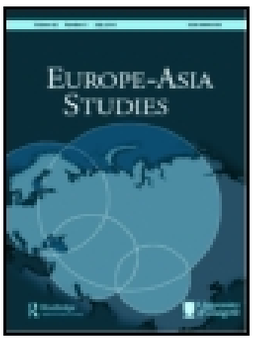

Europe-Asia Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceas20

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To cite this article: Sofie Bedford, Ceyhun Mahmudlu & Shamkhal Abilov (2021): Protecting Nation, State and Government: 'Traditional Islam' in Azerbaijan, Europe-Asia Studies, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2021.1899136

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1899136

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Published online: 26 Mar 2021.

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EUROPE-ASIA STUDIES, 2021
https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1899136

Protecting Nation, State and Government: 'Traditional Islam' in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

The article contributes to a better understanding of 'Traditional Islam' (TI), a state-led project in Azerbaijan to establish an alternative narrative promoting a specific local understanding of Islam that builds on its non-political, non-sectarian and national features to prevent 'non-traditional' religious variants from gaining popular traction. The phenomenon has not appeared in a vacuum. First, its features and functions stem from Soviet-era anti-religious and nationalities policies. Second, many aspects of TI resemble counter-radicalisation initiatives worldwide. Finally, while introduced as a means of blocking radicalisation in order to protect Azerbaijan's national identity as a secular state, Traditional Islam in fact works to extend state control over the religious domain and thus to prevent the development of any religiously grounded dissent against the authoritarian regime.

'IF MY PEOPLE MUST BE MUSLIM, LET THEM BE THIS KIND OF Muslim. If my brother wants to be Muslim, I'd want him to follow Traditional Islam.'[1] This comment was made by Gunduz Ismayilov, a representative of the Azerbaijani State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (*Dini Qurumlarla İş Üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi*—SCWRA), the lead institution behind an ambitious state project to counteract the spread of 'foreign' Islam among the citizens of Azerbaijan through the development and promotion of a national religious creed and practice—Traditional Islam (*Ənənəvi İslam*—TI). Most citizens of post-Soviet Azerbaijan identify as Muslim. What this quote underscores it that, for religious and secular elites, Islam is perceived as a key part of the national ideology and is seen as integral to the new Azerbaijani identity (Mahmudlu 2017). The state is strictly secular; the fear of radicalisation as a result of foreign religious influences promoting a worldview where Islam plays a more prominent, and ultimately political, role has been an important factor in domestic policy since the beginning of the 2000s. How this threat has been used by the ruling elite to legitimise strengthened control over religious

[1]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), Baku, 15 April 2018.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1899136

communities, education and literature in general, as well as harsh political action against certain groups and activities in particular, is well documented in previous literature (Bedford 2009; Ter-Matevosyan & Minasyan 2017; Bashirov 2018).

The notion of 'foreign Islamic ideas' as dangerous and lurking on the country's borders is still on the political agenda. However, recent official discourses tend to focus less on physically targeting and eliminating sources of violent Islamic radicalism and more on establishing an alternative, mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative to protect the national Azerbaijani manifestation of Islam and to prevent its citizens from being radicalised by 'foreign Islamic ideas'. While the notion of a specific 'Azerbaijani' Islam has featured in previous research on religion in Azerbaijan, it is yet to be the sole focus of any extensive enquiry.[2] The aim of our article is to contribute to a better understanding of this intriguing phenomenon. To this end, we will analyse its features and functions through an investigation of how the concept is constructed, both in practice and in the discourses of Azerbaijan's religious and secular elites.

Our point of departure is that the phenomenon of Traditional Islam in Azerbaijan has not appeared in a vacuum: its development and expressions are best understood by analysing it through a comprehensive framework that takes into account relevant developments on the global, regional and national levels. Primarily, while 'Traditional Islam' as an explicit initiative is a relatively new occurrence in Azerbaijan, the trend of state-led 'retraditionalisation of Islam' (Peyrouse 2007) has been present, in different forms and for some time, across post-Soviet Central Asia. In Russia too, Traditional Islam has, since the second half of the 2000s, become a 'powerful discursive tool of governance' (Müller 2019, p. 400). Previous research points to a strong path dependency where the categorisation of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' Islam builds largely on the Soviet differentiation between 'official' and 'independent' religion. To this end, the former was state-controlled and thus perceived as 'good', while the latter was not and was subsequently seen as a potential threat. Our study suggests that much in the Azerbaijani case can be understood in this context. We also propose looking beyond the Soviet legacy. The motivation behind 'Traditional Islam' and its interpretation in many ways resemble those of counter-radicalisation initiatives in other countries that seek to prevent, in a largely non-coercive manner, members of a non-radicalised population from being radicalised (Schmid 2013). Notably, religion in general, and Islam in particular, is often viewed as an important factor in such programmes. To this end our study will, paraphrasing Baker-Beall *et al.* (2014, p. 3), illustrate how Traditional Islam is informed by the imperative of counter-radicalisation, understood in the context of Azerbaijan's particular political and cultural identity/situation. The final part of our analytical framework highlights specificities of the Azerbaijani context that influence the discursive and actual features, functions and implications of 'Traditional Islam'.

Outline of the study

For this study, we consulted a range of sources to answer our overarching research questions: what is 'Traditional Islam', and what is its function in the Azerbaijani context? Our

[2]With the exception of Gasimov (2020).

secondary material included academic and newspaper articles, and reports and websites of relevant government institutions. In addition, ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with elites and experts were conducted in Baku during the spring of 2018. Questions focused on the role of religion in society and state, perceptions of threat and security in relation to religion, the nationalisation of Islam, and TI. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the discursive and practical construction of this concept. One interviewee deserves special mention: Gunduz Ismayilov, the Deputy Head of the SCWRA, the secular authority in charge of the initiative, and one of the creators of the project. Our respondents included prominent members of the religious elite, namely two representatives of the highest Muslim authority in Azerbaijan: the Caucasus Muslim Board and a former imam of a popular Baku mosque. Finally, we interviewed a number of academics and experts with special insight into either the religious or political context of the country.[3] The respondents were selected for their expected ability to elaborate on the state–religion relationship in general and the purpose and prospects of the TI phenomenon in particular. What mattered in this study were the respondents' representations of TI—what they said they thought it was (and perhaps would like it to be) and what social function they believed it to perform. What they 'really' thought was of secondary importance. With the possible exception of Gunduz Ismayilov,[4] none of these respondents was 'representing the state'. Nevertheless, as 'official' religious figures, university (and therefore state) employees or experts working in organisations with close ties to the regime, their views largely reflected the state's ideas and arguments. At the same time, we gained an idea of how the features and functions of TI are interpreted and received in specialist communities, as illustrated throughout the article with extracts from the interviews.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. The first part is dedicated to a definition of Traditional Islam in Azerbaijan. The subsequent three sections analyse the phenomenon from various angles. First, at the regional level, we discuss how the features and functions of Azerbaijani TI can be understood in a post-Soviet context. Second, we examine TI as a counter-radicalisation strategy in a global perspective. Finally, we consider how TI has been influenced by specificities on the national level, followed by a concluding summary.

'Traditional Islam' in theory and practice

Most Western scholarship conceptualises TI through a dichotomy between fundamentalism and modernism. In the literature of Islamic studies, Traditional Islam is defined as an entity established by Islamic scholars in the twelfth century (Fauzi 2012; Mathiesen 2013). Mathiesen (2013) argues that the phenomenon of TI in general

[3]In most cases, profession and workplace rather than name is used to define the interviewees, in order to protect their identity. The interviews were conducted by two of the authors in Azerbaijani and then translated into English for analysis.

[4]It should be noted that while he stated in the interview that he was expressing his personal opinions, his representation of 'Traditional Islam' resonated with official accounts; thus, we interpreted it as a state perspective.

should be understood from its discourses, which endeavour to establish an orthodoxy of specific practices and institutions as opposed to other versions of practices and institutions. Nasr (1994) states that, to better comprehend TI, it is important to analyse its attitude towards various facets of Islam itself. According to him, Traditional Islam accepts the Quran as the Word of God, recognises the orthodox collection of *hadith* in the six *sihahs* of Sunni Islam and the *Four Books of Shiism*, and defends *sharī'a* as divine law. In addition, Sufism and *tariqas* are also seen as part of TI. Usually, TI does not integrate Islamic values with local traditions. However, this is how Traditional Islam has been recently perceived and introduced by ruling elites in some states, primarily in Central Asia, but also in the Balkans and in Indonesia: as a combination of Islam and local traditions, behavioural norms and even pre-Islamic religions (Khalid 2003; Omelicheva 2011; Edelbay 2012; Fauzi 2012). As for Azerbaijan, Ismayilov, the Deputy Head of the SCWRA, suggested that the values of TI have naturally evolved throughout the history of Azerbaijan. According to him, TI in the Azerbaijani context does not contradict the principles of Islam, such as the Quran, *hadith* and *sharī'a*, but supplements them with Azerbaijani traditions, family structures, behavioural norms and customs. TI, he explained, is purely local and opposes Islam introduced from abroad; crucially, it is 'the only choice for the religious policy of Azerbaijani government'.[5]

From a religious perspective, this state definition of TI of Azerbaijan presents a number of inconsistencies. First, the state does not determine the branch of Islam, Sunni or Shi'a, on which it normally puts emphasis. This is critical from the perspective of interpreting the Quran, the *hadith* and *sharī'a.* Second, it is not clear what the state means by the 'combination' of *sharī'a* with Azerbaijani traditions, family structures and behavioural norms, as these are dynamic and change over time. Third, the content of so-called 'local' Azerbaijani Islam is not obvious. Azerbaijan is not one of Islam's centres; it does not host leading Islamic institutions and scholars who can compete with their foreign analogues. One religious leader among our respondents, Aqil Shirinov of the Caucasus Muslim Board, went as far as to claim, 'Traditional Islam is theoretically impossible—Islam is Islam'. However, he continued, pragmatically, 'Practically, it exists. Religion must become a part of a culture in order to be nationalised and a nation cannot live without religion'.[6] In sum, the religious basis of TI of Azerbaijan is weak and, we suggest, its ideas are shaped mainly by the interests, favoured discourses and current policies of the ruling regime.

To this end, we provide a brief overview of the appearance of TI. As a result of historical processes in general and the Soviet anti-religious campaigns in particular, knowledge of Islam was, at the time of independence, low among Azerbaijani Muslims. In the early post-Soviet-era, Iranians, various representatives of the Arab world and Turks provided hands-on help to restore religious life in the country. After welcoming at first this missionary activity Azerbaijani authorities started fearing its impact, believing 'imported'

[5]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the SCWRA, Baku, 15 April 2018.

[6]Interview with Aqil Shirinov, Head of Department, Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute, Baku, 20 April 2018.

Islamic ideas could prove harmful.[7] Over the years, this resulted in various crackdowns on religious communities in the name of anti-radicalisation. The government took a number of legal, practical and administrative measures to strengthen its control over religious life. These included, for example, changes to the registration processes for religious communities, the strict control of the imposition of restrictions on the import, use, production and distribution of religious literature and other materials, restrictions on religious practices, and the installation of surveillance cameras in mosques.[8] In addition, a number of mosques and prayer rooms throughout the country have been closed or demolished in recent years for not complying with regulations, and a large number of theologians, religious figures, activists, journalists and heads of religious organisations and communities have been arrested on various charges (US Department of State 2017; Ter-Matevosyan & Minasyan 2017; Corley & Kinahan 2018). Suggestively, on the most recent list over political prisoners in Azerbaijan (published in June 2020) a majority are in the 'religious activists' category.[9]

The new state narrative that emerged around 2012 remains central for the purpose of our study. At this time, the idea of a national Islam or, as it is officially called, *ənənəvi* —'Traditional' or 'Classic' Islam—was developed and promoted by the SCWRA. This narrative stressed the distinction between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' religious movements (Ter-Matevosyan & Minasyan 2017; Bashirov 2018). One important aspect was that so-called non-traditional movements represented a 'destructive' 'political' Islam 'exported by foreign interests', believed to be set on establishing an Islamic regime under *sharī'a* rule in Azerbaijan. In contrast, 'traditional religious movements' were described as 'non-political', 'Azerbaijan-born' and 'not imported from outside' (Bashirov 2018). In essence, this narrative was not new, since foreign religious influences were already seen as suspicious and potentially dangerous. However, the discursive change was now followed up by practical initiatives to institutionalise this notion as an alternative religious ideology, including as the establishment of a new 'non-sectarian' mosque and a Theological Institute. Ismayilov, the deputy head of the SCWRA used the analogy of infrastructure to describe the situation:

> Imagine your country without railways. … you see that another country wants to create their railway system in your country. You realise that this railway will take you somewhere you do not want to go, so you must invest in your own [railway]. So, we need to build this structure in accordance with our people's minds and interests by restoring Traditional Islam here … . One can analyse it from many perspectives, from security, global processes, regional, political, moral aspects, *et cetera*, but this is

[7]'Mubariz Qurbanli: "Bu gün dini radikal qrupların Azərbaycanda nə ideolojiç nə iqtisadi nə də mənəvi dayaqları var"', SCWRA, 29 December 2018, available at: http://www.scwra.gov.az/az/view/news/8513/mubariz-qurbanli-bu-gun-dini-radikal-qruplarin-azerbaycanda-ne-ideoloji-ne-iqtisadi-ne-de-, accessed 11 February 2021.

[8]'Rəsmi mövqe: "Uzun illərdir ölkəyə Gülənin dinlə bağlı kitablarının idxalına icazə verilmir"', SCWRA, 23 August 2016, available at: http://www.dqdk.gov.az/az/view/news/1951/resmi-movqe-uzun-illerdir-olkeye-gulenin-dinle-bagli-kitablarinin-idxalina-icaze-verilmir, accessed 11 February 2021.

[9]Compiled by the Working Group on a Unified List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan, which brings together human rights activists, lawyers, journalists and experts, available at: https://smdtaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Vahid-Siyasi-Mahbus-Siyahisi-10.06.2020-az.pdf, accessed 11 February 2020.

> self-protection in every case. If we do not pay enough attention, the consequences could be harsh for us and for our state.[10]

His statement is revealing in that it largely describes Traditional Islam as something being created—a structure built from scratch to protect the state. It also hints at the need for both ideological and physical arrangements to steer believers on the right path. Actively supporting the construction and restoration of mosques in 'traditional' architectural styles with financial assistance from the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, is one manifestation of TI.[11] In particular, the 2014 opening of the Heydar Mosque—also named after the former president, as a 'monument to his vision of a unified religious community under strong state supervision' (Koch *et al*. 2018, p. 6)—has played an important role in the establishment of TI. As pointed out by Koch *et al*. (2018), it was opened at a time when the state was actively closing down other mosques. Moreover, while in the 1990s some mosques were being built or restored by different individuals with the support of governments or organisations from Iran, Turkey or the Arab countries, during the last two decades it has become increasingly difficult to get official permission for the construction of mosques in Azerbaijan.[12] Built by the state, the Heydar Mosque is subordinate not to the highest religious authority, the Caucasus Muslim Board, but to the Baku City Executive Committee.[13] Officially created to remove barriers between the Shi'a and Sunnis in Azerbaijan, it thus caters to neither of these communities exclusively. As such, it embodies two key elements of Azerbaijani TI: anti-sectarianism and intra-religious tolerance.

Another example of TI in practice is the Theology Institute of Azerbaijan, established by presidential decree in 2014 to replace the Baku State Theology Faculty. The faculty was closed down and all its assets transferred to the new institute. The Theology Institute is a public university, financed from the state budget.[14] Students can major in three fields: Islamic Studies, Religious Studies and Language Education.[15] Education is free, and the government provides student housing and stipends. Importantly, according to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief,[16] the Caucasian Muslim Board is responsible not only for mosques but for all Islamic education. Until 2018, the Board ran the single official higher Islamic education facility, the Islamic University of Baku, whose graduates were the only ones eligible to work in the mosques subordinate to

[10]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the SCWRA, Baku, 15 April 2018.

[11]A charity foundation started in honour of the former President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, currently run by Vice President Mehriban Aliyev; see its website at: https://heydar-aliyev-foundation.org/en/content/index/47/, accessed 9 April 2019.

[12]'Azerbaijan', USCIRF Annual Report 2019, available at: https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1211041/download, accessed 25 March 2019.

[13]'Heydər Məsçidi', Baku City Executive Authority 2014, available at: http://baku-ih.gov.az/page/59.html, accessed 11 February 2021.

[14]Charter of the Theology Institute of Azerbaijan, available at: https://ait.edu.az/en/about/nizamnam/, accessed 15 October 2019.

[15]Website of the Theology Institute of Azerbaijan, available at: https://ait.edu.az/en/struktur/faculty-of-theology/history-and-mission/, accessed 15 October 2019.

[16]'Dini etiqad azadlığı haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikasinin Qanunu', adopted in 2009, available at: https://www.taxes.gov.az/az/post/46, accessed 11 February 2021.

the Board. The creation of the Theology Institute of Azerbaijan, administered by the secular authorities, namely the SCWRA, shows the state's intention to establish a state-controlled version of Islam, starting with religious education. The subordination of religion to the state is another key tenet of Traditional Islam.

Finally, a Moral Values Promotion Fund was established as a channel for state funds to promote TI in various ways, such as the 'support of religious confessions, protection and development of moral values' and other 'social projects' (Baghirova 2017). So far the fund has published a number of books on topics that characterise the TI project, such as *Introduction to Multiculturalism*, a textbook for higher education institutions, *Reformation in the Islamic World*, *State Religion Relations in Azerbaijan*, *Moral Values in the Quran*, *Radicalism Born from Fake Hadiths* and *The Philosophy of Co-existence*.[17] Moreover, the fund has sponsored conferences, seminars and roundtables all over the country to introduce TI to the population.[18] The SCWRA organised these events, which were held in mosques, the offices of government agencies or in the facilities of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (*Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası*—YAP). Furthermore, the fund pays imams educated at the new institute. This payment, Ismayilov explained, is not a salary—according to the constitution, the state cannot finance religious activity[19]—but an allowance necessary to incentivise people to serve as 'a man of religion'.[20]

In sum, all of the above underlines that Traditional Islam in Azerbaijan is indeed a political project to establish an ideology that reinforces a strong connection between the state and Islamic expression in Azerbaijan. As an ideology, it is anti-fundamentalist, secular and national in character. Despite its official status, the government's TI project is legally questionable. According to Article 48 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the government does not have the right to intervene in religious affairs.[21] Nevertheless, the Azerbaijani state is clearly behind the construction of Traditional Islam, providing its ideological and practical content. In the next sections, we will shed further light on TI by discussing it from three different angles: first, TI as a broader regional post-Soviet trend; second, as a counter-radicalisation strategy; and finally, in relation to national developments. Even though presented separately, these different perspectives often intersect, overlap and mutually reinforce each other as analytical categories. Overall, the combined insights of the various sections provide a comprehensive overview of the features and functions of Traditional Islam.

[17]Website of the Moral Values Promotion Fund, available at: http://mdtf.az/neshrler/, accessed 23 January 2020.

[18]Seminar topics have included the role of the family in Azerbaijani society, multicultural Azerbaijan, youth and morality, and the role of poetry in the preservation of moral values. More information can be found on the website of the Moral Values Promotion Fund, available at: http://mdtf.az/seminar/, accessed 23 January 2020.

[19]Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995, available at: http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/897, accessed 11 February 2021.

[20]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the SCWRA, Baku, 15 April 2018.

[21]Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995, available at: http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/897, accessed 11 February 2021.

Traditional Islam from a post-Soviet perspective

According to the existing literature, 'Traditional Islam' as a phenomenon exists in all post-Soviet Muslim states: Kazakhstan (Omelicheva 2011, 2016), Kyrgyzstan (Tromble 2014), Tajikistan (Lenz-Raymann 2014), Turkmenistan (Kuru 2002) and Uzbekistan (Khalid 2003; Omelicheva 2016), as well as in Russia, which has a sizable Muslim population (Dannreuther 2010a, 2010b; Di Puppo 2019; Souleimanov *et al*. 2019; Müller 2019). As such, TI has a number of common features. First and foremost, in all cases listed above as well as in Azerbaijan, TI is defined as a political project created and promoted by state actors. TI is understood as a 'state-loyal' or 'state-approved' form of Islam, one seen as desirable by the authorities while 'non-traditional' forms of Islam (NTI) are rejected as undesirable. Another important aspect is that TI is supposedly non-political, in contrast to NTI, which are 'political'. This distinction is believed to stem from the final major perceived dichotomy: TI as 'local' and NTI as 'foreign'.

'Good' and 'bad' Islam: the religion–politics nexus

As noted by a number of authors, the TI phenomenon is largely the continuation of Soviet ideas and practices (Peyrouse 2007; Dannreuther 2010b; Di Puppo 2019; Müller 2019). The separation of religion and politics, the cornerstone of modern secular nation-states, was strictly observed in the Soviet Union and has continued as a legacy ideal in many post-Soviet state, carried over by former communist leaders. In this spirit, the new states maintained the Soviet-era separation of 'official' and 'unofficial' Islam as well as the institutions to support this; for example, the so-called Muslim Boards, formally independent organs but in practice key to keeping religious activity under state control. According to Gasimov, Soviet influence can be noted not only in terms of institutions: the rhetoric and methods used by the SCWRA to promote TI 'replicates the practices and discourses of Soviet Islam, drawing on the tried Soviet methods of anti-religious propaganda' (Gasimov 2020, p. 19).

This trend has been visible in post-Soviet Azerbaijan since the mid-1990s. When a religious community was suspected of political ambitions, they were labelled 'oppositional' and dealt with accordingly (Bedford 2009; Jödicke 2017). Much in the same way, non-traditional movements have been portrayed as an 'existential threat to national security and the national identity of Azerbaijan' and include all 'unwelcome Islamic communities, groups and organisations' (Bashirov 2018, p. 2). Somewhat surprisingly, only once during our interviews was the ideology spread by the Islamic State (ISIS) mentioned as a potential danger to Azerbaijan.[22] Instead, we gather that the label of NTI is primarily applied to the same two categories viewed with suspicion and 'securitised' since independence. First, there has long been suspicion of so-called 'Iran-inspired Shiites' who want to 'turn Azerbaijan into an Islamic state' (Bedford 2009, p. 168). Thus, references to 'Iranian influence' on religion are frequently used in domestic politics to legitimise various actions, although rarely with any concrete examples of how

[22]Interview with a head of department, Baku Engineering University, Baku, 18 April 2018.

this influence is enforced (Jödicke 2017). The second category includes certain Sunni communities, Salafis in particular, who are regularly depicted negatively in the media by experts, officials and journalists as 'terrorists', 'fundamentalists', 'long-bearded radicals' or simply 'Wahhabis', a common derogatory term in the post-Soviet space (Peyrouse 2007; Dannreuther 2010b; Gasimov 2017). 'Wahhabism will take us back to Middle Ages', one of our respondents claimed.[23] 'Radical Islamic teachings such as Salafism preach violence and intolerance. There is no place for them in Azeri society', explained Aqil Shirinov, a department head at the Caucasus Muslim Board.[24] One notable development in TI narratives is that representatives of Turkish Sunnism, particularly the Gülen (Hizmet) movement, are now included in the 'non-traditional' category, which reflects a more critical attitude to 'Turkish Islam'. This is an interesting shift from the late-1990s to the early-2000s, when Turkish religious activities were encouraged as a counterweight to 'radical Sunnism' (Yunusov 2004). We will return to this later. In sum, just as in other post-Soviet Muslim states, TI in Azerbaijan appears to build on and reinforce the 'good' and 'bad' Muslim categories from Soviet and early post-Soviet times, even creating new 'out-groups' to this end.

Protecting the 'local' from the 'foreign'

As mentioned initially, NTI movements are commonly portrayed as dangerous because they are 'foreign', but the differentiation between local and 'foreign' is not straightforward. In Azerbaijan, Sufi teaching is accepted as part of TI, according to the SCWRA, but not the revival of *tariqas*, which originated in Azerbaijan, since these largely disappeared during Soviet times and only returned with the help of 'foreign influence'. As mentioned, Turkish-origin groups such as Nurcular, Suleymancilar and other groups of Hanafi origin from Nagshibendi *tariqas* are also increasingly seen as 'non-traditional'.[25] Thus, it appears to be neither the country of origin nor religious affiliation but a movement's relationship to 'foreign' interlocutors that determines if it is 'traditional' or 'non-traditional'. This observation is supported both by the many references made by our respondents to NTI being 'controlled from abroad' or 'by foreign powers' as well as by previous literature pointing to similar ambiguity, particularly in the case of Russia (Souleimanov *et al*. 2019, p. 96). Dannreuther (2010a), for example, notes that in Russia there are in fact multiple 'traditional Islams' and vast religio-theological differences between the Hanafi *madhhab* (jurisprudence school), dominant in the Volga-Urals region, and the Shafi'i *madhhab*, prevalent in the North Caucasus. In the light of this, Di Puppo (2019) has also documented an increasing disparity among religious leaders and practitioners in Tatarstan about what should be considered religious orthodoxy and its connection to 'Traditional Islam'.

In the context of Central Asia, Peyrouse (2007, p. 252) elaborates on the ambiguity of what he calls the post-Soviet 'retraditionalisation' project: 'The old link between

[23]Interview with faculty member, Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, Baku, 25 April 2018.

[24]Interview with Aqil Shirinov, Head of Department, Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute, Baku, 20 April 2018.

[25]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the SCWRA, Baku, 15 April 2018.

collective identity and Islam is ideologically reinvested inside the new state structures; this reformulation is in no way a "return" to an ancient situation but is a modern re-appropriation of a religious phenomenon that has lost its transcendence'. His quote highlights that not only 'foreign' but 'local' has a specific meaning in the context of TI. This relates to another Soviet legacy: a 'state-loyal, secularised form of Islam, or "ethnic Islam"' (Di Puppo 2019, p. 312) developed as a result of the Soviet nationalities policy. Although religiosity was discouraged and, from time to time, severely repressed, some religious traditions and practices were allowed to continue as part of national and cultural heritage. Thus, being Muslim was not about being religious but about being, for example, Azerbaijani, Uzbek or Kyrgyz. In addition, the persecution of religious leaders and the lack of quality religious education and institutions led to a limited knowledge about Islam among the populations that instead mainly embraced a cultural understanding of it, blurred with home-grown, pagan and other traditions. Therefore, the Traditional Islam currently promoted by these states is blended with local customs (Omelicheva 2011), such as respect for various religious holidays, the *turbes* (tombs) of *owliyas* (saints) and family values (Kuru 2002), and is sometimes even linked to certain totemic and shamanistic beliefs (Tromble 2014).

In Azerbaijan, TI similarly includes a mix of religious and national traditions. To this end, the TI narrative is intertwined with the official discourse of 'Azerbaijanism' as a state ideology and builds largely on the speeches and sayings of former President Heydar Aliyev on national traditions, religion and values in general and about Islam being an essential element of Azerbaijani identity in particular (Gasimov 2020). Recent research confirms that many Azerbaijanis link religiousness and national identity (Siroky & Mahmudlu 2016), as did many of our respondents. In the words of a respondent based at Baku Engineering University:

> Islam is everywhere in the person's life, but living the religion is up to the person himself … for some people it's only there when they are in the graveyard. For others it's everywhere. Here [in Azerbaijan], as I said, national traditions and Islamic traditions have been matched to each other and have been mixed for years.[26]

Here the important political and religious legacy of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) (1918–1920) deserves a mention. ADR was built on a strong secular narrative, with Islam as only a cultural component of national identity. Soviet anti-religious and nationality policies reinforced this narrative, establishing religion (especially Islam) as backwards, standing in the way of modernity, and ensured that Islam was present in people's life primarily as a form of national culture and tradition (Bedford 2017). Some respondents saw non-traditional movements as a threat not only to state security but to a secular Azerbaijani national identity. For instance, Aqil Shirinov, Head of Department of the Caucasus Muslim Board, provided the example of the *Novruz* holiday, which has an important place in traditional Azerbaijani culture and has become an integral part of Azerbaijani Islam.[27] Azerbaijani Salafis, to the contrary, reject the

[26]Interview with a head of department, Baku Engineering University, Baku, 18 April 2018.

[27]Interview with Aqil Shirinov, Head of Department, Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute, Baku, 20 April 2018.

celebration of *Novruz*, which they perceive as an element of Zoroastrianism. They even criticise the cooking of traditional *Novruz* food and pastries such *shekerbura*, *bakhlava* and *gogal*, which for most Azerbaijanis are the main symbols of the holiday.[28] Shirinov saw this development as worrying and explained why the attitude of Salafis, in his view, challenged Azerbaijan's identity policy:

> Imagine if this type of religiosity increase, there will be ghettos everywhere. People will not share the same values—then this is not a society, like in Lebanon. In this sense I see Salafis as a threat. Maybe they are not against the state, they don't intend armed conflict, but they are still a danger to national identity.[29]

According to Gunduz Ismayilov: 'Traditional Islam ensures when the nation becomes more religious it doesn't lose its national identity. It stays Azerbaijani'.[30]

In sum, in the post-Soviet context, 'tradition' is a state construction. Müller (2019, p. 401) explains: '"Tradition" is not something essential that exists in the world as such, but something that is produced consciously or unconsciously, a social, political or discursive practice that defines and renders such things as norms, values, belief systems and material culture as "traditional"'. In the post-Soviet space, this construction of tradition is used by the regimes to delegitimise different Islamic currents promoted from outside; in turn, the state must establish its own religious norms to counter radical ideologies. In the next section, we suggest that the phenomenon of Traditional Islam can be understood not only in the light of Soviet path dependency but also as a means—through the creation of an alternative narrative based on the idea of a unique national version of Islam—to counteract foreign radical Islamic ideologies, a strategy that resembles counter-radicalisation actions in other countries.

Traditional Islam as counter-radicalisation

A large part of studies on radicalisation has focused on the perceived threat from home-grown Islamist terrorism and violent extremism in Western Europe and the United States (Precht 2007; Lindekilde 2012; Vidino & Brandon 2012). Research addressed, for example, why young Muslims socialised in the West join militant Islamist groups (Della Porta & LaFree 2012) or the reasons behind the participation of so-called foreign fighters from European Muslim communities in the Syria war or other conflicts (Hegghammer 2010; van Ginkel & Entenmann 2016). The most prevalent view on Muslim radicalisation, and the most relevant for the study at hand, links it to religious-ideological motives. Many radicalised Muslims give religion as a reason, or even a moral obligation, to take up arms (Juergensmeyer 2005; Payne 2009; Kühle & Lindekilde 2010). As a result, many counter-radicalisation programmes consider certain religious ideologies as

[28]'Novruz bayramının tarixi və qeyd etmənin hökmü', *Fəqih*, 16 March 2016, available at: http://www.feqih.com/novruz-bayraminin-tarixi-ve-qeyd-etmenin-hokmu/, accessed 11 February 2021.

[29]Interview with Aqil Shirinov, Head of Department, Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute, Baku, 20 April 2018.

[30]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the SCWRA, Baku, 15 April 2018.

major drivers of radicalisation. Strategies to counter this radicalisation are based largely on the assumption that radicalisation can be avoided through preventing 'young people from entering the radicalisation process in the first place' (Precht 2007, p. 85). Although increased security and surveillance measures have been part of many programmes put in place to ensure this, the 'hearts and minds' approach has been the most prevalent (O'Toole *et al*. 2012), 'providing alternatives and incentives and shaping individual choices in a preferred direction, rather than by restrictions, bans and hard interventions' (Lindekilde 2012, p. 338). This has included efforts at the community level, establishing 'partnerships between Muslim community organisations, police forces and local authorities to mount an ideological challenge to radicalism and to identify individuals thought to be on a radicalising path' (Kundnani 2012, p. 20).

Unlike most other cases in counter-radicalisation literature, the Azerbaijani Traditional Islam project is not an official counter-radicalisation strategy. In fact, formally, Azerbaijan does not pursue any 'hearts and minds' strategy but relies only on hard power to fight violent extremism and radicalisation under the law 'On the Fight against Terrorism'.[31] Nonetheless, there seems to be a clear overlap between the ideas shaping TI and counter-radicalisation initiatives worldwide. Thus, we will discuss two notions that we propose as particularly helpful in shedding light on the functions of TI in the Azerbaijani case: Traditional Islam as an 'anti-virus program' and a counter-narrative against radical religious ideologies.

Traditional Islam as an 'anti-virus programme'

As explained by Kundnani (2012, p. 21) 'radical religious ideology has been conceived as a kind of virus infecting those with whom it comes into contact, either by itself or in combination with psychological processes'. Exposure to alternative narratives, in the shape of moderate or mainstream interpretations of Islam is, therefore, a main feature of many counter-radicalisation programmes as an antidote, or anti-virus—a way to make the population more resilient against radical interpretations of Islam (Vidino 2010; Vidino & Brandon 2012). In many European countries, counter-radicalisation initiatives have targeted specific immigrant communities, on the assumption that their lack of social and economic integration into society makes them more vulnerable to radical agendas (Silber & Bhatt 2007; Brown & Saeed 2015). In the case of Azerbaijan, this perceived vulnerability is attributable to the whole state and its population. Lacking strong religious traditions, the country has long been portrayed by academics, analysts and journalists as particularly susceptible to potentially radical foreign religious influences (Cornell 2006; Wilhelmsen 2009; Nedea *et al*. 2012). This perception resonates in our interviews as well and, to this end, the spread of Traditional Islam among the population is seen as a way to protect the country from other religious ideologies, which could potentially be

[31]'Terrorizmə Qarşı Mübarizə Haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu', adopted in 1999, available at: http://www.e-qanun.az/alpidata/framework/data/3/f_3855.htm, accessed 11 February 2021; 'The Roots of Violent Extremism and Radicalization in Azerbaijan and Georgia', Georgian Centre for Security and Development (Tbilisi, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018).

destabilising if they are becoming too strong.[32] Most of our respondents agreed that religion and religious people at large were not a threat in Azerbaijan; at the same time, as mentioned earlier, they concurred on the danger of believers being under the 'influence of foreign powers', as this could potentially threaten the secular nature of the state.

Post-independence Azerbaijan has been described as one of the most secular post-Soviet countries. As pointed out by the late President Heydar Aliyev, 'it is important to note that neither is Azerbaijan an Islamic state nor is Islam a state ideology of it. Islam is not the ideology of the government of Azerbaijan: Church and state are separated' (quoted in Sattarov 2009, p. 128). Promoting Traditional Islam is seen as a way to protect this heritage through establishing an ideology where religion coexists with the state rather than controlling it. Also, according to the SCWRA's Ismayilov, Traditional Islam accepts that the leaders of Azerbaijan, as well as many in the population at large, are proud of belonging to a secular yet 'Muslim' country. In this regard Azerbaijan's neighbour, the Islamic Republic of Iran, is often pointed out as representing precisely the dangerous influence from which Azerbaijan needs to be shielded. As explained by Gunduz Ismayilov, as the leaders in Iran believe that politics is impossible without religion, 'we [Azerbaijan] have to create our own antivirus programme'.[33] However, TI can only work effectively as a shield if its ideology is sufficiently anchored among the believers at risk of being exposed to 'foreign influences', that is, radical Islamic ideas. For this purpose, another important aspect of the TI phenomenon is its function as an alternative, or a counter-narrative to those propagated by 'foreign influences'.

Traditional Islam a counter-narrative

Throughout the post-independence years, more and more Azerbaijanis are self-identifying as religious.[34] As discussed above, most respondents saw the need for the state to control the process of increasing religiosity. Interestingly, many of them echoed what Aistrope (2016) refers to as an anti-Muslim narrative, arguing that the fact that Azerbaijanis are predominantly Muslim increases the risk of religion being politicised. 'In the case of Christianity religion does not intervene in everything, but in Islam it does', said one interviewee,[35] while another noted that 'We are not the US, not Europe. There Christians do not have a claim to power, but Muslims do'.[36]

One interviewee expressed fear that the Azerbaijani Muslim population is vulnerable and could be co-opted by religious radical groups with various interests. 'Every person has a weak side, for some it is women, for others it is money, or fame. I see that a lot of people went toward these religious movements without knowing what it really is about, because of illiteracy', he explained.[37] According to a head of department at the Azerbaijan Tourism and

[32]Interview with a professor, National Academy of Sciences, Baku, 10 April 2018.
[33]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the SCWRA, Baku, 15 April 2018.
[34]For example, according to the Caucasus Research Resource Centre's surveys discussed in Liles (2012).
[35]Interview with a professor, National Academy of Sciences, Baku, 10 April 2018.
[36]Interview with Aqil Shirinov, Head of Department, Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute, Baku, 20 April 2018.
[37]Interview with a head of department, Baku Engineering University, Baku, 18 April 2018.

Management University, Baku, 'In the USSR the Soviets regulated everything … now it's up to us to protect our independence, our ideology, the stability, even our alphabet. We also have to protect the people's thoughts'.[38] To this end, the approach of TI differs from counter-radicalisation programmes in other countries as it does not simply target those seen as susceptible to radicalisation.[39] Rather, the state's concern, in deploying TI, is that, as Azerbaijani believers become more knowledgeable about religion, the state's ability to control religion and ensure its compatibility with the values of the Azerbaijani state is undermined. As discussed above, exposure to alternative narratives is seen as a key feature of any counter-radicalisation programme; TI is not only about controlling religion but ensuring the dominance of a narrative in which religion is subordinate to the state and embodies its values.

The creation of the Theology Institute of Azerbaijan in 2018 was an important milestone in the TI project. From the interviews, it was clear that controlling the education process—especially having local instructors—was seen as the key to establishing this counter-narrative. However, religious education in itself is not the main point; the aim is to groom messengers to propagate Traditional Islam—'Azerbaijani patriots'[40] who understand and support the state's concerns.[41] In the words of Gunduz Ismayilov:

> It is a state institution, and the cadres will be prepared by the state for the state. After graduating they will be appointed, and they will be paid and change their place of work on a rotating basis. … However, we do not see this as religious education for its own sake; it is also in the state's interests. It will also be to promote the values of 'Traditional' Islam. … So our first task is to prepare educated religious cadres for the society, who will spread Islam appropriately wherever they are sent to work. These youths' understanding of tolerance, secularism, as well as religion, will be different.[42]

The above describes the Azerbaijani state's ambition to establish ownership of Islamic expression by institutionalisation. This is not an uncommon counter-radicalisation strategy. In some Muslim-majority states, authorities have introduced their own version of 'official' Islam to counter radical ideologies (Vidino 2010). Western governments have provided financial and educational state support to individuals and groups who are seen as 'moderate' and able to present a theological challenge to radical ideology to help these voices reach a wider audience and thereby counterbalance more hard-line influences (Vidino & Brandon 2012). Rascoff's (2012, p. 130) account of such efforts in the United States and the United Kingdom bears significant resemblance to the Azerbaijani context as he describes the establishment of an 'Official Islam': 'a government-sponsored account of "mainstream Islam" offered by the state in place of radical doctrinal alternatives'. Still, it would appear that the Azerbaijani case is different. In this context, the idea of a perceived collective loyalty through the merging of individual and state values is not uniquely related to the field of religion. Rather, it is characteristic of authoritarian regimes in general, and

[38]Interview with a head of department, Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University, Baku, 13 April 2018.
[39]Website of the Moral Values Protection Fund, available at: http://mdtf.az/neshrler, accessed 24 January 2020.
[40]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the SCWRA, Baku, 15 April 2018.
[41]Interview with Fuad Nurullayev, Deputy Head, Caucasus Muslim Board, Baku, 28 April 2018.
[42]Interview with Gunduz Ismayilov, Deputy Head of the SCWRA, Baku, 15 April 2018.

how these handle threats in particular. We will return to this in the next section, which discusses some final features of Traditional Islam, reflecting how it has developed as result of the specific Azerbaijani context.

Traditional Islam in the Azerbaijani context

Since independence, Azerbaijani authorities have been endorsing a narrative about a special Azerbaijani style of Islam that is non-political and non-radical and features a unique peaceful coexistence between the country's Shi'a majority and Sunni minority, created through centuries of cohabitation. Only recently, however, did this narrative turn into a political project. We propose two possible explanations as to why this happened. The first is related to changes in Turkey's political landscape. From Azerbaijan's independence up until recently, the secular Turkish republic was the state's role model and 'Turkish Islam' the preferred religion of the authorities (Bedford 2016). While variants of Islam from the North Caucasus, Iran and Saudi Arabia were portrayed as dangerous, the work of Turkish Islamic groups was consistently seen as less threatening and, as such, faced fewer restrictions. These movements were not only generally accepted but also, at least in the case of the Gülen movement, distinctively successful. However, it appears the political conflict that surfaced in Turkey in December 2013 between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and religious leader Fethullah Gülen resonated in Azerbaijan, as the government moved to suppress this movement's activities. Most visibly, all the movement's educational activities were either discontinued or taken over by the state. Although official sources attributed this result to financial and management issues, it is generally assumed to be linked to internal Turkish politics, possibly even the result of a direct request from the Turkish authorities (Bedford 2016). Moreover, as the Erdoğan regime tries to break with Atatürk's secular heritage, by relying on the instrumentalisation of Islam to stay in power, the Turkish model seems to be losing its attraction for the Azerbaijani authorities. Thus, they see the need to further develop and institutionalise an own model for the relationship between state and religion in the shape of 'Traditional Islam'. Second, the development of TI goes hand-in-hand with a larger state undertaking, namely promoting the country internationally as a showcase of peaceful multi-religious and cultural coexistence.

Azerbaijan as a centre of tolerance and multiculturalism

The ambitious international campaign offering Azerbaijan as a model of tolerance and multiculturalism is best described as 'nation branding' (Krebs 2016; Ismayilov 2018). The position of State Counsellor on Multiculturalism, Inter-ethnic and Religious Affairs and the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre were officially created to support the 'recognition of Azerbaijan in the world as the centre of multiculturalism'.[43] In the words of Krebs, this was done in order to:

[43]Official information about the Azerbaijani Multiculturalism Project on the website of the President of the Republic of the Azerbaijan Presidential Library, available at: http://multiculturalism.preslib.az/en_a1.html, accessed 24 January 2012. Another interesting fact is that classes on the 'Multiculturalism of Azerbaijan' have been exported to a number of universities worldwide ('Azərbaycan "Multikulturalizmi" xaricdə fəal şəkildə öyrənilirç', *Interfax Azerbaijan*, 22 January 2016, available at: http://interfax.az/view/663009/az, accessed 11 February 2021).

> brand Azerbaijan as a modern and well-off country with a multicultural history and a hospitable and tolerant population in order to attract tourists and foreign investors, as well as create an international environment of sympathy for a country that lost parts of its territory to neighbouring Armenia after the war over Karabakh in 1994. (Krebs 2016, p. 111)

The multiculturalism concept builds on the idea of Azerbaijan and its inhabitants as located at a unique crossroads, not only between different continents but also between empires, civilisations, religions, ethnic groups and languages. Thus, in a world shaken by religious radicalism, terrorism and a crisis of multiculturalism (Abbasov 2015), Azerbaijan is portrayed as a unique example of different Muslim sects as well as religious groups—Muslims, Jews and Orthodox Christians—living together peacefully. As noted by President Ilham Aliyev during the announcement of 2016 as the 'Year of Multiculturalism': 'In Azerbaijan multiculturalism is both a state policy and a lifestyle'.[44] The idea of tolerance between Sunnis and Shi'as as something unique in the Azerbaijani context is one of the cornerstones of both Traditional Islam and the multiculturalism project, as illustrated by the words of Fuad Nurullayev, Deputy Head of the Caucasus Muslim Board:

> In Germany, I was asked whether there is tension between Sunnis and Shi'as in Azerbaijan. I responded that I am a cleric belonging to the Shi'a sect, but my wife is Sunni. This wasn't a hindrance for us to get married. So, from this perspective you can assess whether we have tension between the sects or not. We have created an Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism for the world. In the case of the religious tensions and wars all around world,[45] in Azerbaijan there is peace and stability.[46]

According to most estimates, around 65% of Azerbaijani Muslims are Shi'a and 35% Sunni (Yunusov 2004).[47] From the time of the Russian Empire, differences between the two branches of Islam were blurred and a special kind of relationship developed. As pointed out by Goyushov and Askerov 'many Sunnis shared Shi[a] traditions and made pilgrimages to the holy places of the Shi[as]. Some of the Azerbaijani Sunnis proudly bear Shi[a] titles as *mashhadi* and *karbala"*(Goyushov & Askerov 2010, p. 195). A notion of peaceful Sunni–Shi'a co-existence was first established by Azerbaijani intellectuals in the Russian Empire, then reinforced as a result of Soviet religious policies and, finally, inherited by the leaders of independent Azerbaijan. Certainly, the situation is becoming more complex as Muslims in Azerbaijan are becoming more aware of their

[44]Quoted on the Azerbaijani Multiculturalism Project's homepage, available at: http://multiculturalism.preslib.az/en_testimonials-ie.htm, accessed 25 March 2019.

[45]He does not clarify in the interview which specific tensions and wars he is referring to. From the context, these references seem to be focusing on Sunni–Shi'a sectarian conflicts including those which erupted in Iraq and Syria. The notion of Azerbaijan as a node of peace and stability in a world full of conflict is at the heart of the multiculturalism narrative, see for example: 'Azerbaijan is a Model of Coexistence for the World', President of the Republic of the Azerbaijan Presidential Library, 13 October 2015, available at: https://multiculturalism.preslib.az/en_others-Q3ijUwrtB8.html, accessed 10 March 2021.

[46]Interview with Fuad Nurullayev, Deputy Head, Caucasus Muslim Board, Baku, 28 April 2018.

[47]In our interviews with SCWRA representatives, they stated that they accepted the 65–35 division as they did not have more up-to-date statistics.

religious identity (Bedford 2009; Balci & Rovshenoglu 2013; Mamedov 2017). When a Salafi believer was attacked and forcibly shaved by a mob in the southern part of Azerbaijan, where a majority are traditionally Shiites, this, for example, raised fears of further future escalation of sectarian violence (Mirzayev 2014). With this in mind, many of our respondents feared that greater influence from 'foreign forces' on the religious scene in Azerbaijan could lead to a sectarian split alien to the Azerbaijani context. To quote Shirinov again: 'Historically we did not have any divisions like this [Sunni–Shi'a], not even in the Tsarist period. These people are not against each other to begin with, but imagine these groups all radicalising—what would happen? Could they live together? No'.[48]

Traditional Islam is supposed to embody and reinforce a national, non-sectarian Azerbaijani Islam, with the aim of preventing distinct and potentially radical identities from developing. One important manifestation of this aim is the 'Unity Prayers', led together by representatives of Shi'a and Sunni communities. On the occasion of the first Unity Prayer, Shahin Hasanli, a representative of the Caucasus Muslim Board, said: 'On this prayer call, the Prayer for Unity, for the first time in the world, all Muslims, no matter which branch of Islam they claim to belong to, gathered together at one time, in one place, making prayers to God'.[49] Moreover, the fact that the initial 'Unity Prayer', held in the Heydar Mosque, coincided with the announcement of 2016 as the 'Year of Multiculturalism', underlines the symbiosis between TI and the international multiculturalism campaign.

In essence, Traditional Islam is a secular phenomenon, constructed by secular elites to fit the specific Azerbaijani religious and political context. This is potentially problematic, notes Rascoff (2012), as in undertaking this type of 'proselytisation counter-radicalisation', a government assumes the role of 'a kind of official theologian', for which it lacks the capacity, expertise and, importantly, credibility. In his study, Müller (2019) describes how young migrant Central Asian Muslims in Russia are highly critical of Russia's version of Traditional Islam precisely because of its theological weakness, but 'play along' with it because they benefit from it as students at an Islamic university established as part of the TI project. So far, we know little about how TI is received in the Muslim communities in Azerbaijan that are labelled 'non-traditional'. However, the one respondent in our sample who could be seen as representing this category was indeed very critical of the content and the motives of TI. In his words, 'tolerance' and 'other similar ideas' had no foundation in the Quran and were 'simply nonsense'. Moreover, he objected to the definition of Salafism as 'non-traditional' and the Salafi community as 'radical' as they, in his opinion, were in fact the only Muslims in Azerbaijan promoting 'true Islam'.[50] Although we do not know if such criticisms are widespread, his comments highlight the fact that the 'non-sectarian' aspect of TI is likely to render it controversial among believers strongly identifying as either Sunni or Shi'a.

[48]Interview with Aqil Shirinov, Head of Department, Caucasus Muslim Board and faculty at Ilahiyyat Institute, Baku, 20 April 2018.

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

[50]Interview with a former imam, Baku, 30 April 2018.

Strengthening the state and protecting the regime

An important aspect emphasised in the counter-radicalisation literature is the perception that a vulnerable population needs to be ideologically enlightened, otherwise it is at risk of becoming radicalised. Education and raising awareness among potential target groups are the main features of such initiatives both universally and in the Traditional Islam project. One major difference is that the end goal of initiatives in other countries is to counter radicalism by encouraging social and political inclusion and participation, thus heading off minority grievances (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Schack 2016). In the Azerbaijani efforts, there is no such notion. Rather, the preferred outcome of TI is the strengthening of the state. Most notably, not only is the counter-radicalisation process in Azerbaijan instigated by the state, but the state is the sole actor. While in other post-Soviet contexts, religious and secular authorities run the TI project jointly, in Azerbaijan religious officials are increasingly sidestepped as the state takes on more responsibility for religious education and expression, which a majority of our interviewees believed was appropriate. State responsibility and control are central to TI. Almost all respondents argued that extensive state control of religious development was necessary to prevent foreign radicalism from spreading to Azerbaijan. 'The State is in control of everything, therefore it has responsibilities. Representatives of various streams [of Islam] try to influence the believers here. If they succeed, this could cause chaos. The primary goal of the state is to prevent these dangers, to establish norms that will counteract this', one interviewee explained.[51]

Still, the question is, what is really at risk? Overall, foreign radical influence in Azerbaijan seems to be assumed rather than real (Bedford 2009). In reality, there are few indications of violent Islamic radicalisation in Azerbaijan (Lonardo 2016). In recent times, there is really just one example, namely the 2008 explosion in Abu Bakr Mosque in Baku. A grenade thrown in during prayer time killed two worshippers and wounded a dozen, including the imam. The attack is believed to have been carried out by the *jihadi* group 'Forest Brothers', as part of an ideological disagreement between two Salafi currents (Gasimov 2017). According to one respondent, the state had no preference either way for Shi's or Sunni Islam. Its aim was to 'get religion out of the game' by weakening Islam in order to control it; the 'brand' of Islam was immaterial.[52] One rare critical voice among our interviewees suggested that the state's ambition to control Islam was actually about controlling the population and thus protecting the regime, rather than reflecting any concern with national security. Islamic groups were a threat, he said, 'not against state security first and foremost, but against the security of the government'.[53] Previous research supports this suspicion: the authoritarian Azerbaijani state tends to view any independent group as 'oppositional' and thus a threat to be controlled and marginalised (Bedford 2014). Furthermore, in mainstream counter-radicalisation research, a tension is often detected between counter-radicalisation (both as idea and policy) and the liberal

[51]Interview with a head of department, Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University, Baku, 13 April 2018.
[52]Interview with a former Imam, Baku, 30 April 2018.
[53]Interview with the founder of a private think-tank, Baku, 5 April 2018.

democratic credo of freedom of thought and speech (Lindekilde 2012). As for Azerbaijan there is abundant research illustrating the clash between state policies and freedom of religion (Bedford 2009; Gasimov 2017; Ter-Matevosyan & Minasyan 2017; Bashirov 2018). It could be argued that, by labelling a religious organisation 'traditional' or 'non-traditional', the government is not pursuing counter radicalisation, but is aiming to preserve an acceptable *status quo* in the religious market, one that does not challenge its interests. Nonetheless, given the authoritarian regime's monopolistic control over civic and political activities, Traditional Islam could potentially work as 'an anti-virus program' against radical Islamic ideas for the majority who accept the political and religious *status quo*. At the same time, it is likely to alienate those who do not consider it possible for Islamic belief and practice to have national features, and therefore disapprove of the government's idea of Traditional Islam. There is a risk that, by questioning the state's ideological hegemony, they might be perceived as threatening the Azerbaijani national identity and even the security of the secular state.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to contribute to a better understanding of 'Traditional Islam', an ambitious state-led project in Azerbaijan to 'nationalise' Islam. It did so by conducting an analysis of this phenomenon, considering its features and function from a regional, global and national perspective. Primarily TI is about creating and promoting what is described as a unique national version of Islam. However, based on our research, both in practice and in the discourses of the religious and secular elites we have interviewed, there is little unique about it. Instead, its development is analogous to political initiatives all over the post-Soviet region. On this level of analysis, we can answer our first research question: what is 'Traditional Islam'? In all post-Soviet Muslim countries, Russia included, secular authorities have instigated a political project to construct a religious ideology deemed suitable for the local context. To this end TI has two main features, both Soviet legacies. First, it embodies the notion of religion not as a theological expression but as a part of a person's national identity, which in practice means the embrace of a mishmash of religious and non-religious local traditions and customs. In Azerbaijan, for example, TI is non-sectarian, in tribute to the historically peaceful coexistence between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. In principle this allows the state to effectively invent 'tradition'. Second, as a result of this invention, TI is a form of Islam that does not question state policies or the regime. Its ideology and expression are controlled and thus endorsed by the state. All other forms of Islam—the activities of non-traditional movements—are seen as 'bad' and potentially dangerous.

The next, global, level of analysis sheds light on our second research question: the function of Traditional Islam in the Azerbaijani context. Through the lens of literature on counter-radicalisation initiatives in other countries, we conclude that TI establishes an alternative narrative focusing on a local version of Islam that is anti-fundamentalist, non-political, non-sectarian and national in its character. If embraced by believers, it is expected to function as a 'shield' or an anti-virus programme to prevent foreign radical Islamic ideologies (and non-traditional Islamic movements) to gain ground. For this to happen, an important function of the project in its current stage is to educate imams and thereby create reliable messengers to ensure the future spread of TI among believers.

Finally, a look at the specific Azerbaijani context provides an additional answer to the question of what TI actually is: part of a 'nation-branding' campaign to present Azerbaijan as a role model of tolerance and multiculturalism to the world. Moreover, this level of analysis suggests yet another function of TI: the consolidation of authoritarianism. By a more explicit, albeit not legally formalised, ownership of religious expression, the Azerbaijani state ensures the right to continue controlling who says what, where and when. This further marginalises any group or individual challenging its interests and makes the state even stronger, securing the continuation of the authoritarian regime.

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