

# Introduction

Islamic discourse in Azerbaijan—and broader discourse on national identity—has, since the rise of nationalism around the second half of the nineteenth century in this part of the world, been dominated and defined by elite thinking and agency, with intra-societal dialogue on the matter, including in particular across the religious-secular divide, systematically muted and suppressed. Consequently, although the questions of national identity and the role of religion therein is at the core of the Azerbaijani state-building effort, the prerogative of asking these questions has never been entrusted to the masses and any discussion on the matter at any stage during the twentieth century was informed by a master discourse imposed by the elite. Such was the case when the founding fathers of Azerbaijan’s first independent modern state (ADR), which lasted two years (1918–20) before being brought into the fold of the Soviet Union, confronted the question and, inspired by European modernity as they were, made the pioneering moves toward a de-sacralization—and secularization—of the social space, which had historically been dominated by religious notions and understandings.<sup>1</sup> Such was certainly the case in Azerbaijan under Soviet rule, when the key tenets of Azerbaijani nationhood were forged and molded in central Moscow. And this has also been the reality of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where the ideological contours of the reemerging nation and the multiple shifts in the understanding of the nature of Azerbaijani identity and its proper application have been defined exclusively by changing elite-level dynamics and evolving elite perceptions of what was most expedient given the unfolding developments at home and internationally. As such, Ayaz Mutallibov, the country’s first president (30 Aug. 1991–6 Mar. 1992; 14–18 May 1992), attempted to espouse the kind of national identity that would support a pro-Moscow foreign policy. Second president Abulfaz Elchibey (16 June 1992–1 Sep. 1993) inclined toward

Turkism to support a pro-Western, anti-Russian, and anti-Iranian approach. More recently, both president Heydar Aliyev (24 June 1993–31 Oct. 2003) and president Ilham Aliyev (since 31 Oct. 2003) have re-invoked ADR-era *Azerbaijanism* as the foundation of a more balanced foreign policy (Ismayilov, M. 2015; 2008). And while Elchibey and the Aliyev regime differed significantly in terms of their approach to the definition of nationalism, the former embracing the ethnic definition thereof (thus calling the nation Azeri Turks) and the latter propagating the civic definition of national belonging (thus accepting all citizens of Azerbaijan, including all members of national minorities, as embodiments of Azerbaijani nationhood), their initial understanding of the role of Islam was strikingly similar: both embraced it as a merely *cultural*—and thus nominal—part of Azerbaijani identity.

Consequently, much like broader discourse on national identity, Islamic discourse in Azerbaijan over the past two decades has not been anchored in intra-societal or elite-society dialogue and deliberation and has not reflected major cultural shifts or changing moods, perceptions, and self-perceptions across the country's social landscape. Rather, it has been formed and evolved as a continuously instantiated, dialectical function of exogenous effects of the elite's tactical pursuit of legitimation across domestic and international planes of power (both grounded in their quest for tactical and strategic survival). Three exogenous factors in particular, each anchored in the elite's quest for survival, have informed the dynamics of Islamic discourse and elite attitudes to Islam in post-independence Azerbaijan: the country's geography and the perceived threat of religious radicalization exported from neighbors; the elite's embeddedness in a Soviet political-cultural milieu; and the elite's pursuit of Western (and broader international) recognition.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the evolution of Islam's place in Azerbaijan's post-independence identity has unfolded as a contingent product of dialectical tension between the various motivational triggers within the hybrid intentionality underlying the elite's pursuit of survival. A continuously instantiated product of dialectics underlying the elite's response to ever-changing security stimuli at home and abroad in view of their tactical needs for survival, Islamic discourse and state policies based thereupon have also been unstable.

Over the past 25 years of independence, the ruling elite in Azerbaijan has benefited from—and sought to reproduce—overall societal animosity (including as expressed in the attitudes of the secular opposition) toward the country's religious groups, particularly those opposed to the incumbent regime, these routinely portrayed as radical, potentially terrorist, and ostensibly evil. Not only was the effort to reproduce the social, cultural, and ideological rupture between the country's secular and religious opposition (and the religious and secular segments of the country's social spectrum more broadly) meant as a component of the elite's ingenuous “divide and rule” strategy in the pursuit of total dominance and control (including by thus depriving the

religious opposition of an organizational toolkit to mobilize society around their cause), but by continuously reinforcing the representation of Islam as an imminent danger to the stability and secular nature of Azerbaijani statehood, the government has sought to position itself—in the eyes of both the “liberal,” “democratic” West and the secularized population at home—as the sole force capable of staving off the Islamic threat, thus using the radical Islamist card to justify its increasingly illiberal regime and authoritarian practices, a discursive effort that received a particular boost during the dramatic shift in geopolitical conditions associated with the 9/11 events of 2001 in the United States and the “global war on terror” that quickly followed.

For a long time, the regime’s strategy worked relatively smoothly. More recently, however, the rise of the Movement for Moslem Unity under the leadership of Taleh Baghirzade, a charismatic young Shia cleric, and the concurrent rapprochement between the country’s Islamic movement, on the one hand, and secular civil society and the traditional opposition (particularly as embodied in the *National Council* opposition bloc), on the other, has occasioned a dramatic shift. Religious and secular forces, which before were insulated from one another, have now opened a multifaceted dialogue, discussing issues as fundamental as the nature of Azerbaijani statehood, national identity, and Islam’s role and place in both. Looked at from this perspective, the specific dynamics facing Azerbaijan in the third decade of independence and the associated shift toward a resacralization of political space discussed in this study further below have served to prompt a gradual endogenization of the dynamics informing societal attitudes toward Islam and the latter’s normalization across the country’s public space.

This book offers a detailed account of the dynamics behind the religious-secular divide in Azerbaijan over the past two decades of independence and the conditions underlying the ongoing process of normalization of Islamic discourse and rising cooperation across the country’s religious-secular political landscape. It begins with an outline of hybrid intentionality behind the elite’s manifold attitudes to Islam, with a particular focus on the strategy of separation between religion and politics in which those attitudes have found expression. It then proceeds to show the complicity of civil society and the broader populace, as well as the international community and the country’s Islamic stratum itself, in the reproduction of the narrative of Islamic danger and the resultant religious-secular divide in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The study then continues with an account of a number of dialectical tensions inherent in policy outcomes to which the hybrid nature of elite intentionality has given rise. It then follows on to discuss key factors contributing to the ongoing normalization of Islam across the public realm and the gradual bridging of the religious-secular divide amid the ongoing state repression. The volume concludes with a comparative insight into some common features and conditioning factors behind the dynamics underlying the religious-

secular nexus in Azerbaijan and across the broader region of the Middle East. It also offers an insight into some future potentialities that the current dynamics have laid bare.

Works of monographic scope focusing exclusively on Islam in Azerbaijan are almost non-existent. Some of those few that exist employ a historical approach to understanding the nature of Islamic revival in Azerbaijan in the 1990s and lack a conceptual toolkit to account for the structural embeddedness of the latter phenomenon in the contextual dynamics of today (Sattarov 2009) or concern themselves exclusively with the “social activist” dimension of Islam in the country outside its embeddedness in broader discourses about identity and nationhood (Bedford 2009). Still others only look into the bottom-up processes underlying Islamic discourse in the country, neglecting the latter’s dialectical embeddedness in a discursive landscape enabled by the top-down dynamics anchored in elite behavior (Wiktor-Mach 2017). None of the existing literature combines a theoretically innovative (dialectical) approach to the issue and the rich up-to-date empirical data, including on the latest developments around the so-called Nardaran affair. The present study is meant to fill this void.

## NOTES

1. As part of the nation-building strategy, ADR’s founding fathers moved away from purely religious categorizations of the past toward what they called *Azerbaijanism*, thus adding an ethnic category of “Turkism” and European modernity to the definition of the people’s collective identification (Ismayilov, M. 2008; Mustafa-zade 2006; Świętochowski 1985; cf. Atabaki 2002). As part of secularization reforms in Azerbaijan of that time, *shari’a* courts were abolished in all regions save Zaqatala, where these were kept given “the existing realities and the closeness to Daghestan”; *waqf* property was confiscated as a result of the May 1920 land reform; and “all present and former servants of religious cults regardless of their denomination with the exception of the *müdeships* [those who washed dead bodies] were deprived of the right to elect and to be elected in the power structures” (Goyushov and Asgarov 2010, 170–71, 190–99).

2. This study operates with, and draws on, Alexander Wendt’s conception of “the struggle for recognition” among states and individuals as a micro-level driving force behind structural change and collective identity formation. Picking up from Georg W. F. Hegel’s (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Wendt defines recognition as “a social act that invests difference with a particular meaning [in which] another actor (“the Other”) is constituted as a subject with a legitimate social standing in relation to the Self” (2003, esp. 511–12). For a conceptualization of the struggle for recognition, see also Fukuyama (1992) and Honneth (1996). For a detailed conceptualization of the struggle for recognition and its workings in the context of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, including the underlying tension between “imitation” and “pipeline politics” as two modalities by which Azerbaijan’s struggle for recognition was effected, see Ismayilov, M. (2012). See also Ismayilov, M. (2014).