

# Islam as a Political Project in Post-Independent Azerbaijan

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# ISLAM AS A POLITICAL PROJECT IN POST-INDEPENDENT AZERBAIJAN

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**Abstract.** The development of Islam in Azerbaijan is a dynamic process shaped by both historical and contemporary events. The policy of state atheism during the Soviet period contributed by strengthening the role of religion. The article aims to highlight the role of Islam and its affirmation as a viable political project and as a resonator of everything happening in Azerbaijan. Alongside the historical approach an anthropological one has been applied – open to more qualitative studies and sensitive to internal differences, especially towards details usually treated as insignificant, but important for the overall analysis of religion. The ending summarizes how the perception of Islam is transformed not only as social phenomenon, but also as a factor of political change.

*Keywords:* Islam, Azerbaijan, re-sacralization, policy, social dynamics

## 1. Introduction

The development of Islam in Caucasus, in particular in Azerbaijan, is a dynamic process that takes shape under the influence of both historical and contemporary events. A long-term dominance of Shiism can be deduced as a basic trend, in contrast to most countries of Central Asia, where Sunnism is widely represented. Shiism constantly competes with it and the various Salafi groups and movements (activated as a result of Russian influence in the country), which play an important role in forming power structures of a new type. In recent years, Sunnism (Turkish Sunni Islam), which started attracting both young people and more followers in general, has gradually gained the upper hand in this internal competition.

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The policy of state atheism during the Soviet period of rule contributed to strengthening the role of religion. The political liberalization resulting from the formation of an independent state led to a revival of the sense of religious belongingness. Religious identity represents one of the components of national affirmation. The return of religion in social practice and public life does not necessarily result in rejection of secularism, society and individuals (Peyrouse 2004, 74).

Religious identity serves as one of the essential components of national affirmation – necessary to legitimize power. The government uses the non-radical, apolitical model as “soft power” and promotes dialogue between religions. At the same time, it fully controls religious institutions and activities, in order to prevent unwanted risks and influences. The established Council of Religious Affairs controls all denominations and emerges as the sole authority representing Islam, despite the absence of a centralized institution within Islam itself. It must stop the more modern and universalist, but at the same time more fundamentalist, Islam penetrating from the Arab world. Locally, moderate, national, traditional Islam is favored as a counterbalance to global fundamentalist movements. Part of this direction is the promotion of the cult of saints and support for Sufi practices, treated as a moderate version of Islam, in harmony with national traditions.

In contemporary public discourse, Islamic pluralism is represented as an opposition between “traditional” and “fundamentalist” groups, with “traditional” being associated with following local cultural traditions that preserved the traditional social system. “Fundamentalist” is seen as synonymous with “Wahhabi” and is associated with those Muslims who reject the religious and social status quo.

In Azerbaijan, there are no Islamist movements similar to IMU (Islamist Movement of Uzbekistan) and Hizb al-Tahrir (with the most opportunities for Islamization of society)<sup>2</sup> or PIR, in Tajikistan<sup>3</sup>. The ideal of a caliphate and a united Muslim nation is not on the agenda.

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<sup>2</sup> It is made up mostly of Uzbeks and targets the middle social classes, which are the basis of Islamism.

<sup>3</sup> Organized around acts of violence, including two attempted invasions of Kyrgyzstan in the summers of 1999 and 2000. Their strength lies in a specifically regional context. See Olcott & Babajanov 2003, 31-40.

Most members of Islamist movements are motivated by local conditions and act more pragmatically rather than theologically. In general, they are not broadly well-known in the respective areas. Therefore, applying such a dichotomy to Azerbaijan does not work.

The existing religious pluralism approaches that of classical Islam in the past and includes local religious minorities, also extremely heterogeneous – strongly religious Shia communities (embracing a conservative, liberal, or reformist discourse), and strongly religious Sunnis, who subsequently differentiate themselves as Sufis, Turks, or those inspired by the Salafi interpretation of Islam in Arab countries.

The influence of atheism and the secular project of modernization, combined with the unstable geographical area in which the country is located, reinforce the process of desacralization of the political space.

The perception of Islam as a threat and a political challenge (from an individual marker of identity to be transformed into a social phenomenon and a factor of political change) conditions the authorities strong commitment to it, as well as its attempts to prevent external religious influences (religious education abroad, foreign emissaries to teach in madrasahs, religious proselytism).

## **2. Argument on the political insights of the public discourse on Islam**

Along with pragmatic measures to stop Islam from entering public discourse (banning the use of loudspeakers for the call to prayer, wearing the hijab in school, closing mosques with large numbers of visitors), Azerbaijan's political establishment has demonstrated "symbolic violence"<sup>4</sup> regarding Islam.

Five interrelated discursive lines can be traced, according to Ismayilov:

1. Maintaining a narrative linking the rise of the religious with the rise of Islamic "extremism" as a threat to the country's security and stability, especially if religious practice leads to increased public activism by religious groups or individuals (Islam is transformed from an individual marker of identity into a social phenomenon);

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<sup>4</sup> The term "symbolic violence" was introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to denote processes in which "order and social constraint are produced by indirect, cultural mechanisms rather than by direct, coercive social control" (Jenkins 2002, 104).

2. A clear formed contrast between the Islamic fundamentalism of neighboring Iran, (a growing trend of insecurity and destruction globally) and the entirely secular nature of the Azerbaijani state, with its stability and security;
3. Associating growing religiosity with poverty, illiteracy, backwardness will automatically generate exclusion (marginalization);
4. Attribution of foreign religious influence (direct sponsorship by foreign agents, especially those from Iran) to local social activism, claiming that Islam is being used to radicalize Azerbaijan's domestic politics;
5. Highlighting secular nationalism and multiculturalism as an alternative ideological vision around which to mobilize society<sup>5</sup> (Ismayilov 2018, 342).

The government pursues two complementary goals:

1. To position itself in the eyes of the West and the local population, as the only power that can and is willing to contain the growing political influence of Islam in the country, in order to preserve its secular character, *xapakmer*<sup>6</sup>. Such an effort demonstrates the elite's commitment to Islam, laying the groundwork for the endogenization of Islamic discourse.
2. At the local level, the goal is to discredit any other influence that could potentially mobilize the population. A kind of prevention against the growing influence of the opposition (often accused of contacts with Islamist networks as well as Iran's special services), which in turn reinforces the West's belief in the presence of repressed minorities.

The rise of the Movement for Muslim Unity under the leadership of the charismatic Shiite cleric Taleh Baghirzadeh and his reconciliation with some secular opposition forces (especially those who are part of the opposition bloc of the National Council) caused a dramatic change<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Corley & Kinahan 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Such an effort became a feature of the elite's commitment to Islam – the regime became increasingly authoritarian, and its governance model began to attract increasing criticism from the West.

<sup>7</sup> See I. Abbasov, "Azeri Muslims Protest Theologian's Arrest", April 9, 2013, [goo. gl/4zjV6v](http://goo.gl/4zjV6v); "Who is Taleh Baghirzade?" *Azadliq Radiosu*, April 3, 2015, [goo.gl/g8fdVZ](http://goo.gl/g8fdVZ); E. Mamedov,

The Muslim Unity Movement can serve to politicize certain segments of the apolitical Shia and Sunni groups, so that even those who do not support Taleh Baghirzadeh's anti-government cause do so (it is about representatives from across the religious spectrum who do not support political Islam as a future project for the development of the country). This emerging dynamic could be the 'soft power' helping to bridge the Shia-Sunni divide and find expression in a government strategy to increase the number of mosques attended by both Sunnis and Shias.

At the macro level, the secular society in the country, together with the opposition, seeks to maintain ties with various religious groups, the reasons for this being different: fear of losing financial and political support from the West, against the background of the ongoing ideological divergence<sup>8</sup>.

In 2013-2014 the disappointment with the West's ability to promote democratic changes in Azerbaijan is gradually increasing. The secular opposition ever more relied on domestic forces for support<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, religious groups began to distance themselves from overtly aggressive criticism of the West (without abandoning an anti-Western attitude as such) and embraced the idea of a universal struggle against imposed authoritarianism, focusing more on establishing a democratic state with leaders elected by the people, and not with the establishment of an Islamic Republic<sup>10</sup>. Bagirzadeh admits that the Azeri society is not ready

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"Whither Azerbaijan's Islamists?" *EurasiaNet*, August 12, 2015, [goo.gl/2i6Aoc](http://goo.gl/2i6Aoc); M. Runey, "Azerbaijan: Show Trial Ends with Harsh Sentences for Islamic Activists", *EurasiaNet*, January 26, 2017, [goo.gl/Ny13Vb](http://goo.gl/Ny13Vb). See also Alchina и Ilham, "Four Months Imprisonment Decision for Taleh Baghirzade", *Cebhe.Info*, December 2, 2015, [goo.gl/PID4Ub](http://goo.gl/PID4Ub); Islam Azeri, "Taleh Baghirzade and 13 People Arrested, Some Died", November 26, 2015, <http://goo.gl/Kiwe8S>; F. Majid, "Defendants in 'Nardaran Case' Received from 10 to 20 Years in Prison," *Caucasian Knot*, January 25, 2017, [goo.gl/xFjGm](http://goo.gl/xFjGm); "Taleh Baghirzade's Prison Term Extended," *Meydan tv*, March 7, 2016, [goo.gl/euNMp1](http://goo.gl/euNMp1); A. Raufoglu, "Nardaran Violence Sparks Fresh Concerns About Authoritarian Rule," *Meydan tv*, December 1, 2015, <https://goo.gl/MCs8Vm>; "Azerbaijan Deepens Crackdown on Shi'ite Stronghold," *Радио Свободна Европа*, December 1, 2015, [goo.gl/bzTFS4](http://goo.gl/bzTFS4).

<sup>8</sup> See "Azerbaijan: Repression of the Islamic Movement," *5Pillars*, July 19, 2014. <http://goo.gl/YdpHm7>.

<sup>9</sup> See Fuller & Bakir 2007; Geybullayeva 2007, 112-113.

<sup>10</sup> See "The National Council Held a Rally, Two People Detained," *Azadliq*, May 30, 2015, [goo.gl/Riut43](http://goo.gl/Riut43); "Taleh Baghirzade: 'Now, I Am in the Large Prison,'" *Azadliq Radiosu*,

for the establishment of an Islamic State and that in a democratic state, the population will have a chance to elect a president with a political platform that they support, and when the demographic conditions in Azerbaijan show the readiness of the society for an Islamic State, then the majority will quite naturally vote for a president embracing an Islamist agenda. MMU's mission is to help transition from Soviet-style secularism to true religious practice rather than the imposition of the Islamic State.

Ilgar Ibrahimoglu<sup>11</sup> shares Bagirzadeh's idea of electoral democracy as a key mechanism for solving the question of the future of the country's political identity and the place of Islam in it. It is also concerning the establishment of a democratic process in the country, holding elections, formulating common rules, and the right of believers to identify themselves. For both, just like for the Islamists throughout the Middle East "democracy is not an end, but a means."

Thus, practically silently, a large part of apolitical religious people will be socialized into a post-democratic Islamist agenda. This will not happen without a dramatic societal polarization of the religious-secular divide and an increase in civil conflicts, which will highlight the question of the political and ideological support of power.

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July 30, 2015, [goo.gl/CbRTae](http://goo.gl/CbRTae); "There is No Basis nor Prospects for the Establishment of the Islamic State in Azerbaijan," *Islam in Sesi*, August 10, 2015, <http://goo.gl/1grq8g>.

<sup>11</sup> Imam Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, the man around whom the other center of Shiism gravitated and led the Juma Jamia in old Baku until 2004. He was educated in Iran. He studied Shiite theology and philosophy at the University of Tehran and Qazvin, where he became acquainted with the moderate interpretations of Islam by Ayatollah Motahari and the philosopher Soroush. He brought to Azerbaijan an updated interpretation of the conduct of some rituals, including Ashura (traditionally the custom is connected with self-flagellation, blood and weeping-mercy). His companions began to donate blood for children suffering from thalassemia, believing that in this way they were truly fulfilling Imam Hussain's vow. His followers are members of International Human Rights Organizations that appeared in the country in the first years of independence. Haji Ilgar is the head of the Islamic Association for Human Rights and the Azerbaijan Section of the Christian NGO for Human Rights, in the International Association for Religious Freedom of the United States. Cooperation with international Christian associations that advocate against violations of freedom of conscience created a winning image of Haji-Ilgar as a modern and open to dialogue Muslim politician, which he successfully used.

The dividing line lies between those who support the current political establishment and those who oppose it (this leads to a natural alliance of secularists and Islamists against authoritarian rule). If the opposition wins, the fundamental division will be between those who pursue the Islamic cause and those who oppose it. At a later stage, Ibrahimoglu pointed out that Azerbaijan's Constitution should find a way to include Islam as the leading state religion, which effectively challenges some of the state's secular foundations. Musawat, one of the two opposition parties (the other is the Popular Front), takes a rather cautious position towards the Islamist movement in the country. The pro-Western Republican Alternative (REAL) is also opposed to an alliance with political Islam, based on the idea of the incompatibility of Islam with democracy and the need to ban Islamist parties in secular democratic societies, thus resulting in reducing Islam down to individual practice.

What does the resacralization of the political space and the normalization of Islamic discourse in the public space portend for the future of Islam in Azerbaijan: in the context of the broad exogenous changes related to the social dynamics, as well as the country's international politics and commitments ?

In many ways, the revival of Islam aims to foster a new contextual reality in which antagonism towards Islam is increasingly equated with antagonism towards society as a whole, rather than as a means of internal social legitimation. The more the population identifies with Islamic groups and their struggle, the harder it will accept attacks on religion or appeals to Islam as a threat and a tool in the hands of foreign powers. A reality, that gradually led the authorities to abandon the use of Islamic extremism as a tool for internal legitimation. They use the newly formed movement to align the politically active Shia and the secular opposition in order to form religious groups on a secular basis to gain power. In this way, the role of Shiite Islam as a factor influencing the political dynamics in the country will be minimized. The rulers do their best to guarantee the success of such a religious project, which would otherwise fail. This is made possible by the fact that Islamic groups that tactically reject the Islamist element of their agenda associate themselves with the secular environment and define themselves as pro-democracy movements. Conditions are being created for political Islam to establish itself as a viable political project.

Additionally, while such religious-secular dynamics may create tension for an elite in its pursuit of Western trends and broader national legitimation, this is not a problem for Azerbaijanis, who are shifting their focus from Western power structures to anti-Western, anti-globalist ones. Power constellations with the Global South (see Ismayilov 2015, 10-11; Ismayilov 2014, 79-129) and a relative (if still ambivalent) normalization of Iran's relations with the West (see Baczynska 2016; Friedman 2014). President Aliyev has used the narrative of the rise of Islamophobia in Europe to secure support for a new course of opposition to the West- a stance that some analysts say shows the West has lost its "moral authority" in the eyes of Baku (see Gassanly 2017).

Furthermore, there is an increased engagement of the elite alongside the Muslim world, with the aim of domestic legitimation and economic survival. This is a new trend through which a large part of the population is gradually socialized in an Islamic discursive environment. This is likely to lead to an inevitable and irreversible sacralization of society, thus gradually reordering the external and internal dimensions of the elite's quest for legitimation and survival and their positioning within Islamic structures.

While Azerbaijan continues to receive substantial loans from the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank, and its commitment to the Islamic Development Bank, which supports the country's efforts to strengthen the non-oil and other sectors of the economy, is also increasing significantly. mainly in the fields of transport, trade, agriculture and energy, as well as private sector development and banking<sup>12</sup>. This cooperation, although still in its infancy, aims to introduce Islamic banking in Azerbaijan<sup>13</sup> – a measure

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<sup>12</sup> See N. Abbasova, "Azerbaijan Sign Grant Agreement," *Azernews*, January 18, 2017, [goo.gl/cFVSnv](http://goo.gl/cFVSnv); A. Hasanli, "Azerbaijan Offers to Invest in Car Manufacturing," *Trend News Agency*, January 18, 2017, [goo.gl/Q3Em3K](http://goo.gl/Q3Em3K); A. Hasanli, "May Consider Participation in North-South Project," *Trend News Agency*, January 31, 2017. [goo.gl/c890JQ](http://goo.gl/c890JQ); A. Mammadov, "Islamic Development Bank to Review Irrigation Project in Azerbaijan," *Trend News Agency*, April 16, 2015, [goo.gl/TjZrdu](http://goo.gl/TjZrdu); "Azerbaijan and Islamic Development Bank Ink Grant Agreement," *Report News Agency*, January 18, 2017, [goo.gl/azy2qv](http://goo.gl/azy2qv); "Islamic Development Bank Mission Arrives in Azerbaijan," *Report News Agency*, November 22, 2016, [goo.gl/qK2esC](http://goo.gl/qK2esC); "Azerbaijani President Meets with President of Islamic Development Bank Group," *Trend News Agency*, April 6, 2015, [goo.gl/uRH0iK1](http://goo.gl/uRH0iK1)

<sup>13</sup> See: Abbasova, "Azerbaijan Sign Grant Agreement;" "Islamic Development Bank Takes Next Step in Supporting Islamic Finance in Azerbaijan," *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 10, 2015, [goo.gl/vFdPto](http://goo.gl/vFdPto); Report.Az, "Azerbaijan and Islamic Development Bank...".

which, if implemented, will surely serve as a means for a larger part of the population to step into the discursive field of Islam *исляма* (Aliyev 2015, 3-6).

The regime in Baku is also working to expand bilateral ties with a number of Muslim, countries, including Iran (a decision was made on joint car production and pharmaceutical cooperation)<sup>14</sup> and Pakistan within the field of military cooperation (ballistic missiles with a range of 500 km)<sup>15</sup>.

The dynamic intensity and increasingly strategic nature of the partnership with Turkey over the past few years is also significant, given Turkey's geographical proximity and its progressive shift towards an Islamist discourse since the "Justice Party"<sup>16</sup> government came to power.

In relation to its humanitarian commitments to the Global South, the Azerbaijani government provides training courses for civil servants in the administration of a number of Muslim countries (especially Afghanistan). Such is the Caspian Basin Studies Program, run by Ada University since 2011<sup>17</sup>, which "offers a unique opportunity for foreign diplomats and government officials to explore and study the Caspian Basin region in depth" (Ismayilov 2015, 96).

<sup>14</sup> See N. Abbasova, "Foundation Stone Laid for Azerbaijan-Iran Pharmaceutical Plant," *Azernews*, January 16, 2017, [goo.gl/rmV5nu](http://goo.gl/rmV5nu); Abbasova, "Azerbaijan, Iran Eye Implementation..."; A. Karimova, "Azerbaijan, Iran Finalize Deal on Medicine Production", *Azernews*, April 22, 2016, [goo.gl/tBkusn](http://goo.gl/tBkusn); A. Karimova, "Azerbaijan, Iran to Invest Initially 35M Euros in Medicine Plant Construction", *Azernews*, March 14, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> See E. Mamedov, "Azerbaijan: Marching in Lockstep with Turkey in Cracking Down on Gulen," *EurasiaNet*, August 9, 2016, [goo.gl/v3q9VJ](http://goo.gl/v3q9VJ); F. Shahbazov, "Azerbaijan's Growing Military Cooperation with Pakistan," *The Diplomat*, January 13, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Among the most dramatic and consistent reforms carried out by Erdoğan's Party is the lifting of the ban on headscarves in public and in institutions (October 2013), public schools (September 2014) and the military (February 2017 .); introduction of compulsory religion lessons in primary schools (grades 1-3); drastically increasing the number of religiously oriented schools within the state system (the so-called Imam Hatip Lyces); See also: S. Arsu and D. Bilefsky, "Turkey Lifts Longtime Ban on Head Scarves in State Offices," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2013, [goo.gl/VxvDGB](http://goo.gl/VxvDGB); R. Smith, "Why Turkey Lifted Its Ban on the Islamic Headscarf," *National Geographic*, October 12, 2013, [goo.gl/yxR3aB](http://goo.gl/yxR3aB); C. Tee, *The Gulen Movement in Turkey: The Politics of Islam and Modernity* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 59-61; "Turkey Lifts Military Ban on Islamic Headscarf," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2017, [goo.gl/9NOOwg](http://goo.gl/9NOOwg).

<sup>17</sup> Before 2014, the university was known as Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy.

The government has also generously provided full scholarships for students from the Global South, many of whom are practicing Muslims, to pursue a full undergraduate or graduate degree at Ada University since the latter launched its first degree program in 2009. These efforts continue to expand and facilitate the opening of more public platforms for the practice of Islam. Azerbaijan is actively working to open a broad debate on hot conflict points, while also aiming to attract the attention of organizations from the Global South. On the initiative of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, in April 2016, a contact group was established in Ankara regarding the Armenian aggression against Azerbaijan<sup>18</sup>. At the suggestion of the Non-Aligned Movement, the final document of the meeting in Tehran in August 2012 included a call for a “negotiated settlement of the conflict within the framework of the territorial integrity, sovereignty and internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan”<sup>19</sup>. Thus, for the first time, “the issue of Karabakh became the subject of widespread recognition by governments, apart from the political problems of the South Caucasus or post-Soviet Eurasia” (Strakes 2013).

In view of the need for internal legitimation and more successful external recognition, the elite emulated the Soviets in their attempts to minimize Islamic practices and attitudes in territories inhabited by indigenous Muslim populations, so as not to foster transnational ties of Islamic solidarity that would threaten secular politics and ideology. At the same time, the spread of so-called “folk Islam” is encouraged, which is seen as promoting sub-national identities, maintaining patriarchal social structures, and therefore posing less of a threat while facilitating governance in traditionally secular Muslim areas (Ismayilov 2015, 7-13).

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<sup>18</sup> The contact group, whose first meeting under the chairmanship of OIC Secretary General Iyad bin Amin Madani was convened on the sidelines of the 71<sup>st</sup> regular session of the UN General Assembly in September 2016, includes seven countries: Turkey, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Gambia and Djibouti. See “Contact Group on Aggression of Armenia Against Azerbaijan Convenes Its First Meeting,” *Azertag*, September 20, 2016, [goo.gl/lm9gbS](http://goo.gl/lm9gbS).

<sup>19</sup> Final Document in the Summit of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, August 26-31, 2012, para. 391, p. 104, <http://namiran.org/16th-summit>.

Therefore, the Islamic discourse, promoted by the elite as a means of domestic and international legitimation, is sequentially transformed into a coherent and homogeneous one, shared by an increasingly large part of the population, and gradually begins to be understood as a conscious practice of faith.

At least two vectors can be distinguished regarding the dynamics of resacralization of public space in Azerbaijan.

First, the growing intensity of Azerbaijan's relations with Israel, which is a possible external obstacle to deepening Baku's engagement with Islam. Azerbaijan's third largest trading partner as of February 2016 – Israel has enjoyed a truly strategic partnership with Baku over the past decade, particularly in the military and internal security areas. Israel is critical to Azerbaijan's efforts to diversify its economic dependence on oil, helping to boost the country's high-tech and agricultural capabilities<sup>20</sup>. Finally, Israel occupies a key place in Azerbaijan's foreign policy, traditionally lobbying for Baku's relations with Washington<sup>21</sup>. This leads to the development of several scenarios – the elite may choose to pursue a positive policy towards Islam that will not correspond to the idea of resacralization of public space, an approach that would also require finding an alternative, legitimating strategy. The elite may choose, in the short term, a combination of local repression and an ongoing conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh to maintain local nationalism as the main legitimating mechanism capable of competing with Islam and a tool for popular mobilization. In the long run, however, since such a strategy is socially unsustainable, the elite will have to work towards the formation of genuine economic transformation to further maintain its national strategy, legitimacy and to ensure loyalty.

Secondly, the transformation in the dynamics of the religious-secular relationship and the normalization of Islamic discourse in the evolving field of (political) Islam in Azerbaijan.

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<sup>20</sup> See N. Abbasova, "Azerbaijan, Israel Keen to Expand Cooperation," *Azernews*, November 8, 2016, [goo.gl/GdnUOI](http://goo.gl/GdnUOI); "Azerbaijan and Israel Aimed at Increasing Mutual Trade Turnover," *Contact.az*, December 15, 2016, [goo.gl/VKTmKD](http://goo.gl/VKTmKD).

<sup>21</sup> See C. Liphshiz, "Netanyahu Scores Diplomatic Home Run in Iran's Backyard," *The Times of Israel*, December 17, 2016, [goo.gl/aoDfac](http://goo.gl/aoDfac).

### 3. Conclusion

The Islamic discourse in the last two decades is not confined to an intra-societal (within society or elite) dialogue and does not reflect major cultural changes or changing moods, perceptions and self-perceptions in the country's social landscape. Rather, it has formed and evolved as a continuously fluid function of exogenous effects and the tactical pursuit of domestic and international legitimation of power. In particular, on three exogenous factors: striving for survival, after the declaration of independence; the geographical area of the country and the related threat of religious radicalization brought by the neighbors; an elite incorporated into a Soviet political-cultural environment, but striving for Western (and wider international) recognition.

The evolution of the place of Islam in post-independent Azerbaijan also unfolds as a contingent product of dialectical tension between different motivational players within the hybrid intentionality underlying the elite's quest for survival.

From this point of view, the specific dynamics in Azerbaijan during the third decade of the country's independence is related to the change towards resacralization of the political space.

With Islamist groups emphasizing their commitment to civil rights, justice, the overall anti-authoritarian struggle and striving for democracy, and the secular opposition not shying away from making references to Islam and Islamic concepts (thus highlighting the religious segment of their identity in their narrative of common struggle and unified opposition to the current political regime), the two groups, previously at opposite poles of socio-political resistance, today find themselves gradually moving towards a convergence of discourse in regard to religion and politics.

Islam is strengthening its place in public discourse, and Azerbaijani society has a historic opportunity to develop, in its own internally evolved way, its individual idea of the place that religion should occupy in the socio-political fabric of the state, thus transforming the dynamics of Islamic discourse from an exogenously (contextually) determined dialectical function of the elite's drive for self-preservation (and therefore unstable) into an endogenously determined linear (and therefore more stable) evolution.

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