

# Challenges of Religious Pluralism. The Case of Azerbaijan

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## Abstract

The break-up of the Soviet Union has brought new challenges in the field of religion for which state authorities of the former Soviet republics have developed various responses. I will focus on two main strategies involving the use of the concept „religious rights”: shaping the image of a defender of religious freedom and limiting the diversification of a religious market. Those practices will be analyzed on the basis of data I have collected in my field research in Muslim Azerbaijan. On the one hand, Azerbaijan is similar to other republics of Eurasia as it has witnessed sudden revival of religion in the last decade, accompanied with an influx of foreign missionaries preaching their ideas. On the other hand, Azerbaijan has been considered as one of the most secular and tolerant of the Muslim countries worldwide.

In the new situation the state has to deal with new problems, one of the most serious being the spread of radical Islamic ideas. To prevent this trend the state has taken some measures which at the same time limit the religious freedoms guaranteed by the law. Using the slogan of „war with terrorism,” the governments seeks to control religious symbols and institutions and to monopolize the right to interpret Islam. The state-promoted „traditional religions” do not include groups that do not want to conform to state policies, such as Salafi Muslims, that suffer discrimination. By using the label „Wahhabis,” state authorities legitimize their activities, as struggle against the „Wahhabi trend” is a common phenomenon for the Eurasia region.

## 1 Introduction

Since 1970s, religion has been re-emerging as a powerful social, cultural and political force all over the world. One facet of this phenomenon is the massive turn towards religion in Muslim societies. This global process has been described by Jose Casanova as the „deprivatization” of religion meaning that in previously secularized societies religion is leaving the private niche and re-gains public resonance [3]. In many countries the religious revival triggers the disconnect between ethnicity and religion. Some nationalistic movements change their tones and evoke religious symbols and ideas, an increasing number of Muslims prefer

to be identified as belonging to the Islamic ummah instead of to a particular ethnic culture.

The deprivatization of religion presents a challenge to a society, state, and religious communities. The greatest challenge, probably, is facing the „post-secular” societies, i.e., societies that have undergone the experience of secularism and are now dealing with an unexpected comeback of religious discourse and practices in the public sphere [8]. This term usually refers to the Western world, where the separation between the religious institutions and other spheres of social life was introduced gradually, but also to the post-Soviet republics that were forced in the previous century to adopt atheistic model of renouncement of religion or, at least, public religion. The notion „post-secular” is employed by Habermas to refer to the change in public consciousness—people in post-secular societies have to deal with the re-appearance of religious norms and ideas in non-religious spheres (education, health care, etc.) and to debate the extent of religion that can be incorporated without undermining the rules of secular state.

In this article, I would like to contribute to the ongoing debate about religion in the public sphere and religious rights by focusing on the process of pluralization as a part of the phenomenon of religious revival. The analysis is based on ethnographic data collected during my field research in Baku last year, which included interviews with 40 Muslims representing the revivalist religious traditions, experts in religion, and religious Islamic leaders. Another sources were the official documents related to the religious policy in Azerbaijan, president’s speeches on religion, as well as reports on religious freedom prepared by non-governmental organizations and research institutes.

I will argue that the concept „religious rights” in Azerbaijan is used by the state in the following ways: (1) as a measure to create the public image of a liberal democratic country, which defends the basic rights such as the freedom of conscious and religion (2) as one of the main instruments of the state to cope with the challenges of pluralism and competition in the religious field. This tool enables the Azerbaijani establishment to control the diverse market of religion and to shape it according to its main aim: creation of national model Islam, i.e., such an interpretation of Islamic religion that is compatible with national identity. Religious rights are attributed to those believers who follow or accept the state’s model, while those who do not subordinate and represent alternative religious traditions (e.g. Salafism, Nurcu Islam) are deprived of their rights. State’s strategies towards the problem of religious pluralism are shaped and realized on three levels: in the legal sphere, in the public discourse, and in informal practices. At each level the changes in the overall state’s approach to religion are visible.

The case of Azerbaijan is interesting for a couple of reasons. It is one of the very few secular democratic states (at least according to the law) in the Muslim world. The analysis of the role religion plays in that country can contribute to the hot debates about Muslim immigrants and citizens in Europe and about Islam’s relation with democracy and liberalism. Similarly to the Western countries, where religion was on the wane in the post-War period, Azerbaijan ex-

perienced seventy years of communist propaganda accompanied by a cruel fight with religion. Soviet attempts at creating a new society reinforced the process of laicization of the Azerbaijani people that began with the Russian colonization in the nineteenth century. Another reason for the interest in that republic is the current process of Islamic revival that has been influencing the public side of religion and the state religious policy. Finally, the process of pluralization, that I consider to be one of the main dimensions of the deprivatization of religion, is clearly noticeable in Azerbaijan as it appeared unexpectedly with a sudden force with the breakup of the Soviet regime.

Religious pluralization refers here to a set of emerging public and private forms of Islam propagated by particular Islamic traditions. Islam is understood here as a religious culture composed of a number of religious patterns of practice and belief or, in other words, of religious traditions. With the end of communism and the following liberalization of the religious, Azerbaijan, like other post-Soviet republics, has witnessed an influx of foreign missionaries preaching their ideas. Among the most influential actors there were: Iranian clergy, religious activists from Arab countries and Turkey, as well as some Christian groups and sects.<sup>1</sup> Pluralization means a multiplication of religious actors and an increase in the range of religious offers.

Not all of these actors and their religious goods turn out to be acceptable or suitable to the political actors. One of the main participants in the Azerbaijani religious field whose activities raise state's objections is the global reformist Salafi movement inspired by the Arab Muslims<sup>2</sup>. Although the majority of the Salafis in Azerbaijan are moderate in their political outlook, there is a small group among them that represents fundamentalist stance and espouses radical Islamic ideas. I will show that the political elites in Azerbaijan officially combat that extremist trend but unofficially use the „fundamentalist threat” to fight against the whole Salafi movement and to regulate the religious sphere according to their own aims. In manipulating the religious rights, the state aims at shaping the national form of religion, i.e., religion understood as a set of cultural norms and values compatible with the national heritage and national interest („traditional religion”). This model of Islam is, however, against other approaches developed by the global Muslim networks that enjoy increasing popularity among the youth. Salafis' refusal to conform to state policy has led to discrimination of this movement under the labels such as „Wahhabi radicals.” The restriction in religious rights of this movement has been the common phenomenon in the Eurasia region since the emergence of post-Soviet republics.

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<sup>1</sup>Since the majority of Azerbaijanis profess Islam (94%), and only a small groups follow other religions (Orthodox Christianity—3%, Judaism—1%) [6], in this work I focus mainly on the Muslim religion.

<sup>2</sup>Salafism is a movement in Sunni Islam that focuses on the example of pious ancestors (Salafs) of the very beginning of Islam. It is a puritanical group that calls Muslims to imitate the Prophet Muhammad and his companions in all spheres of life. This branch of Islam is in many countries referred to in a derogatory way as „Wahhabi.”

## 2 Responses of the post-secular state to religious pluralism

As it has been said earlier, the recent deprivatization of religion or the return of religious worldviews to the public sphere put the post-secular societies and states in the need of finding a solution to tackle this issue. There are two main dimensions of the problem. There is, first of all, a question about the extent of religion acceptable in a secular state by its leaders and society. Among the most well-known contemporary Western solutions or models of relations between religious and secular sphere there are the following: French model of laicite or strict separation, freedom of religion exemplified by Sweden, and adopted by Great Britain model of multiculturalism [11].

The Muslim immigration to the West underlines the second dimension of the problem. Despite the question whether or to what extent shall democratic states accommodate religion, another issue revolves around the problem of the nature of religion as a “public religion.” Muslims from different cultures who want to keep their customs call for the recognition of their ways of life, but the spectrum of practices labeled as Islamic is enormous. The question of the veiling of Muslim women raises hot debates not only among non-Muslims, but also inside the Islamic ummah in the West. There is neither an agreement on the issue of whether a woman shall be covered, nor what kind of dress or veil is appropriate. The variety of cultural interpretations of Islamic norms makes the discussion on the public religion even tougher. For instance, hijab can be interpreted on the basis of specific regulations of the Islamic schools of law, it can be seen as a cultural norm that provides links between immigrant population and their home country and ensures the common identity for the group, or it can be reinterpreted as a purely ethical norm depending on the free choice of a woman.

The post-Soviet religious policy can roughly be divided into two periods marked by liberalization and restriction of religion and religious rights respectively. After regaining independence, Azerbaijani elites undertook liberal reforms, which established a „free market” of religion. The new laws granted freedom of choice, practice, and teachings to all citizens and religious actors from abroad. At that time, Azerbaijan attracted numerous preachers, clerics, and missionaries mainly from neighboring countries. An intense revival of religious life was felt all over the region. That general course as well as strategies used in religious policy were surprisingly similar to that found all over Central Asia.

After that initial period, the political establishment began to transform its strategies towards religious actors. Having gained experience in communist time (as a KGB general), the president Heydar Aliyev (1993–2003) realized how serious the religious resurgence was. His strategies were thus based on careful examination of threats and possibilities that religion, especially the deprivatized religion, may bring to the political order. In the second part of the 1990s, the state’s approach to religious rights began to change in the direction of re-

strictions and control over the religious landscape.

### 3 Religious rights as an instrument in international relations

On the international arena, Azerbaijani has been trying to create a coherent image of a tolerant, secular, liberal democracy where all religions cohabit in harmony. This strategy is motivated by the Western orientation of Azerbaijani political elites and their willingness to establish closer links with the United States and European Union. One of the main obstacle, apart from its communist legacy, was religion. Generally, Islam is viewed by Western societies with suspicion, what affects also Turkey's European aspirations. For that reason, Azerbaijan on various level has been craving the image of a country compatible with Western solutions and standards in the sphere of religion. On the other hand, the willingness to balance the international relations can be seen in a constant attempt of Azerbaijani elites to present their country as a bridge between civilizations, mainly between the West and the East.

In the legal sphere, the response of the state to the deprivatization of religion and pluralization of the religious market that followed the end of Soviet regime was the realization of two principles: the maintenance of „separation between church and state” and the implementation of the „freedom of religion.” In Europe, the former principle took different forms in each legal systems. The premise for the Azerbaijani model of religious tolerance is enclosed in the Azerbaijan Constitution. The 24th, 26th, 28th, and 48th articles of the constitution, together with the first article of the Act on Religious Liberty form legal basis for relations between the secular state and religious communities [7].

According to Article 48 of the constitution, freedom of conscience belongs to the basic rights of citizens of Azerbaijan:

1. Everyone enjoys the freedom of conscience.
2. Everyone has the right to define his/her attitude to religion, to profess, individually or together with others, any religion or to profess no religion, to express and spread one's beliefs concerning religion.
3. Everyone is free to carry out religious rituals, however this should not violate public order and contradict public morals.
4. Religious beliefs and convictions do not excuse infringements of the law.

The constitution goes on to say that „religion acts separately from the government but each religion is equal before the law.” In practice, it means freedom of faith and religious practices for Muslims (who are in an overwhelming majority), Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and even small Baha'i community, which

suffers persecutions in Iran. All religions are equal before the law. Atheism and agnosticism are treated as each religious denominations in regards to rights. Formally, all state institutions are keeping a distance towards religion. Education, health, economy, and other social spheres are excluded from the influence of religion. There are no religion classes in public schools. Moreover, religious communities are entitled to take part in the public life similarly to other social groups. And, according to standard liberal rule: everyone has the right to engage in religious practices with only one boundary, which is the freedom of others.

In the matter of participation of religious actors in the political life, the law allows it, but with a limit. The Article 85 Article of the constitution says that religious figures cannot be candidates for the parliament (*Milli Majlis*) nor contribute money to political candidates or parties.

Notwithstanding the formal laws arrangements guaranteeing the freedom of conscious to every citizen, Azerbaijani political leaders present themselves as active defenders of religious tolerance. The public discourse led by politicians constitutes the second level of implementing the state strategy to create a tolerant, Western-oriented country. The speeches and documents directly refer to the concept of „religious tolerance” and „religious rights” as constituting the foundation of the state’s relations with religious groups.

The state’s stance on religious freedom is clearly supported by the official religious establishment. Both groups underline religious tolerance as one of the main feature of contemporary Azerbaijan. A Shiite *akhund* (religious official in Azerbaijan) I talked to in Baku stressed that one of the main challenges for his country is the unity and collaboration between people of different faiths. In his opinion, the *sheikh ul-islam* (the title of a religious superior in a Muslim country) has recently been implementing the strategy of creating comfortable conditions for all religions (which is not really the case, as I will show in the next section).

Serious commitment to religious liberty is seen in the meetings of world religion leaders that have taken place in Baku in the last decade. The most recent with a theme „Globalization, Religion and Traditional Values” was held in April 2010 and attracted around 150 major religious figures from above 30 countries. It was organized by the Moscow Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church and the Caucasus Muslim Board, which is an official institution managing religious affairs in Azerbaijan. In the rhetoric of Azerbaijani representatives, the long tradition of religious and ethnic tolerance was stressed. This line of arguments is exemplified by the speech president Ilham Aliyev delivered to the summit participants [1]:

It is no coincidence that the meeting is taking place in Baku. Meetings of religious leaders in Baku have already become traditional. Representatives of different nationalities and religions have lived in Azerbaijan in the atmosphere of friendship and fraternity, like one family, for centuries.

The official state discourse of liberty is also upheld by the participation in

the major international organizations engaged in religious rights, including the United Nations, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe. Azerbaijan has signed the basic documents in regard to human rights and religious freedom and established an institution of ombudsman to represent citizen's interests [7]. These moves obviously reinforce the impression that Azerbaijani elites are dedicated to maximum realization of principles of human and religious rights. However, there are constant voices from human rights organizations and independent religious communities that such declarations are merely a facade.

Parallel direction of establishing Azerbaijani position on the international area is the clear move towards Muslim countries. Not only does Azerbaijan presents itself as a modern, Western-type country but also as a part of the global Islamic ummah. The leadership of Azerbaijan tends to underline their attachment to Islamic values. Despite the formal separation of religion and the state ensured by the law, political establishment in relations with Muslim neighbors stress the Islamic identity of Azerbaijani people. One of the clearest example of this strategy was seen in 2009 when Baku was serving as a „capital of the Islamic culture.” It was organized in the framework of an influential international body called the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) with 57 member states wishing to represent interests of the Islamic world. The opening ceremony as well as numerous cultural events in 2009 that were related to that project were used to promote Baku and the whole Azerbaijan as an excellent example of an inter-civilization dialog, modernity and an attachment to Islamic values. At the opening ceremony, president Ilham Aliyev called for cooperation between Muslim countries in various spheres, such as economy, politics, culture. He also underlined the ability of Azerbaijan to make a contribution to the cooperation between Islamic states. Although Aliyev did not explicitly mention the issue of religious rights, he nevertheless expressed the idea of spiritual foundation needed for a country's development.

The project of Baku being the capital of Islamic culture was highly promoted in the Internet, on city's billboards, in buses and in metro. Nevertheless, none of my respondents took part in any of numerous events taking place in the project's framework. I was usually told that the cultural events and conferences were not directed to local Muslims, but served as a means of the government's promotion. Important people were coming from abroad and from local institutions close to the state, but average Muslims were not thought of as being participants. In order to take part one needed an invitation and it was not easy to participate without organizers consent.

The strategies outlined above have been successful to a degree that Azerbaijan has found approval of its religious policy by some Western powers. For instance, the Vatican has recognized this country as a model of religious tolerance, especially since the opening of the first Roman Catholic Church. By many Western commentators and analysts Azerbaijan is seen as one of the very few Muslim countries that found the balance between Islamic values and modernity and the political leadership are judged as promoters of plural society [13].

## 4 Religious rights as an instrument of regulating the religious market

The second main application of the religious rights concept is in the sphere of regulation. Not only does this principle serve as a way of fostering closer links with international partners, it is also used in internal politics. An increase in pluralization and fragmentation of the religious market in the 1990s was a real challenge for the political establishment and for the whole society. Religious rights have thus been used as one of the main instruments of the state to cope with the new situation as an ideological tool in a state-building process. Islam is therefore seen as a kind of cultural bond able to unite the nation around common values and norms. Politicians present themselves as defenders of religion and religious rights of citizens by limiting the influences of radicals, extremists, fanatics. To ensure the freedom of conscious, beliefs, and religious practice, they argue, it is necessary to take all measures against those who want to destabilize the religious order. However, instead of guaranteeing religious freedom this process creates opposite results and in effect some groups face difficulties in religious practice.

Although this strategy is typical of other post-Soviet governments, Azerbaijan has also some unique features of action. I argue that the use of religious rights as an instrument of regulation turned out to be successful to a degree religious extremism is a marginal problem, but at the same time it contributed to the restriction of rights of many believers and led to a situation of social conflict and to limiting the degree of the process of deprivatization of religion, which is linked to current global Islamic resurgence.

The state's strategies in regulating religion can also be analyzed on various dimensions. Here, I will refer to the practices in the legal sphere, in public discourse, and to informal activities of the political establishment. At each of these levels, steps have been undertaken to use the principle of religious and human rights to control the process of pluralization and to shape the national model of religion.

### 4.1 Legal instruments

The liberal law enabling the freedom of religion and the overall chaos in the country made it possible for the Islamic missionaries to set up their activities in Azerbaijan. Especially after 1993 there was an influx of religious preachers and activists from Saudi Arabia, Libya, Qatar, UEA, Kuwait and Jordan. New mosques were built all over the country, many of which had foreign financial support. That boom in religious activity was put to an end in 1998 when new legal regulations were introduced. This move was announced as a means to counter radical ideas and politicization of religion. And since the problem of Islamic extremism continues, at least in the official discourse, religious law is from time to time updated in a direction of further restrictions of religious freedom. The most recent changes were introduced in May 2009 as amendments

to Azerbaijan's Religion Law.<sup>3</sup>

One of the field the allegedly secular government took control is religious education. The main change was directed against religious training outside Azerbaijan. When the political establishment became suspected of uncontrolled, foreign influences that were spread through educational channels, it introduced changes in law that restricted the rights of students of religious issues. According to the report of a local research group, in recent years it was popular among young people to pursue their education in religious centers in the Arab countries, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and in the nearby Dagestan. The number of students from Azerbaijan at Egyptian university Al-Azhar has already reached 160 person [9]. Shiite Muslim youth tend to choose Islamic centers in Iran. At present, there are around 200-250 Azeri students in Qom [10] and some groups in Najaf.

For those eager to make a career in the religious industry one has to subordinate to official and unofficial rules and norms of the Muslim Board led by the *sheikh-ul-islam*. It is not enough to graduate from a particular university, and precisely from the Baku Islamic University headed by Haji Sabir. Prospective *akhunds* must also go through an attestation process. If they are allowed to take special exams and pass them successfully they will be assigned to a mosque. According to the recent legal rules, people holding foreign diplomas, even from prestigious Islamic universities, are unable to get a nomination to be in charge of a registered mosque. Besides, religious training in Azerbaijan is subject to regulations. The case of a Shiite imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is particularly well-known, as he has been banned from heading the Juma mosque since 2004. In an interview he told me that at present even those who were sent abroad by the government to study religious topics are now prohibited from working in mosques under state's institutions control. He himself spent nine years in Iran, where he had been sent by the Azerbaijani Ministry to pursue Master and Doctoral studies.

In the light of rising popularity of religious preachers from abroad, the government took measures against them. It has introduced a ban on religious proselytizing by foreigners. Not only does the law explicitly prohibits such activities, the government strictly supervises this field.

Another sphere that the government took control of is the functioning of religious communities. There is a few legal regulations that make it compulsory for any religious community, organization or a group to be registered by the government. The law has been binding since 2001, but after the amendments in 2009, Article 12 of the Religious Law implies that unregistered religious activity is illegal [4]. To ensure the process of registration, a special institution was created. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO) has been established alongside of another official institution, the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), which is a successor to the Soviet Muslim Board of Transcaucasus. Both of them engage in controlling and regulating religious activities in

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<sup>3</sup>Monitoring of changes in legislation on religion and religious freedom is systematically done by Forum 18, Norwegian-Danish non-profit initiative, and the reports are available at <http://www.forum18.org>.

the country in spite of Azerbaijan formal secularism. They enable the implementation of legal provisions by working directly with religious communities. SCWRO has a lot of power over the process of registration, including banning certain groups or suspending their activities.

Religious education and formal requirements for any religious group are only two examples of the much wider trend in the legal sphere of gradual increase in state interventions into religious market. What reasons do the state and official clergy collaborating with the political establishment give to justify the restrictions in religious freedom and rights? The main argument is the extremist threat and the war on terror. Only using Soviet-era methods of control, state representatives say, it is possible to ensure the rights of the majority. The public security and stability are given as priorities in current policies. Thus, the religious market is increasingly under the supervision of political actors, who invent new legal means to achieve their aims. As we will see later, this process leads to favoring of some communities of believers and to discriminating of others.

## 4.2 Public discourse

The regulation of religious market takes place also in the dimension of the public discourse, expressed by politicians, mass media and some scholars. The most popular categories used in public discussions are „Wahhabism,” „fundamentalism,” „traditional” and „non-traditional” religions. These terms are used as a tool of division between those who are or should be deprived of religious rights and those who deserve them. Traditionally-oriented Muslims are regarded in this framework as „liberal,” „tolerant,” „state- friendly;” Fundamentalists labeled Wahhabis are portrayed as „backward,” „integrist,” or „terrorist.” Thus Wahhabism is mostly regarded as a synonym of religious extremists or fanatics.

The war with so-called Wahhabism is a common phenomenon for Central Asia and the Caucasus. In a new reality that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the sudden appearance of religious pluralism included the spread of radical Islamic ideas. To prevent this trend the state has taken some measures which at the same time limit the religious freedoms guaranteed by the law. Using the slogan of „war with terrorism,” which has intensified after September 11, the governments seek to control religious symbols and institutions and to monopolize the right to interpret Islam. Although radicalism is not felt by average Azerbaijani, there was one terror attack in 2008 at a „Wahhabi” mosque Abu Bakr in Baku. Till today the motives standing behind that act have remained unknown, but nevertheless they served as a justification of arrests and restriction of activities of „Wahhabi communities.” From time to time there are news reports about extremist groups that intend to commit terror acts and destabilize the political situation. The accusations were also made by the official Shiite clergy and the governmental bodies. Independent religious communities claim that the state exaggerates the threat of radicalism to mobilize local and international sympathy for its undemocratic measures taken against certain groups. Nonetheless, the public opinion has generally accepted this

rhetoric and holds a very negative view of Wahhabis.

Using the label „Wahhabism” in the sense of dangerous opponents has a long tradition; it dates back to the very beginning of al-Wahhab’s movement in the eighteenth century. The understanding of Wahhabis as radical and extremist Muslims is shared by virtually every citizen of Azerbaijan. In fact, Wahhabis are, in majority, pious Muslims who do not fit into state’s model of Islam. To avoid the negative connotation of the term Wahhabism, they call themselves Salafi Muslims, meaning those who follow the tradition of the first generations of followers of the Prophet Muhammad. Salafism is one of the main and most rapidly spreading Islamic movement of the globalization era appealing to young people looking for pious orthodox religious identity. Most of Salafi Muslims in Azerbaijan are not radical and distance themselves from politics. They represent the phenomenon of neofundamentalism in the sense of Olivier Roy [12], i.e., Islam focused on the family, morality and mosque practices.

„Do not meet with Wahhabis!” shouted my friend Layla with horror when I told her that I had arranged a meeting with a member of this group. „We are afraid of them, because they are terrorists. Our teacher was trying to convince us that not all Wahhabis are terrorists, only some, but I do not know...” She is always afraid of them, especially in the metro. She has one Wahhabi in a family. He joined this group when he came to Baku to study geography at the Baku State University. Layla’s family opposed his decision. For some time, the young man used to visit his relatives and always made an effort to convince them that they had no idea about Islam. Layla was terrified so much that she did not dare to talk to him at all. He criticized everything. Consequently, the family expelled him from home and broke all relationships. „Wahhabis claim that only those who behave exactly like them are true Muslims!” she added at the end.

The scheme presented above is employed in local state politics. By classifying some groups as extremists or fundamentalists, the government and the president underline the features of „proper” religion and way of practice that they favor. Religious values and norms should, first of all, support the nationalist ideology and Islamic norms are to be understood as cultural norms. President Ilham Aliyev frequently expresses this idea, for example:

Our religion is Islam. We follow our religious and ethnic traditions, try to raise our young generations in the spirit of patriotism, in the national spirit [1].

In the early 1990s, Azerbaijani politicians discovered the value of religious capital and soon a number of them, including the formerly communist president, undertook the strategy of presenting themselves as true Muslims:

The current work presents our nationwide leader Heydar Aliyev as connoisseur of Koran and Islamic sciences, traces back Aliyev’s views on Islamic morality and spiritual values as referred to appropriate fragments from Koran, stressing his particular erudition in

theological sciences; Dr. Adil Al-Falah carried out a thorough analysis of Aliyev's speeches and reports to authoritative international forums, conferences, held in Baku and other places worldwide, his meetings and discussions with world leaders. Following the results of his analysis, Dr. Al-Falah lays a special emphasis on Aliyev's selfless love to his people, land, religion; the author shows that Heydar Aliyev harshly criticized double standard policies pursued by some great powers with respect to major political problems [5, p. 6].

These sentences from an introduction *sheikh-ul-islam* Pashazade wrote to a book on the life and ideology of the former president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev point to the use of Islam as an ideological tool in the state's religious policy and, moreover, to the alliance between official Shiism and the state. In an effort to deal with sudden and vital Islamic market, the traditional cooperation between Shiite and secular powers regains its significance. The *sheikh* expected protection and privileges for his hierarchy of clergy; politicians needed religious legitimization to their public activity.

Political leaders have demonstrated an ambivalent attitude towards religious affairs. On the one hand, they saw an advantage in the use of Islam as an effective ideological tool and, on the other hand, they were afraid that the rising religiosity in the country would threaten their positions. What Elcibey and Aliyev had in common was their willingness to promote themselves as true committed Muslims. Both of them used every possible opportunity to take part in religious celebrations, and Aliyev even went for an *umra* (lesser pilgrimage) to Mecca as the first political leader from Azerbaijan [14].

To sum up, the state is trying to interpret and regulate Islamic religion denying the pluralism inherent in it. New religious movements that gained popularity with the opening of borders around 1991 are discouraged by the government as not fitting into the state model of national Islam. Islam in the strategy of Azerbaijani political and religious Shiite establishment shall be understood in relation to culture and national traditions. Those Muslims who search for religious meanings and openly manifest it by introducing religion into the public sphere (i.e., contributing to the global phenomenon of de-privatization of religion) are treated as threatening the public order. The Wahhabi label is useful in distinguishing „dangerous” Muslims who use Islamic symbols (in Azerbaijani context—*hijab*, „Islamic beard,” and shorter trousers typical of Salafis) from the proper „traditional” Muslims that define their religiosity in ethnic frameworks. The freedom of religious practice is still stressed as one of the basic freedoms in independent Azerbaijan, but limited in scope to those support the state's religious ideology.

### 4.3 Informal practices

Although the state has endeavored to create an image of a tolerant, liberal democracy and a secular country with a separation between religion and other spheres of social life, it has, at the same time, adopted an old, well-known from

the history, strategy of that can be called „heretic-hunting.” It refers to the fight against activities of those groups and individuals that hold independent ideas and are not willing to conform to the state’s expectations. By a heretic I mean, following the word’s Greek etymology, a person who makes his own choice. In the post-Soviet context, heretics are people choosing different variant of religion than recommended or imposed on the society by politicians. The exact meaning of the word has been changing, but according to the most recent trend an increasing number of religious groups, movements and figures are included in this category. The state acts here in a similar way to that the Church played in the past being the institution able to establish the norms of „orthodoxy” and „mainstream religion.” Earlier I have highlighted the legal means and strategies employed in the public discourse to regulate religious diversity and now the focus of attention will shift towards less formal practices that restrict religious rights of some groups of Muslim believers.

A non-governmental organization DEVAM headed by imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, a famous independent religious leader, assembles Muslims fighting for protection of conscience and freedom. After state officials forced Ibrahimoglu and his community to move out from „their” mosque, they gather in an apartment that serves as a meeting and lecture room, place of prayer and of DEVAM activities. When I came for an interview I had to wait a little for the imam; his coworker explained that on that day journalists kept calling, since there had been a problem with *azan* (a Muslim call for prayer). Unofficial ban on *azan*, which is a basic element of Islamic tradition, was sent „from above” to many mosques in the capital and in other regions. The government hoped to halt this tradition, the young man said. There was no official document in that matter and nobody admitted to be responsible for the decision. However, an official of state-related SCWRO confirmed that the prohibition was based on the state’s recommendations.

That controversy followed a longer problem of closing the largest mosques in Baku by the state. In recent years a number of mosques have been closed or demolished. Usually an official reason was given, but it never satisfied believers, as e.g. the claim that a mosque had been constructed illegally, it had not received official status, or simply had to be shut down for „repairs.” Among those closed are the Sunni mosques Abu Bakr (so-called „Wahhabi mosque”), and „Shahidlar” mosque. Both of them were the most popular among Baku’s youth discovering their religious roots. When Sofi Bedford conducted her research on Islamic activism in Baku in 2004-2005, the number of mosque visitors to the Abu Bakr mosque was surprisingly high in comparison to other Islamic places in the capital. While the majority of Shia mosques were visited by only a handful of believers, this Sunni center had around 8000 people coming for Juma prayer [2]. Today the situation is different, since the mosque had been closed after the terrorist attacks in it in 2008. The Salafis I met attend now mostly the much smaller Lezgin mosque in the Old City. However most of their activities are hold at private homes. One of my respondents said that she meets with her „sisters” usually two-three times a week.

Professor Rafail Musla Oglu Hasanov proposed his hypotheses explaining the

process of shutting down mosques in an allegedly religion-friendly state: „Today there is a trend among politicians to be suspicious of hostile and nonconformist ideas. There is a fear in political circles of Islamism or the use of religion to achieve political gains. Political Islam can trigger radicalism in attitudes and mentality. People are eager, although sometimes unconsciously, to listen to such ideas. And such people and diverse slogans became visible in many mosques. That’s one of the main reason for mosques close.”

Even though recent restrictions of religious practice and symbols have touched all practicing Muslims, the main unofficial fight with „public religion” is directed against Salafi believers. During a focus group with Baku’s Sunni Muslim men, they gave me some examples of discrimination. One of them said: „Today there are a lot of problems with religion. Before there was only traditional Islam; orthodox wing appeared only 10-15 years ago. My Salafi friend came back from the university of Madina after five years of studies and he got arrested. He was forced to choose the offense: drugs or something else and to sing that.” Another Muslim admitted that such cases occur: „Political spheres recommend unofficially not to engage in religious practice. Once, when I was doing namaz (Muslim prayer) with my friends in a public place, we got arrested by the police. They made us sign a document that we are not terrorists.”

Since the main sign of Salafi Muslim men is their longish beard with no mustache, the state’s moves are directed against that „Wahhabi” symbol. In some cases, religious Muslims were forced to shave their beards or taken to the police station for such shaving. Usually, those men were left free afterwards, as if the beard was the only reason for detention. Salafis in Baku have also a problem with gathering for prayers. Their main mosque, Abu Bakr mosque, was closed in 2008, and most of their religious activities take place in private apartments. Gunel—a 32-year-old Salafi woman—told me her story from her community’s life. She witnessed a police action against small gatherings of people who came to a private place to discuss the Koran and hadiths. While she and her „sisters” were reading religious scriptures, the police came and ordered them to open the door. The owner replied that she cannot, because her husband is out and she is not allowed to open the doors to strange men. The officials threatened that they would unhinge the doors. Fortunately, they have not fulfilled their threats but she was seriously scared. Some other women she knew were taken to the police and kept for hours and interrogated.

Such informal practices aim at discouraging religious people from following other than state-approved model of Islam. Religious rights are thus taken away from devout Muslims and granted to those who are following Islam in a „traditional way,” i.e., merge it with ethnic values and norms, who listen to local Azerbaijani religious authorities and restrict their religious activities to private sphere and religious holidays. In that way, revivalist movements that have been attracting Muslims all over the world are discouraged by the Azerbaijani state.

## 5 Conclusion

Religious diversity that appeared in post-Soviet and post-secular Azerbaijan has been a great challenge for the state. As the pluralization of religious market came very suddenly and unexpectedly, political elites had to search for methods and strategies of dealing with this phenomenon without the help any established patterns. In the paper I have analyzed two main types of strategies the Azerbaijani state undertook in order to handle the revitalization of religion and parallel process of pluralization of religious sphere. The initial chaos in religious migrations resulted in numerous Islamic preachers coming to the Caucasus to propagate their model of religion. Missionary activities were made easier by the liberal law that characterized the first years of independence. The second half of the 1990s witnessed a gradual shift in religious policy from the free market towards the increasingly monopolized religious economy.

I argue that politicians have taken advantage of the concept of religious rights to pursue their aims. On the one hand, it served as a tool in international relations. The aspirations of Azerbaijani elites are oriented towards the West and therefore they use every opportunity to present their country as a liberal democratic state where religious tolerance and the freedom of religion are among the most-protected values. On the other hand, as the majority of Azerbaijanis are Muslims, the state is presenting itself as a member of the global Islamic community but with clearly moderate character.

Another sphere of state's interference is the internal religious market. After the liberalization which ensured religious rights of practice and belief for virtually every believer, the government and the president changed their strategy to control and regulate religious activities in the country. The state-promoted national model of Islam was granted with privileges and rights. It is underlined by the political establishment that their way of understanding Islamic religion as a part of national heritage and thus limited to a large extent to the private sphere is a effective way to counter Islamism (political Islam) and Islamic radicalism. The struggle against other Islamic traditions is carried out under the slogan of „war on terror.”

State practices have visible effects in the contemporary religious situation. In fact, in comparison to other post-Soviet Muslim republics Azerbaijan has relatively little problems with Islamic extremism. From time to time, there are press releases about arrests of small groups suspected of collaboration with terrorist groups from the Northern Caucasus or Al-Qaida, but the human rights defenders suggest that it is not a serious problem; it is in the state's interest to uphold the image of an enemy to justify their restrictive means.

Another consequence of state's religious policy is the regulation of Islamic pluralism in the country. Religious rights are granted to „traditional” Muslims and those believers who prefer the privatized version of religion. Those who are under the influence of the revivalist Islamic movements or are close to political version of religion have been limited in their freedoms. That process is visible in the legal sphere, in the public discourse and in unofficial practices of state officials. As a result, the most popular Sunni movements such as Salafism are

referred to as „Wahhabis,” who in the public perception are seen as dangerous radicals threatening the stability of the country and society.

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