the rhetoric of the neo-conservative ideology of Azerbaijanism (*Azərbaycançılıq ideologiyası*) promoted by the ruling party, which is based on the idea of the existence of common and unique identity and set of moral values uniting all the Azerbaijanis, regardless of their religion and ethnicity, protecting them from the challenges of

53 Ibid.

54 "Haji Shahin Hasanli appointed to Caucasian Muslims Office," *Report News Agency*, December 3, 2014, https://report.az/en/religion/haji-shahin-hasanli-appointed-to-cauca sian-muslims-office/.

55 "New Akhunds have been assigned to Sheikh Ajdarbay and Taza Pir mosques," *Oxu.Az*, October 13, 2015, https://oxu.az/society/97080.

56 "Shaykh Javid was released," *Fakt Xəbər*, August 3, 2013, http://www.faktxeber.com/eyx-cavid-azadla-xd_h430572.html; "Haji Shahin has been released," *Musavat Newspaper*, September 1, 2011, https://musavat.com/news/son-xeber/haci-shahin-azad-edildi_92413.html.

57 "New Akhunds have been assigned to Sheikh Ajdarbay and Taza Pir mosques"; "Mirjafar Eyyubov was appointed to the CMB?," *Maide.az,* June 30, 2014.

58 See article 21 of the "Law on Religious Freedom," http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/ 7649.

globalization and hostile ideologies. Azerbaijanism "unites all ethnic groups" living in Azerbaijan based on "national interests" and protects them from "attempts of their moral and physical weakening."59 *Traditional Islam* adds to Azerbaijanism a unique Islamic component.

As follows from numerous speeches and writings of state officials, ideologists, and scholars, the genealogy of both Azerbaijanism and its ideological consequence *traditional Islam* stems from the intellectual heritage of Heydar Aliyev, who appears as its ideological "personification." Discussions about *traditional Islam* are legitimized and normalized within the official ideological rhetoric through references to Aliyev's utterances on national traditions, religion, and values. In his speeches, usually delivered at local mosques or sacred places, Aliyev often stressed that Islam is an essential element of Azerbaijani identity, and further that even in Soviet times, he had shared the values of Islam, secretly visited local shrines, and that God bestowed on him the talent of a politician that made him again the leader of Azerbaijan.60 Since its appearance until the present, SCWRA perpetuates these narratives, especially the regime's dominant rhetoric of the exceptional role of Heydar Aliyev as the savior of the nation amidst military and economic collapse, as well as his posthumous status as a great "national leader" (*ulu öndər*), which is presented as a undeniable consensus, any contestation of which is deemed as unthinkable. This cult of personality is buttressed by the popular support that Aliyev had enjoyed during his lifetime, as well as his personal charisma. He viewed Islam as an element of Azerbaijani culture and customs that could never interfere in politics or exist independently from state control. His "Muslim politics" sustained Islam that had been formed during Soviet times when it became a part of local customs and practices, "a marker of national identity for which no personal piety or observance was necessary."61 In this regard, *traditional Islam* appeals to a set of common values, beliefs, and traditions shared by many Azerbaijanis. For example, the domination and esteem of elders, the cult of the "strong" family, the image of the ideal woman as a "hearth-keeper," and decent moral behavior in public all constitute discursive references to *traditional Islam*.62 The state simultaneously utilizes and sustains such local Islamic practices as a sacred attitude to the Qur'an, popular celebrations of Ramadan and

59 R. Mehdiyev, *Yeni məfkürə, dövlətçilik, müstəqillik yolu ilə* (*yanvar 2002–dekabr 2006*)," 2, (Bakı: Şərq-Qərb, 2006), 27.

60 *Heydər Əliyev siyasəti: tolerantlıq* (Baki: dqidk, 2015).

61 A. Khalid, "A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 35, no. 4 (2003), 578.

62 One can refer to numerous events dedicated to national and family values by SCWRA, as well as to its publications. See: http://www.SCWRA.gov.az.

Novruz, homage to the Shi'i Imams and local saints, a negative attitude towards sectarian contradictions, visits to local sacred places and shrines, and popular perceptions of piety (as, for example, the preponderance of being, first and foremost, a moral person, rather than a strict follower of *shari'a* norms). This "religion of people"—using Gramsician terms—is reformulated and packaged into a bureaucratically initiated discourse of *traditional Islam*, which serves state legitimacy.

While Aliyev's vision of religion became the main reference point of SCWRA's interpretation of Islam, his politics of restoring and building mosques after independence formed the basis of the state's symbolic use of religious landscapes. The current president Ilham Aliyev, as well as representatives of SCWRA, CMB, and other institutions that contribute to the regime's cultural hegemony, often emphasize that the state protects Islam and cares about its Muslim citizens by citing its building of more than 500 mosques since independence.63 The meanings that the state invests into religious landscapes endorse official rhetoric on the government's promotion and protection of religious tolerance, multiculturalism, and freedom of worship. These policies culminated in December 2014, when the state built the largest mosque in the Caucasus, named after Heydar Aliyev. This mosque is a spatial representation of *traditional Islam*, which is "strategically positioned as a monument to Aliyev's vision of a unified religious community under strong state supervision."64 The bureaucratically imitated practice of joint collective "unity prayers" of Shi'a and Sunnis (*vəhdət namazı*), which was originally practiced in the Heydar Aliyev mosque but is now gradually being transferred to other mosques around the country as well, symbolizes the state's imaginary of an Azerbaijani unified Islam without any sectarian connections or transnational linkages.

Thus, the model of state–religion relationship that the national leader has established after independence is represented as an unquestionable public good that should be met with an undeniable consensus. In this regard, SCWRA bolstered the regime's popular ideological *topos*, "any alternative to the existing political system will lead to the collapse of the state itself" with a similar one according to which "any alternative to state's religious politics will lead to a sectarian civil war." Consequently, *traditional Islam* contributes to the

63 See "Ilham Aliyev attended the opening of Heydar Mosque in Baku," *President.az*, December 26, 2014 https://en.president.az/articles/13889; "Mubariz Gurbanli: It is not forbidden for the State to protect religion," *Azvision.az*, December 27, 2017, https://azvision.az/news/134318/.

64 N. Koch, A. Valiyev, K. H. Zaini, "Mosques as monuments: An inter-Asian perspective on monumentality and religious landscapes," *Cultural Geographies*, 25, no. 1, (2017) 188.

regime's survival strategies. Any form of Islam that tries to challenge this discourse is declared as alien and dangerous to the state's sovereignty itself.

4.2 *Neither Shi'i nor Sunni: Defining Traditional Islam*

When the state in Azerbaijan insists that one of if not 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 creates something essentially new.

The state delegated the task of conceptualizing *traditional Islam* not to imams or akhunds—although they spread the message in mosques—but to local specialists who studied at secular universities. Predominantly, they are graduates of the department of theology at Baku State University (BSU), which was created according to the model of Turkish departments of theology or divinity (*ilahiyat fakülteleri*). "Turkish university theology" was established in the early and mid-20th century with the goal of creating a scientific, modernist, and national Islam that would not contradict Kamalist nationalism or Turkey's secular project.65 Many professors at the theology department in BSU are graduates of Turkish *ilahiyat*, whereas their students often obtain master's and doctoral degrees from the same Turkish universities. After becoming state officials, these scholars of religion internalize the ideological and rhetorical conventions of the state, and they immerse themselves into the exegesis of Islamic texts, deciding what is true Islam and what is deviation. In other words, they make decisions that usually religious communities leave to themselves or their religious leaders. "Islam's new interpreters" challenge the monopoly of the specialized class of Muslim scholars over the sacred, being a product of the spread of mass education and new media, which has led to a pluralization of Islamic authority worldwide.66

The *traditional Islam* that these scholars of religion and officials produce is not a systematized ideology or belief system, but rather it is an *eclectic ideological discourse* which often comprises mutually contradictory ideas and practices that the state persistently represents as a centuries-old natural consensus of the entire Azerbaijani nation. It derives sustenance from the discourse of Muslim modernists of the 19th–20th centuries (jadidism),67 local Islamic practices shaped during the Soviet times, Turkish university theology, and the ruling

65 F. Korner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology: Rethinking Islam*, (Wurzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2005).

66 J. Anderson, "The Internet and Islam's new interpreters," in D. Eickelman and J. Anderson (eds), *New Media in the Muslim World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2003).

67 Jadids are liberal Muslim intelligentsia who took their name from *osul-e jadid* (the new method of education) as they fiercely advocated for the establishment of secular

regime's ideology of Azerbaijanism. All these discourses are normalized through references to the speeches, utterances, and writings of Heydar Aliyev. Although the state's narrative portrays *traditional Islam* as Sunni and Shi'i forms of Islam historically present in Azerbaijan, it has developed into an inclusive (although highly selective) ecumenical discourse that shuns involvement in politics and that never contradicts, but rather, supports and legitimizes the foreign and domestic policies of the government. This Islam also recognizes the secular nature of the state and is free from sectarian contradictions. Finally, it has no connection whatsoever to external Islamic institutions or foreign Muslim states. The main elements of *traditional Islam*— unquestionable harmony with secularism (*dünyavilik*), multiculturalism, and tolerance—are explained as the primordial, "biologically-spiritual" feature of Azerbaijanis, their genetic memory.68 According to SCWRA's officials, it is the very enmity towards this primordial secularism that unites such different religious groups as the Salafis and radical Shi'a, "who all want to establish in Azerbaijan a theocratic state." The other force, which undermines secular regimesand creates chaos in the Middle East, is the West.69

In my discussion below, I will draw on publications, speeches, and inter- views produced by the SCWRA to illustrate the major components of this ideo- logical discourse. According to the book "Religious Question in Azerbaijan: Dangers and Goals," which SCWRA depicts as very important and pioneering, secularism was not imported into Azerbaijan, but it is, in fact, an indigenous phenomenon. A distinctive feature of the Azerbaijani Turks is their exception- al openness to secularism, science, education, literature, art and gender equality.70 The religious prejudices (*xurafat*)71 and the rigorous adherence to the norms of Islamic law or "Shariatism" (*şəriətçilik*) are both used as synonyms.72 Devotional adherence to the specific Islamic school (*məzhəb*), either theological or legal, acquires a pejorative connotation in the language of *traditional*

secondary and higher education, press and theatres among Muslim communities of the Russian Empire.

68 Interview of SCWRA's chairman Mubariz Qurbanli to "SalamNews," *SCWRA.gov.az*, December 13, 2016, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/2504/; G. İsmayılov, "Tolerantlıq. Bildiklərimiz və bilmədiklərimiz," (Bakı, 2014), 119.

69 G. İsmayılov, *Azərbaycanda dini məsələ*, 135; "Mubariz Qurbanli: Great resources are allocated to export the situation in the Middle East to our country," *Trend News Agency*, December 6, 2014, https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2341038.html.

70 G. İsmayılov. *Azərbaycanda dini məsələ*, 132–133.

71 *Xurafat* means "[religious] prejudice," although in SCWRA's language it also refers to "religious obscurantism."

72 Ibid., 147.

Islam. Other among SCWRA's publications also support this idea. For instance, SCWRA's chairperson writes:

> The difference in the existing sects (*məzhəblər*) should not prevent our unity and our integrity. The Muslim identity and the ideology of Azerbaijanism should overcome 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 that is alien to 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 extremism.73

These statements interestingly resemble some revivalist narratives, which also take a very critical stance towards the Islamic schools of law and consider them the product of the distortion of the "once unified and pure Islam." Likewise, SCWRA calls for a return to the authentic ("fundamental") sources of Islam: Qur'an and *hadith*. The *traditional Islam* is claimed to be free from devotional attachment to any particular Islamic school (*məzhəbçilik*) and is defined as "the Qur'an, the life and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad,"74 while the Islamic law is just a product of a subjective understanding of certain Islamic scholars. Muslim jurists are described in very negative terms, as a group that "frequently shies away from the true values of Islam and Qur'an."75 They are blamed for bloodshed and riots in the Middle East, "which are largely caused by their thoughtless and detached from reality fatwas."76 The Islamic law itself is depicted as a source of intolerance between Muslims, "because when the faithful plunged in Islamic law more deeply, and delve into details, their inherent tolerance weakens."77 This hermeneutical approach is quite common among Muslim modernist thinkers, which one scholar defined as "secularized religion." It sees religion as an abstract category that has a universal value as long as it does not contradict reason and science. As for religious rituals and liturgies, they are inessential with respect to the universal truth of enlightened religion. Moreover, rituals and observances are regarded as evidence of

73 M. Qurbanlı, *Azərbaycanda dövlət-din münasibətləri: Tarixi baxış və müasirlik* (Bakı: Tuna Printing, 2017), 27–28.
74 G. İsmayılov, *xxi əsrdən baxış. Islam, Quran, Musəlman* (Bakı: Pleyada, 2017), 18.
75 Ibid. 19.
76 Ibid. 19–21.
77 G. İsmayılov, *Azərbaycanda dini məsələ*, 148.

"distorted relationship to religious truth" that could be used to manipulate and deceive believers.78

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. Gunduz Ismayilov, SCWRA's deputy chairperson and an intellectual and scholar of religion, whose writings are promoted by SCWRA, explains this idea as follows:

> For example, think of an Azerbaijani who is a Shi'i and follows legal opinions (*təqlid*) of Ayatollah Sistani. At the same time, imagine Iranian, who follows Ayatollah Sistani as well. They both adhere to the same religion, Islamic school and even *mujtahid*. There is no difference between them in regard to issues of Islamic law. But do they have a similar lifestyle? Certainly not! Because, after all, the Azerbaijani Shi'a have a lifestyle that is typical for the Azerbaijani people, while the Iranian Shi'a have a lifestyle that is typical for Persian people. There is another example. Juxtapose an 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.79

Another SCWRA expert writes that *traditional Islam* expresses itself best when the local preachers or mullahs explain Islam not by references to "Arabic religious scholars or shaikhs of the 9th or 10th centuries," but rather to classical premodern Azerbaijani poets as Nizami, Fuzuli, or Nasimi.80 This discourse implies that Azerbaijani Muslims should not follow any form of Islam that is diffused by Arab, Persian, or Turkic preachers, because this practice will trans- form them into an Arab, Persian or Turk. As Ismayilov puts it, "diffusion of the alien Islam leads to an increase in the numbers of the faithful, but to a decrease in the numbers of Azerbaijanis."81

The idea is best explained through the example of 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

78 S. Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire," 341–342.
79 G. İsmayılov, *Azərbaycanda dini məsələ*, 142.
80 M. İsmayılov, "Islamın hər hansı bir modeli var mı?," *Cəmiyyət və Din*, 10, no. 315, (2017), 13.
81 G. İsmayılov, *Azərbaycanda dini məsələ*, 145.

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 *traditional Islam* (the state-imagined Islamic "orthodoxy"), which, according to the author, is followed by the majority of Azerbaijanis. Ismayilov argues that the growth of polygamy in Azerbaijan would not entail the growth of Islam. What it would entail is the weakening of *traditional Islam*.82

4.3 *Soviet Discourses of Traditional Islam*

While the official historical narratives produced in Azerbaijan after independence condemn Soviet times as oppressive and radically atheist, *traditional Islam* actually replicates the practices and discourses of Soviet Islam, drawing on the tried Soviet methods of anti-religious propaganda. As evidence, I can again refer to the recent SCWRA publication written by Ismayilov, which says that during the Soviet era and in the first years of independence (before the appearance of foreign preachers), nobody in Azerbaijan had been associating the image of a believer with the image of an Arab, Turkish, or Iranian Muslim. Although during the Soviet era there were few religious people in the country, their Islam, nevertheless, reflected Azerbaijani values. Ismayilov argues that:

> 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 precisely the same way—covering all layers of society and individuals from the bottom to top.83

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[d] their own,"84 but it should be noted that what is usually rejected is the form and not the essence. Almost all post-Soviet Muslim states have revived their Soviet-era religious institutions ("spiritual boards") and

82 Ibid. 144.

83 Ibid., 279–280.

84 P. Jones, "Introduction: Reassessing the 'Islamic Revival' in Central Asia," in P. J. Luong (ed), *Islam, Society, and Politics in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 2016).

established religious committees based on the model of Soviet Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC). In time, these Soviet-type committees started to receive the level of financial assistance, political support, and structural power that was higher than that enjoyed by spiritual boards. The SCWRA inherited from CARC its bureaucratic dichotomy of "registered" versus "unregistered." While the former is associated with the communities that represent the "true" Islam, the latter is identified with the communities that preach religious prejudices or radicalism. SCWRA's officials often reproduce the discourse of the CARC regarding ignorant Muslims and illiterate mullahs who mislead the former, emphasizing the urgent need to provide society with a knowledgeable religious cadre and high-quality Islamic education. Similar to its Soviet predecessor, SCWRA launches mass educational projects in the cities and regions, re-educating the population about "true" religion and menaces of religious prejudice. The painstaking politics of constructing "progressive and enlightened Islam" also stems from the Soviet-era CARC: notably the appeal to the modernist hermeneutics, which juxtaposes Qur'an with the Islamic textual canon and represents Islam as fully compatible with the policies, laws, and discourses of the national state.85 Finally, unlike the Soviet authorities, SCWRA does not vilify such local practices as shrine visitation, as they constitute a part of national customs, but it still criticizes certain types of behavior during visitations, calling them "unauthentic" Islam and "religious prejudice/obscurantism." Likewise, SCWRA does not prohibit mass Shi'i Ashura processions, which were banned during Soviet times, but it annually engages in contestation of Ahura's *shahsey-vahsey* rituals (public self-flagellation and chest-beating), requiring Muslims to perform them within the space of mosques and condemning self-flagellations as superstitions.86 Thus, on the one hand, the SCWRA protects traditional Islamic practices and perceives any attempt to change them as an attack on state security. On the other hand, it claims the monopoly on "modifying" or transforming these practices whenever that suits the utilitarian interests of the state, which is also a tribute to the Soviet policies vis-à-vis Islam.

85 On CARC see: Y. Ro'i, *Islam and the Soviet Union: From World War ii to Perestroika* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2000); D. Deweese, "Islam and The Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's Islam in the Soviet Union," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 13, no. 3, (2002); A. Goyushev and E. Asgarov, "Islam and Islamic Education in Soviet and Independent Azerbaijan," in M. Kemper, R. Motika, S. Reichmuth (eds), *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successors State*, (London: Routledge Curzon 2009), 186–189.

86 "The principles of tradition and modernity should be pursued in 'Ashura' ceremonies," *SCWRA.gov.az*, September 5, 2018, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/8453/.

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 bureaucracy full of such Soviet-era clichés as "religious-ideological" (*dini-ideoloji*), "national-moral values" (*milli-mənəvi dəyərlər*), "religious prejudice" (*xurafat*), "national cadre" (*milli kadr*), "control process" (*nəzarət prosesi*), "nationwide interests" (*ümümmilli maraqlar*), and so forth. Islam, in the official rhetoric and media, is articulated in the same idioms as narratives on Azerbaijanism and the absolute success of the ruling regime's domestic and foreign policies, which mirror Soviet rhetorical practices. Through this rewriting and translation process, the local languages of Islam are harmonized with the language of the modern state bureaucracy and officialdom. The idioms, expressions, and conventions of this language are reproduced by "registered" Muslim communities during numerous events, which are organized with the support of SCWRA.87

4.4 *State Hermeneutics: "Back to the Qur'an!"*

References to the theological or legal works of the most widespread Islamic schools in Azerbaijan—Ja'fari (Shi'a), Hanafi and Shafi'i (Sunni)—are very sCARCe in the discourse of *traditional Islam*. The same applies to references to premodern and contemporary authoritative theologians, as that might be understood as approval or legitimation of a particular Islamic scholar or school (*məzhəb*), whereas this is something that SCWRA seeks to avoid as much as possible. Meanwhile, SCWRA's officials and experts frequently refer to the Qur'an to substantiate their arguments. For example, criticizing religious radicalism, SCWRA's chairperson 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 Christianity.88 He also backs up his criticism of the violence against women with the Qur'an89 and advises the youth "to learn Islam only in the framework of the Qur'anic verses."90 His deputy says:

87 For the topics and discussions of such events, one can refer to SCWRA's website SCWRA.gov .az: "National moral values and the traditional Islam," "Islam against religious radicalism and prejudices," "The importance of bringing up new generation in healthy national- moral spirit," etc.

88 "Interview of the SCWRA Chairman Mubariz Qurbanli to SalamNews."

89 "Mubariz Qurbanli: All religions are against domestic violence," Salamnews.com, 2015, https://www.salamnews.org/az/news/read/196132.

90 Interview of Mubariz Qurbanli with Yap.org.az, 2017, http://www.yap.org.az/az/view/interview/455/.

> I am not saying let's create a new religion in Azerbaijan or bring innovations to classical Islam, which is based on Qur'an […] We say let's take the Qur'an as a basis for ourselves. In this book there is no division into Sunnism and Shi'ism. The Qur'an is so great, it has so a 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.91

The slogan to leave sectarian disagreements and follow the "purified" Islam of the Qur'an is one of the most famous tropes of the revivalist Muslim exegeses of 19th–21st centuries. "A Look at the Issue of Religion from the 21st Century," one of the latest among SCWRA's publications, says that the view of Islam from the 21st century is actually an attempt to change and renew the Muslims, not the Qur'an or Islam.92 This slogan indicates how SCWRA's officials see the new Muslim subjectivity and refers to the modernist interpretation of the Qur'anic verse, "Allah does not change the position of people until they change them- selves (13:11)." The verse is cited in other SCWRA publications as well.93 It was "oft-quoted by Islamic reformists such as al-Afghani, Abduh and Rida" and be- came part of a popular narrative of Islamic reformism since the early 20th century and extending to recent times, calling Muslims to transform themselves into highly moral and active individuals before trying to change the world.94 Nearly all modernists in Islamicate societies have put Qur'an at the center of their discourse, as it allowed them to identify themselves with "the most authentic form" of Islam, thereby bypassing the centuries-old interpretive tradition. In this context, SCWRA also wants to bypass or limit the influence of dominant Muslim traditions over local Muslims.

SCWRA frequently refers to the ideas of Azerbaijani liberal Muslim intellectuals (*jadids*) of the late 19th–20th centuries, for instance, in an attempt at a rapprochement between the Islamic schools of law as well as critique of religious fanaticism, blind imitation of Islamic authorities (*təqlid*) and division of mosques along sectarian lines ("if mosque belongs to Sunnis or Shi'a, how then can it be the house of God?").95 Yet SCWRA does not explicitly position itself as a proponent of a reformist Islam, since it seeks to preserve its status of a neutral

91 ~~Deputy~~ Chairman of the State Committee: "There is no Sunni-Shi'i separation in the Holy Qur'an…," Moderator.az, 2016, http://www.moderator.az/news/159825.html.

92 G. İsmayılov, *xxi əsrdən baxış: İslam, Quran, Müsəlman*, 5.

93 M. Ismayılov, *Islam: Mənəvi dünyadan sosial həyata* (Baki: Tuna, 2019), 14.

94 See: A. Kateman, "Muhammad Abduh and His Interlocutors: Conceptualizing Religion and in a Globalized World," (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 198; 230.

95 See G. İsmayılov, *xxi əsrdən baxış*, 61; *Dini radikalizm və xurafat: Bir medalın iki üzü: məqalələr toplusu* (Baki: dqdk, 2017); R. Nazarov, "The role of education in the fight

regulator that does not interfere into theological debates. According to a SCWRA's spokesperson, "the very attempts to reform Islam have always ended in failure or the emergence of a new sect." Paradoxically, instead of reformation, he suggests following the true Islam: "As strange as it may seem, the solution is to convey to the people the true Islam and to explain its revivalist essence."96 This rhetoric shows that SCWRA's officials abandon their neutral status and increasingly immerse themselves into theological hermeneutics.

Such hermeneutics suits the state's project of construction of a "meta-sectarian" (*məzhəbüstü*) Islam, as it derives reference points directly from the Qur'an ignoring the corpus of Islamic exegetical tradition—with its diversity of views, debates, and controversies—whether Shi'i or Sunni. At the same time, appeal to the Qur'an communicates a message to the public that the state's Islamic discourse is actually based on the 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 the people"—using Gramsci's idioms—as often even the most secular and non-practicing Muslims, who probably have never read the Qur'an, still maintain a reverential attitude toward the sacred text. Therefore, the SCWRA intellectuals harness the Qur'an, which is also a common cultural element, producing the ideological message, which connects the masses' "popular religion" to the state's bureaucratic Islam.

The state's desire to supervise courses on recitation of the Qur'an indicates that it sees the sacred text not only as a source of its ideological rhetoric, but also as a matter of security and sovereignty. In order to open Qur'anic courses, it is required to be a registered Muslim community and to receive permission from the CMB.97 However, the entire teaching process—its forms, time and space—are regulated by the SCWRA itself, which insists that the recitation of Qur'an must be taught at mosques, not in private apartments or offices, and it must not be accompanied with additional theological lessons.98 SCWRA shut down all educational institutions that combined the classes on recitation of the Qur'an with exegesis.99 Such regulative practices are in line with the state's general religious policies: the teaching of recitation without theology embeds the Qur'an in the discourse of *traditional Islam*, thereby securing the scripture

against [religious] prejudices," August 2, 2018 http://www.SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/articles/269/.

96 Ibid., 16–17.

97 "Official notice on Qur'an courses," *Trend News Agency*, May 24, 2017, https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2758614.html.

98 G. İsmayılov, *Azərbaycanda dini məsələ*, 108–109.

99 Ibid., 110.

and its readers from interpretations offered by dominant Islamic schools and foreign preachers.

5 Bureaucratic Interventions: Traditional Islam applied

5.1 *Politics of Ramadan*

Considering how the state in Azerbaijan puts its bureaucratic Islam into effect, the reader may agree with Wainscott who says that when the state engineers religion, it does not depict the beliefs of the citizens as they currently are or as they once were, but rather, it reshapes them into a form that serves the state and its interests.100 This transformative process is related to what Starrett calls "functionalization," which is when the local religious discourse has been "reified, systematized in novel fashion and set to work fulfilling the strategic and utilitarian ends of the modern and secular discourse of public policy."101 In this context, let us consider as an example the state's politics of Ramadan.

SCWRA, together with 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. When it comes to fasting during Ramadan, many local Shi'a seek guidance from the *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 in Azerbaijan, or elsewhere, have never had a unified position on these issues. In this case, the state is trying to pursue an almost impossible task: to ensure that local Muslims, regardless of their theological or juridical affiliation, start and end fasting on the day defined by the state and not according to any external religious actors or fatwas from other Muslim countries. Striving to limit external influence on the local Muslims, the state considers Ramadan to be an issue directly related to its sovereignty. Timetables of Ramadan published and imported to Azerbaijan from abroad are designated as a manifestation of "the radicalism proper" and "perhaps the most obvious attempt to split the believers."102 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

100 A. Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam*, 71.

101 G. Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1998), 10.

102 "Interview of deputy of SCWRA's chairman Siyavush Heydarov to Moderator.az," SCWRA.gov.az, November 18, 2016, http://www.dqdk.gov.az/az/view/news/2355/.

punished.103 However, before employing administrative measures, the state tries to legitimize its policy in order to minimize resistance and secure a semblance of consent. SCWRA deploys a discourse of "Islamic unity" (*İslam vəhdəti*), shared by many Muslims in Azerbaijan and elsewhere. It declares that the individuals or groups rejecting the idea that every Muslim should start fasting on the same day, in fact, go against the idea of Islamic unity. The SCWRA tries to legitimize its intervention as a response to the urgent social demand for the unity of Muslims and the unification of Islamic rituals.104

5.2 *The State's Moral Economy*

Another example of bureaucratic intervention into religious space is SCWRA and CMB's criticism of citizens for the excessive squandering during the traditional funeral rituals. Interestingly, the state, which is building its ideology on national traditions, criticizes one of the most deeply rooted traditions that most Azerbaijanis perceive as an important religious and moral norm. To erect 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 an expensive tombstone for the deceased. However, since 2014, the state has launched a vigorous campaign in the capital and other regions to prohibit both rituals, describing them as excessive and costly.105 The SCWRA's chairperson, 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 an even more difficult situation. He backed up his criticism with the theological arguments (Qur'anic verses and prophetic narrations), arguing that some traditions should be revised over time, especially since they contradict religious norms.106 In a publication based on the Qur'an and *hadith*, one of SCWRA's experts called the population to save resources not only during funerals or weddings but also on a daily

103 "Mubariz Qurbanli: If there would be a chaos in this sphere…," *Trend News Agency*, July 16, 2015; https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2417732.html; "Mosques that call for the pray during Ramadan at different times will be warned," Trend News Agency, May 24, 2018, https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/gundem/2907612.html.

104 "Those who distribute 'religious calendars' apart from the official calendar of the Cauca- sus Muslim Board may be brought to justice by law," *Azerbaijan State News Agency*, June 6, 2015, https://azertag.az/xeber/861445; "We understand Islam as a religion of unity, brotherhood and peace," *Kaspi Newspaper*, June 8, 2016, http://kaspi.az/az/islami-vehdet-qar dasliq-sulh-dini-kimi-qebul-edirik/.

105 "Will the ban on luxury mourning ceremonies be effective?," *Azadinform Information Agency*, September 3, 2014, https://azadinform.az/az/read/124464/.

106 "Mubariz Qurbanlı: The initiative to eliminate wastefulness in ceremonies is a public or- der," *SCWRA.gov.az*, 2014, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/309/.

basis,107 while another SCWRA official argued that the main reason why people spend lavishly on funerals is that they do not know "Islam's main principles."108 During one of the events dedicated to "squandering," the chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Public Associations and Religious Organizations stated that Islamic traditions and ceremonies should be also regulated by the law in order to "erase differences between them, make them harmonized with each other and free from any wastefulness."109

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 Absheron110 will soon turn into "a pantheon of graves, into one large cemetery." Here, SCWRA, using Islamic idioms, legitimizes "law on the construction and regulation of graves" that has been recently adopted by the government.111 And again, as in the case of 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, because, according to SCWRA, the squandering is also caused by a lack of proper religious education. These policies did not lead to any real changes, although there were reports that in some regions, the population supported these policies and local authorities succeeded in ensuring that funerals were performed without squandering.112

In Soviet times, these life-cycle practices were also condemned as "irrational expenditure of resources."113 Interestingly, in recent times, the *muftiats* and state institutions controlling the religious sphere in Kazakhstan,114

107 V. Aliyev, "Squandering," *SCWRA.gov.az*, June 28, 2016, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/articles/288/israfchiliq.

108 E. Karimova, "One of the main reasons of squandering during funeral ceremonies is a lack of enough knowledge about Islamic norms," July 11, 2016, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/1870/.

109 "The conference on 'Religious rituals: history, tradition and law' was held in Baku," *Azerbaijan News Agency*, October 15, 2018, https://azertag.az/xeber/1204544.

110 Baku is situated on the Absheron peninsula.

111 "The Cabinet of Ministers has approved the rules for the establishment and management of cemeteries," *Turan Information Agency*, December 12, 2018, http://www.turan.az/ext/news/2018/12/free/Social/az/77345.htm.

112 "Will the ban on luxury funeral ceremonies be effective?—public opinion," *Xeberle.com*, September 4, 2014, https://xeberle.com/cemiyyet/2437-debdebeli-yas-merasimlerine-qadaeffekt-verecekmi-ictimai-rey.html.

113 A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, 120.

114 See: "Kazakhstanis urged to abandon lavish mourning ceremonies," Nur.kz, May 27, 2016, https://www.nur.kz/1141973-kazakhstancev-prizvali-otkazatsya-ot.html.

Tajikistan,115 Uzbekistan116 and Kyrgyzstan117 levelled their criticism at these rituals providing almost identical arguments. 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 stagnation.118 In both the Soviet and post-independence eras, these ceremonies have been crucial "to maintain one's status and social obligations."119 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 assure them the necessary level of material well-being. One the one hand, the state tries to modify these "costly" practices. On the other hand, in the face of growing urbanization and the implementation of infrastructural projects, it expands its control over the land and space under its jurisdiction (by regulating the size of tombs and graves). The SCWRA, paradoxically insisting so vigorously on its secular nature, deploys a religious discourse for the legitimization of its social policy by rep- resenting 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 members of the public.

5.3 *Bureaucracy Against Occultism: "Commanding the Right and Forbidding the Wrong"*

Bureaucracy in Azerbaijan not only shapes and disseminates a bureaucratic Islam, but it also projects power into the domain of all informal practices that it classifies as "spiritual" or "religious." SCWRA's approach to fortune-tellers could be an interesting case study in this regard. The SCWRA designates fortune-tellers as charlatans wishing to control people's minds and money. One of the SCWRA's official explains: "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."120SCWRA officials insist that fortune-telling is incompatible with the very values and norms of Islam, while its chairperson emphasizes

115 "Tajikistan's Latest Crackdown on Tradition," *IWPR Central Asia,* September 11, 2017, https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajikistans-latest-crackdown-tradition.

116 "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-kontrole-u.

117 "The introduction of restrictions on pompous celebrations," *Radio Azzatyq*, June 5, 2016 https://rus.azattyq.org/a/torzhestva-prazdnovanie-centralnaya-azija/27780220.html.

118 Especially in Azerbaijan, after the decline of oil prices in 2014.

119 A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, 120.

120 "SCWRA speaks about measures against fortune-telling (interview)," *Trend News Agency*, August 9, 2016. https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2568005.html.

that those who use Qur'an for fortune-telling go against the Qur'an itself, because the Holy Scripture cursed fortune-telling.121

The law does not prohibit people to practice magic, although in 2015 SCWRA's officials suggested that a punishment for sorcerer's machinations should be added to the Criminal Code. While work on this amendment is in progress, SCWRA strives to save the people from sorcery through its mass education projects and its fight against superstitions.122 Any citizen swindled by a fortuneteller has a legal right to report the incident to both the police and the SCWRA, since according to its charter "one of the tasks of the State Committee is to look into administrative offenses."123 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 fortune-tellers.124 What is interesting is that the secular structure, in fact, performs an old Islamic practice of "commanding the right and forbidding the wrong"—that is, advocating for the correct Islam and good mores and denouncing practices that contradict *shari'a* norms.125

Guided by the logic of bureaucracy, SCWRA imposes its classificatory schemes on the phenomenon of fortune-telling. First, it makes a distinction between psychics (*ekstrasenslər*) and fortune-tellers (*falçılar*). According to SCWRA's chairperson, the former are similar to psychologists, while the latter are primitive scammers. In this regard, he suggests that today all those who pretend to be psychics should be tested, and if approved, could get a special license issued by a state body created for this purpose.126 The attempt to de- fine, classify, and control healers and sorcerers is evoked by the process of bureaucratization of religion that has its roots in Soviet times.127 As was

121 "Mubariz Qurbanli: Our intellectuals fought against prejudice, not against Islam," *Musa-vat Newspaper*, July 22, 2017, http://musavat.com/news/455665.html.

122 "Azerbaijan forbids the fortunetelling: Draft law is being prepared," *Khazar Broadcasting Company,* November 6, 2015, http://www.xezerxeber.az/Web%20TV/37705.html.

123 "SCWRA speaks about measures against fortune-telling (interview)," *Trend News Agency*, August 9, 2016, https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2568005.html.

124 "Special operation against fortune-tellers was held in Azerbaijan," *Interfax-Azerbaijan*, August 17, 2016 http://interfax.az/view/679801/az.

125 See Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000).

126 "The chairperson of the Committee said about fortune-tellers: '… ability should be examined,'" *Lent.az*, November 6, 2015, https://lent.az/news/220764.

127 E. Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim. The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (NY: Oxford University Press 2017), 124–129.

mentioned earlier, SCWRA's discourses, language, and practices are largely derived from Soviet institutions: in particular, the CARC. The Soviet officials—drawing on the positivistic ideas of European Orientalism of the 19th century, educational projects of liberal Muslim intellectuals (*jadids*), and field observations of Soviet ethnographers—distinguished between "authentic Islam" embedded in Muslim scriptures, foremost in Qur'an, and deviant Islam rooted in "pagan traditions," that is, different forms of Sufism and folk practices of healing, fortune-telling, and sorcery. The "urban Intellectual scripturalism" was used to eradicate the emotional and mystical sides of Islam.128 Likewise, SCWRA criticizes the practices of fortune-tellers using both the Soviet positivistic language and the discourse of Azerbaijani liberal Muslim intellectuals. Advocating for the most "pure" Islam, SCWRA's chairperson compares the state's ideological struggle against religious prejudices with both the struggle of early Muslim community against ignorant Arab traditions and the activities of the Azerbaijani Muslim intelligentsia of the 19th–20th century such as Mirza Fatali Akhundov, Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, Mirza Alakbar Sabir, and many others, who, according to him, "never fought religion itself, but prejudices":

> First, [religious] prejudice comes out when one misrepresents the religion. Second, when one tries to convey Qur'anic verses to the people, not as they are, but mixing them with different myths. Third, [religious] prejudice 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 Qur'an for fortune-telling and "prescription of special prayers" are nothing but prejudice and obscurantism. There is a verse in the Qur'an: "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 Qur'an 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 the Qur'an in their hands and a mullah's hat on their head. Therefore, the activity against religious prejudices must continue in ideological, spiritual, and scientific spheres.129

128 M. Kemper, *Studying Islam in the Soviet Union* (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA, 2009), 16–17.

129 "Mubariz Qurbanli: Our intellectuals fought against prejudices, not against Islam."

One the one side, this unexpected and spontaneous struggle against magic and spiritualism is an act of legitimization aimed at demonstrating to the believers that the state struggles against phenomena that Islam severely condemns (for instance, Islamic law condemns witchcraft, thus, the state acts in accordance with the norms of Islam). On the other side, one can observe here resemblance with Soviet politics of Islam that sought to establish total control over the "anarchy of Muslim life beyond the acceptable religion."130 Fortune-tellers, like "unregistered" preachers, operate in the sphere that SCWRA is trying to bureaucratize and put under its full control. That is why SCWRA seeks to adopt a law that allows public religious performances (of any kind) to be con- ducted only by officially appointed religious or "spiritual" figures.131

6 Politics of Mass Enlightenment

Since 2014, the SCWRA has reinforced its public relations policies and initiated a variety of events on *traditional Islam* and religious prejudices in the capital and provinces. During these events, SCWRA, in cooperation with CMB and other state and non-state institutions, shapes one unified discourse of Islam, harmonized with the ideology of Azerbaijanism. Such activities constitute a broad educational project of "mass enlightenment and education" (*maarifçilik*)132 in which everyone—CMB's mullahs, SCWRA's experts, representatives of the intelligentsia, university professors, schoolteachers and various officials—actively participates. *Maarifçilik* implies working with the population in mosques, secondary schools, universities, public institutions and prisons, where the representatives of the state explain the essence of *tradition- al Islam* and its "non-traditional" antipodes: "Wahhabism," "Salafism," "Gulenism," "Nursism," oppositional Shi'ism, and all other Islamic movements that do not fit into the picture of the world created by the regime. Here one could make an analogy with James Scott's notion of the state's internal principle of utilitarianism, according to which states employs classifying phenomena based on their utility and harmfulness, narrowing its field of vision and imposing its

130 E. Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*, 134.

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

132 In Azerbaijani language, *maarifçilik* also refers to the Age of Enlightenment as well as to educational activities of the Azerbaijani liberal intellectuals of 19th–20th centuries. The SCWRA harnesses this locally recognizable idiom, implying that state policies are, in fact, a continuation of the Azerbaijani enlightenment.

optic on the very reality it is observing.133 Applied to "non-traditional" Islam, the explanatory categories of "enlightenment" and "prejudice" facilitate the work of the state, simplifying things for its convenience. When the state in Azerbaijan faces any unwanted or disturbing religious phenomena or actors, bureaucratic dichotomies potentially allow it to categorize them as a manifestation of "religious prejudice," ignoring all their specific features and ideational and practical differences. In other words, the state simplifies its work by bringing all these "undesirable phenomena"—from fortune-tellers to oppositional Shi'ism and Salafism—to one common denominator, "religious prejudice." Al- though along with "prejudice," the notion of "radicalism" is also often employed in the official discourse, for SCWRA, these notions are, in fact, "two sides of the same coin."134 At the same time, using the same logic, the state tries to domesticate and incorporate into its institutional and ideological project of *traditional Islam* every Islamic group or figure that it finds useful.

Every year within the framework of this project, SCWRA organizes between 600–1000 seminars, courses, conferences and public lectures 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," and so on.135 The politics of mass education implies that the masses are radicalized when they follow radical "non-traditional movements" because they are religiously ignorant and do not know the essence of "true" Islam; therefore, it is a task of the state to educate them. Activities aimed at combating religious radicalism and integrating radicals into the society are carried out alongside activities against drug addiction and bad habits.136 Radicals are defined as infected people who must be treated by the state Islam. The socioeconomic roots of radicalization such as poverty, restricted political space, authoritarian governance, and poor quality of education are almost ignored, while radicalism is predominantly explained as a

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

134 "Round table 'Religious radicalism and prejudices—two faces of one medal' has been held," August 29, 2016, *Azerbaijan State News Agency*, https://azertag.az/xeber/Dini_radikalizm_ve_xurafat___bir_medalin_iki_uzu_movzusunda_deyirmi_masa_kechirilib-987642.

135 See the "Events" or "Enlightenment" sections of SCWRA's "Society and Religion" newspaper: http://SCWRA.gov.az/docs/170/?.

136 "Events held to promote religious enlightenment and promotion of national and spiritual values in the provinces," *SCWRA.gov.az*, July 31, 2015, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/ news/834/; "An event titled 'Religious Radicalism and Ways to Combat Drug Abuse' was held in Yardimli," *SCWRA.gov.az*, December 12, 2018, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/ 8492/.

misunderstanding of the true meaning of Islam and the Qur'an. 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 radicalized Muslims who have internalized the "wrong" interpretation.

In 2018, the state made another bureaucratic intervention aimed at the institutionalization of its ideological discourse by establishing a new body called the 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 [of the Azerbaijani people] to the future generations."137 The Foundation helps to integrate people suffering from religious fanaticism, alcoholism and drug ad- diction into society. In fact, financial aid takes various forms: it ranges from financing projects on Islamic education to providing cars to the registered Muslim communities.138 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.139 Making mullahs salaried employees is an important transformation in the religious field. If, earlier, the Azerbaijani state indirectly provided financial assistance to mullahs through CMB, now it pays wages and determines who will receive them. This politics of the "propagation of national values" and educating population about them is a recent phenomenon. If previously the symbolic politics of the state was rather sporadic and inconsistent, in recent years it has become systematized. Through numerous educational projects, the Foundation conveys to the religious communities the state's vision of national religion. Involving communities into its numerous activities, SCWRA's officials emphasize that *maarifçilik* and the struggle against religious radicalism should turn into a "nationwide activity,"140 which indicates that the state wants every- one to participate in the reproduction of its ideological discourse.

In recent years, the SCWRA has also increased attempts to use the new media to disseminate its spiritual enlightenment. For instance, the Foundation launched its weekly radio program "Moral values" in cooperation with the

137 M. Qurbanlı, *Azərbaycanda dövlət-din münasibətləri*, 215.

138 "Names of religious communities who have been granted cars were announced," *ReportNews Agency*, October 11, 2018, https://report.az/din/azerbaycanda-avtomobil-verilen-dini-icmalarin-adlari-aciqlanib/.

139 "Imams and their assistants will receive salaries beginning from the state next year," *Musavat Newspaper*, December 19, 2017, http://musavat.com/news/491891.html.

140 "The fight against religious extremism and radicalism should turn to a nationwide activty," *SCWRA.gov.az*, May 13, 2019, http://www.SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/8812/.

state-run Asan Radio station.141 SCWRA's TV programs that broadcast through public television and online, such as "Faith" (*Iman*) and "Religion and Society" (*Cəmiyyət və din*), also contribute to making *traditional Islam* a part of public discourse. The other newly employed media form that transmits the state's vision of spiritual enlightenment and religion is cinema. The ideology of *traditional Islam* is visualized through a number of documentary films that are shown in all institutions of the country: in schools, universities, municipalities, prisons and ministries. "Discord," "Martyrdom" and "Unity" became a kind of manifesto for SCWRA, which it brings to the masses.142 All three films contain a different narrative united by one ideological thread. The first movie shows the inglorious and tragic fate of those who left their homeland, Azerbaijan, to participate in the civil war in Syria. The second one tells the story of radicals who have been killed and imprisoned, while juxtaposing them with the national heroes who fell during the war in Armenian-occupied Karabakh. The trilogy ends with a story about a tolerant Azerbaijan that is free from sectarian conflicts. Interestingly, these films became a key part of symbolic rituals that developed around SCWRA's educational activities over time. Usually, before the events, SCWRA's officials visit one of Heydar Aliyev's monuments (especially in the provinces). After that, they proceed to give public speeches on *traditional Islam* and issues related to it (radicalism, drug addiction, bad habits). Normally, these activities end with a collective watching of one of SCWRA'sdocumentary films.

7 Transformation of Islamic Education

The bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan expanded the state's pedagogical power into the sphere of Islamic education. This expansion involves a monopolization of knowledge production, ensuring a stable transmission of *tradition- al Islam*. The state gradually takes control of and reorganizes Islamic education in the country, simultaneously extruding all informal Islamic educational networks.

Since the 1990s, official Islamic education has been mainly represented by the Baku Islamic University (BIU) and Islamic madrasas, both of which are subordinated to the CMB. Although, in these institutions, Islam has always

141 "'Moral Values' program on ASAN Radio," *Mdtf.az*, October 25, 2018, http://mdtf.az/photo-gallery/36-asan-radioda-mnvi-dyrlr-verilisi.html.

142 All movies are available at SCWRA's YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE4tJ06NTxfSEjJzl-LBSnQ.

been taught in accordance with "national interests," and discussions of Shi'i–Sunni contradictions have not been welcomed and almost ignored; nevertheless, SCWRA officials from time to time have made statements that the quality of education in BIU is very low and does not satisfy the state requirements.143 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 in Iran, and the former in Syria. SCWRA usually employed its personnel not from BIU, but rather from the department of theology at Baku State University, where Islamic disciplines were taught along with the humanities and social sciences. As mentioned above, the majority of its faculty received their education at various departments of religious studies in Turkey. Eventually, in the context of the intensified bureaucratization of Islam, this department was transformed by decree of President Ilham Aliyev into the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology in 2018, and included into the SCWRA.144

The main goal of this newly formed university is to prepare "national religious cadre," who have never studied in foreign religious institutions and have no theological precommitment. These new experts will not be mullahs or traditional theologians anymore, but instead will be salaried scholars of religion "fully embracing the idea of Azerbaijanism."145 At present, the Institute pro- vides 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 religious studies department so much as to prepare specialists who would be able to support state policies on religion and respond to the challenges posed by external religious influences. These specialists "will study the main sources of the Islam—the Qur'an and prophetic traditions, learn how to see events in a broader perspective and convey a peaceful Islamic message to the society."146 Unlike BIU, the education in ATI is free of charge.

143 "Strong accusations against Baku Islamic University from the Religious Committee's official," *Modern.az*, September 2, 2017, https://modern.az/az/news/142302.

144 "The Institute of Theology is being established in Azerbaijan," *Turan Information Agency*, February 10, 2018, http://www.turan.az/ext/news/2018/2/free/Social/az/69011.htm.

145 "Mubariz Qurbanli: Admission to the Institute of Theology can be held this year," *Interaztv.com*, 2018, https://interaztv.com/videos/xeberler/259059.

146 "Ilham Aliyev's valuable contribution to the Azerbaijani model of Islamic enlightenment," *Azerbaijan newspaper*, October 14, 2018, http://www.azerbaijan-news.az/view-155796/.

The new institution is also planning to provide students with free housing, clothing and food.147 The Foundation for Propagation of National Values also supports ATI's students by granting them additional stipends.148 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 scholars of religion, but also a new generation of imam-*khatibs*—public theologians, who will directly work with the population in the mosques.149 This proposal indicates the possibility of SCWRA's potential encroachment into CMB's direct sphere of responsibility. It will give SCWRA a greater opportunity to disseminate its "enlightened traditional Islam" through state-employed professionals, not "uneducated" mullahs in the mosques.

In addition to Islamic higher education, the bureaucratization process also involved Islamic madrasas (secondary schools). Most of them were built in the early 1990s with the support of 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 madrasas were renamed into Islamic colleges, and 10 of such colleges are functioning today.150 These colleges are also tasked with training "national cadres" who, after graduation, will preach Islam in accordance with the national values. The very fact of renaming Islamic madrasas (*mədrəsələr*) into colleges is symbolic, as it reflects the expanding state intrusion into the religious sphere.

It should be noted that the state in Azerbaijan has long been reluctant to teach religion in secondary schools. This issue was discussed periodically by the Ministry of Education, the SCWRA, and local media. Besides the legal obstacles (the constitution of Azerbaijan "is one of few among the Council of Europe that has a direct reference to the secularity of public education"151), there has been a lack of relevant vision of Islam as well as Islamic textbooks

147 Ibid.

148 "Foundation allocates financial aid to students," *Mdtf.az*, December 5, 2018 http://mdtf.az/xeberler/76-fond-tlblr-maddi-yardim-ayirib.html.

149 "From this moment, theologians with national ideology will be prepared," *Kaspi Newspa-per*, June 28, 2018, http://kaspi.az/az/bundan-sonra-milli-mefkureye-sahib-ilahiyyatcilar-hazirlanacaq/.

150 "Seven state religious education institutions have received their certificates," SCWRA.gov.az, 2017, http://SCWRA.gov.az/az/view/news/2912/.

151 R. Ibadov, "Religious Education in Azerbaijan" in D. H. Davis and E. Miroshnikova (eds), *The Routledge International Handbook of Religious Education*, (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2013), 39–45.

that could be introduced to the children. Although since 2004, the class *Hayat Bilgisi* ("Learning about the Life") has been taught in schools, it provides only superficial and general information about world religions. However, with the rise of *traditional Islam* the situation has changed. After 2011, SCWRA started emphasizing that teaching about Islam needs to be enhanced in both secondary and high schools. The revised editions of *Həyat Bilgisi* published after 2014 contain more information about Islam. In 2019, the SCWRA together with the Ministry of Education, prepared new textbooks with a special focus on Islam for recently introduced mandatory classes in high schools and universities.152 The revised and new textbooks reproduce the narrative on "true" Islam and religious prejudices, emphasizing the role of the state as a protector of religiously tolerant environment in the country.153

9 Conclusion

This article argues that, faced with the security challenges after the Arab uprisings of 2011, the Azerbaijani government has steadily intensified the process of bureaucratizing Islam. The growing institutional power of SCWRA, the co-optation of religious figures, and a concerted diffusion of ideology of *traditional Islam*, accompanied by the new politics of mass education and creation of the Foundation for Propagation of National Values and Azerbaijani Theo- logical Institute, are all indicative of an increased administrative and discursive intrusion of the state into the country's religious space. The government represents its bureaucratic policies as a necessary measure that serves the Azerbaijani Muslims' interests, notably, as a struggle against religious radical- ism in addition to the protection of sovereignty, national values, and peaceful coexistence among the country's religious communities. However, the state- sponsored bureaucratization transcends its organizational boundaries and begins to encroach into the sphere of Islamic theology, imposing on Muslim communities bureaucratic categories and reshaping the entire religious spacefor the utilitarian interests of the regime.

The state's political imaginary promotes the notion of traditional Islam that allegedly reflects the age-old values of the Azerbaijanis. This Islam should be

152 "How classes on religion will be held in secondary and high schools? (official statement)," *Online News Agency*, April 29, 2019 https://ona.az/az/sosial/9075.

153 See E. Əzizova, "Azərbaycanda orta ümümtəhsil məktəblərinin "Həyat Bilgisi" dərsliklərində dinə baxış: kvantitativ və kvalitativ təhlil," *Dini Araşdırmaları Jurnalı*, 1, (2018).

protected and utilized against external radical discourses. However, behind the de-radicalization strategies lies a relentless promotion of Heydar Alyev's personality cult and the legitimization of the regime's cultural and social policies. The ideology of *traditional Islam* presents the state as the main protector of national values and Islam in the country. Islamic movements that do not fit into the state-sponsored picture of traditional Islam are declared "untraditional," that is, "alien" and "dangerous." To this category belong politically active Shi'ism, quietist Salafism, various Sufi movements and other independent Shi'i and Sunni actors and groups. The problem with this dichotomy is that since the 1990s, the local religious landscape of the country has changed, and forms of Islam that had been shaped by transnational religious flows in the 1990s had already become "traditional" and embedded into the local context. Moreover, SCWRA, which itself has designated some local religious practices of Azerbaijanis as "prejudices," is now trying to recast them. In this way, it is transforming the very character of the "indigenous Azerbaijani Islam" for which it itself used to advocate. This contradiction is caused by the fact that SCWRA inherited from Soviet bureaucratic structures a negative attitude to local religious practices (the so-called "folk Islam"). As the Soviet authorities, the functionaries of SCWRA consider them to be outdated prejudices that are out of step with mod- ern times. Besides, SCWRA's experts are graduates of the religious studies department at a secular national university at which they studied Islam in accordance with the "Turkish university theology." This theology takes a very critical view of the devotional Islamic practices that do not correspond to their modernist exegesis of scriptures. As a result, the state does not protect or empower the local, "indigenous" version of Islam," but rather it effectively creates its own new image of traditional Islam. In the process, it inevitably becomes deeply embroiled into theology and symbolic politics.

The state tries to achieve a sustainable reproduction of traditional Islam by training a new generation of religious experts who will become employed officials and bureaucrats competing for high positions in the state hierarchy. This administrative and ideological intervention serves the Azerbaijani regime's survival strategies in that it allows the ruling elite to neutralize, potentially, the very possibility of the emergence of any oppositional force within the religious space. Bureaucratization considerably expands the scope of social control by rendering the country's religious space predictable, monolithic, less competitive and open to state intervention and manipulation.