The Instrumentalization of Islam in the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict Over Nagorno-Karabakh: Through the Beginnings of the Dispute in the 1980s to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020

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Abstract

This research focuses on the role and impact of Islamic discourses in the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. As an ethnoterritorial interstate dispute between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis, the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict is an intriguing case study from the perspective of instrumentalization of Islamic discourses. This research, thus, attempts to explore whether and how Islamic rhetoric has evolved since the 1980s, when the Conflict erupted upon the rubbles of the godless Soviet Union, until the most recent war of 2020. While the peculiarities of Azerbaijani Islam are thoroughly discussed in this research to demonstrate how they relate to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a particular emphasis is put on illustrating the Islamic discourses surrounding the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020. Furthermore, this thesis draws on important Islamic concepts like Islamic Solidarity and *Ummah* to analyze how Islam 'mattered' in this ongoing ethno-territorial conflict. Using discourse and media analyses as well as historical approaches, this research investigates the ways Islam entered the Conflict and gradually became more involved in it, reaching its 'Islamic peak' in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020. As for theoretical contributions, this research attempts to look at the contemporary Azerbaijani politics from a 'post-secular' light, thus challenging the discourse that post-secular perspectives are only applicable to modern Western societies. Moreover, I critically reflect on the notion of Azerbaijanis' orinetalization within the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, adding to the existing theory on this intriguing discourse.

Key Words: Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Islamic Solidarity, Instrumentalization of Islam, Azerbaijani Islam

Table of Contents

Introduction

Research Question and Relevance

In early November 2020, when thousands of Armenians and Azerbaijanis were caught in a renewed warfare over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious leaders of Azerbaijan shared this message to the outside world: “The escalating conflict the world is witnessing between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not religious in nature, no matter how much others wish it to be, nor is Azerbaijan playing the "Muslim invader" part in international fantasy” (Newsweek 2020).

The most recent all-out war in the Caucasus broke out on September 27, 2020, and lasted only 44 days, ending on November 9 with a cease-fire agreement that redrew the political map of the region. The war had a devastating impact on Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the disputed region that both countries claim as their own, Nagorno-Karabakh, taking thousands of lives on both sides and forcing tens of thousands of mainly ethnic Armenian civilians out of their homes. It was fought on many fronts – from actual warfare to ‘social media wars’, from political contestations to confrontations in the Armenian and Azerbaijani diaspora communities.

Among the many layers of the 2020 war was the fact that (mostly) Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis were fighting each other in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh area/region at the border between Asia and Europe, East and West. Religious belonging and religious difference became some of the most significant characteristics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in general and the 2020 War in particular. Political and religious leaders from all over the Globe did not hesitate to side with either Christian Armenians or Muslim Azerbaijanis in their claims of restoring historical justice in this new phase of armed struggle between the two nations. Yet intriguingly, as shown above, the religious authorities of Azerbaijan vigorously denied the war had any religious motives. In their message to the outside world, they even quoted from the sacred books of the three Abrahamic religions, making sure that the world does not perceive the renewed armed violence in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenians and Azerbaijanis as a clash between Islam and Christianity:

> It is dangerous to play politics with religion—and equally so to attempt to pit religions against each other.

> It need not be this way. For in the Torah it is said: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18); in the Bible "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39); and in the Koran "Be good to your parents, to relatives, to orphans, to the needy, and the neighbor who is a kinsman, and the neighbor who is not related to you and your companions" (4:36) (Newsweek 2020).

So, in the autumn of 2020, when Armenians and Azerbaijanis were fighting for control over Nagorno-Karabakh, the leaders of the three main religious communities of Azerbaijan were communicating a message to the world that the war is not religious, and Azerbaijan is not the *"Muslim invader"*, while some exponents of the European far right, for instance, were calling out the *"Islamic barbarism"* of Azerbaijan against the *"Christian Armenian friends"* (@geertwilderspvv, October 6, 2020).

The main objective of this research is twofold. First, this research attempts to show how Islamic discourses have evolved throughout the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh since the beginning of its modern phase in 1988. Furthermore, towards the end of the thesis I elaborate how, to what extent and why Islam mattered in the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani War over Nagorno-Karabakh. The fact that religious difference between Armenians and Azerbaijanis resonated so much in both local (Armenian and Azerbaijani) and international politics during and after the 2020 war is one of the reasons that studying Islamic discourses in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh can be intriguing and relevant to the study of political Islam. It is especially intriguing to research on Islamic discourses in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since both protagonists of the Conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan, are secular states. Among other reasons is the relatively little attention that this interethnic conflict has enjoyed in academia. In fact, I believe, not only the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict but also the other various ethnoterritorial conflicts in the South Caucasus have gotten rather little coverage in the Western academia in comparison to, for instance, the ones in the Balkans or in the Middle East. However, given how close the region is to Europe, both geographically and politically, this sometimes comes as a surprise. Therefore, with this research I also aim to make this academic gap narrower and hope to encourage further contributions on the study of the South Caucasus.

Positionality

My lived experience throughout several stages of the conflict as an Armenian has also certainly motivated me to conduct this research and contribute to the academic study of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The way I have experienced the conflict and perceived it, thus, is not at all free from personal biases and convictions. That is why I believe it is crucial to shed light on the issue of my own positionality in this research. Acknowledging the fact that it would perhaps be impossible for me to write on this politically contested topic fully objectively, it is nevertheless my primary goal to research how politics and Islam intermingled in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. To reach this goal, I will use relevant academic literature and media sources, while at the same time avoiding jumping into generalized conclusions. Furthermore, this research neither disregards, nor denies the escalated rhetoric of Christian nationalism on the Armenian side of the conflict. Thoroughly addressing that, however, would be far beyond the reach of this thesis, so that dimension of the religious side of the conflict will get less attention and will be mostly illustrated when it is needed to elaborate the spurge of Islamic discourses during the Conflict. My choice of researching Islamic discourses in the Conflict is moreover conditioned by my background in Oriental Studies and my academic interest in Islam within Religious Studies. More importantly, it is crucial to note that this research does not deny or underestimate the sufferings caused by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to several generations of Armenians and Azerbaijanis and has not been written to serve as a sort of apologia for either of the sides of the conflict.

Theoretical Framework

As for the theoretical framework of this thesis, the secular-post-secular dichotomy is of crucial importance. Drawing from the theories of renowned scholars of secularism and post-secularism, this study reflects on the modern stage of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, with its ‘highlight’ of the 2020 war.

It is important to note that the secular and post-secular have been extensively studied from a Western perspective by the Western academia. As such, both terms were mostly developed to reflect on the societies in the West. Charles Taylor, for instance, argues that contemporary Western societies live in a secular age in contrast to other modern societies, while affirming that a secular

society is one where "you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God" (Taylor 2007, 1). Furthermore, Taylor identifies three ways of understanding what a secular society means. The first way of understanding it is through the public space; a society is secular if God is excluded from its public space. The second 'type' of secularity is the one where people lose religiosity and belief God, disassociating themselves from religious institutions. The third way of making sense of a secular society is through the notion of "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (Taylor 2007, 2-3). In other words, Taylor claims that there are several ways of defining the secular and understanding what a modern secular society entails, while what matters to this study is that those definitions are overwhelmingly Western-centric and do not consider that non-Western societies can be truly secular.

Moreover, scholars like Jürgen Habermas have long established a link between (Western) Christianity and secularism, arguing that Christianity with its rational thought 'made secularism possible' in the West. Drawing from this genealogy of secularism, other religions, particularly Islam were thought to be unable to 'lead to' either secularism or modernity (Braidotti et al 2014, 1-2). Rosi Braidotti et al, however, challenge this perspective, claiming that the Habermasian notion of the secular, embedded in the (Western) Christian tradition with its alleged rational, modern thought, is problematic. They argue that modernization policies and emancipation of marginal groups are still very much in progress in the West, thus affirming that "no simplified dichotomies should be set up between an allegedly progressive Christian tradition and the allegedly backward others, starting with the Muslim." They moreover hold that "different forms of secularism may be engendered by multiple models of modernity." In other words, Braidotti et al argue, that neither secularism nor modernity are restricted to modern Western societies (2014, 3-4). This perspective on secularism is relevant to this research since it affirms the legitimacy of other models of secular societies, namely non-Western Muslim ones. This research shows how one of those secularisms, namely the one in modern Azerbaijan, functions and relates to the interethnic conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Different from the Western models of secularism, the post-secular Azerbaijani one has some intriguing peculiarities which are discussed in this thesis in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Apart from secular perspectives, I believe that post-secular perspectives are also relevant to incorporate into this research to critically reflect on the Azerbaijani society and politics. Again, as is case the with secularism, post-secularism too has been defined and discussed mostly in relation to modern Western societies. However, even when it was used to apply to contemporary Western societies, scholars have hardly agreed what it really entails. Justin Beaumont et al, for instance, recognize several rubrics on the post-secular. One of those is the *naivete* which considers the post-secular from a chronological perspective, as a stage that follows the secular phase. Another one is the *critical* rubric. As the name suggests, this view at the post-secular challenges the discourse that Western societies are secular and that the modern and the secular are parts of the same project. This perspective ultimately argues that the secular understanding of today's Western societies does not do justice to their complexities and thus post-secular perspectives should be applied to study them. The third one is the *genealogy* perspective. Here, the post-secular is "a way to subvert the presentist narratives of secularity, or to offer a vindication for its accomplishment, while also throwing light on how vindicating those accomplishments presupposes what is to be explained" (Beaumont et al 2020, 297). Finally, Beaumont et al ultimately argue that post-secularity is best explained as a *reflexive secularity*. From this perspective, "postsecularity concerns assemblages of antagonist processes unfolding through state secularization, and structures and practices that uphold respect for one's right to faith" (2020, 299).

Nevertheless, in whatever way the post-secular is illustrated, it is meant to reflect on modern Western societies. Habermas himself, who popularized the term 'post-secular' argues that it could only be applied to the affluent societies of the North Atlantic world (Habermas 2008, 17). However, conflicts like the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh throw another challenge at the modernity-secular-post-secular triangle. What I mean is that the conflict is not indeed a Western one, i.e., no Western power is directly involved in it. While this being the case, both countries are, and have been for a long time, secular states,[1] and of course what I ultimately hope to demonstrate in this thesis is that Islam, and religion as a whole, have played a significant role in the modern developments of the conflict. Hence, the conflict in its modern stage is, on the one hand, obviously non-Western, while it has developed in ways beyond the secular, on the other.

[1] Furthermore, Azerbaijan also boasts being the first secular nation in the Islamic and Turkic world. Due to a 70-year-long Soviet legacy both Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as Nagorno-Karabakh have well-rooted secular traditions.

That is why it can indeed be intriguing to see, through an analysis of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, whether, contrary to Habermas's (2008, 17-19) argument, non-Western societies or politics can be studied through post-secular lenses.

Another theoretical prism that is relevant to this study is the orientalization thesis. Inspired by Edward Said's well-known *"Orientalism,"* the Azerbaijani scholar Farid Shafiyev holds that Azerbaijanis have been orientalized in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and particularly in the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh. A detailed discussion of Shafiyev's paper is given later in this thesis, while main arguments of Said's renowned work are presented here.

Orientalism, Said holds, is meant to be several interconnected things. First definition of Orientalism, Said argues, is the academic one. While many scholars, dealing with the Orient, approach it from rather different angles (anthropological, linguistic, philological and so on), anyone who academically studies the Orient, Said affirms, is an Orientalist. Other than that, Said holds that "Orientalism is a style of thought" that recognizes the arbitrary distinctions between the Orient and the Occident. In this general understanding, some features, practices, customs are thought to be essential and inseparable from the Orient and its people. The third definition explains Orientalism "as a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." In this regard, Said defines Orientalism as a discourse "by which European culture was able to manage and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period." (Said 1978, 10-11) In short, Said argues, that Orientalism is not merely a collection of myths and lies about the Orient, but a system of knowledge that has seen a significant amount of material investment, which enabled the "filtering through the Orient into the Western consciousness" (Said 1978, 14). Furthermore, what is central to Said's work is that the Orient has been long imagined as 'the Other' to the European Western 'Self.' Through this process of 'othering' the Orient has defined the West "as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1978, 9).

Thus, drawing from Said's *"Orientalism,"* Shafiyev holds that Azerbaijanis have been portrayed as the 'Other' in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, owing to the fact that Azerbaijanis are mostly Muslims, while Armenians are mostly Christians. This, Safiyev holds, led to the orientalization of the Azerbaijanis with all its negative implications since Azerbaijan was imagined to be part of the Orient, i.e., the 'Other' (2022, 88-90). Since this is an intriguing and a

new perspective to look at the conflict, I critically reflect on Shafiyev's paper in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

The renowned and often controversial theory of the clash of civilizations, which has been a well-discussed matter in several studies on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, is also revisited in this thesis. Huntington's famous book has not ignored the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the assumed 'civilizational differences' between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Indeed, it can hardly come as a surprise that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh could become a perfect example of explaining how and why civilizations clash. These two neighboring nations view each other as the perfect 'Other' and insist that major differences exist between what is perceived to be pure Armenian and Azerbaijani. Huntington says:

In the former Soviet Union, communists can become democrats, the rich can become poor and the poor rich, but Russians cannot become Estonians and Azeris cannot become Armenians. In class and ideological conflicts, the key question was "Which side are you on?" and people could and did choose sides and change sides. In conflicts between civilizations, the question is "What are you?" That is a given that cannot be changed. And as we know, from Bosnia to the Caucasus to the Sudan, the wrong answer to that question can mean a bullet in the head (Huntington 1996, 34).

Religion, in fact, is only one of such differences. If we take, for example, linguistic difference one could also see clashes that involve elements of ethnic belonging and self-realization as a nation. Azerbaijani is a Turkic language, closely related to other languages in the same family, with Turkish as its closest mutually intelligible language. Armenian, on the other hand, is an Indo-European language. Therefore, Armenians and Azerbaijanis speak completely different tongues and have different ethnic origins which also have the potential to diverge them further, given the fact that these two peoples are in a dispute over a territory.

However, religious difference, I believe, has perhaps been more capable of widening the 'civilizational gap' between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Huntington (1996, 34) further argues that: "Even more than ethnicity, religion discriminates sharply and exclusively among people. A person can be half-French and half-Arab and simultaneously even a citizen of two countries. It is more difficult to be half-Catholic and half-Muslim." On top of that, considering the fact that several international reactions to the war classified the war as a clash between the Armenian-Christian and Azerbaijani-Islamic civilizations, it would be intriguing to study whether and how

Islam ‘clashed’ with Christianity in the Conflict and whether the war can be analyzed as an example of ‘clash of civilizations.’

Methodology

As mentioned above, this research aims to explore how Islamic discourses evolved throughout the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and how Islam mattered in the 2020 war. To reach this overarching goal, several research methods will be used. First, this thesis will use historical methods to shed a light on the previous stages of conflict with a particular focus on religious difference and Islam. I make use of historical approaches to give an account of the complex history of Nagorno-Karabakh. I critically reflect on the history of the region, analyzing Armenian, Azerbaijani, and international publications on the history of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Furthermore, I make extensive use of discourse analysis in an attempt to analyze the Islamic-nationalistic/militaristic rhetoric, identities, beliefs that were constructed through language use in various circles of the Azerbaijani government, media, and religious elite in the course of the modern stage of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (1988-ongoing) and especially around the 2020 War. Comprehensive discourse analysis is also relevant to my thesis in order to examine the production and reception of those rhetoric, identities. The documented speeches, statements, condemnations and so on will be used as data to examine those rhetoric, identities, and beliefs.

Besides, I also employ media analysis especially in light of the contemporary stages of the Conflict with a special focus on the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which was widely discussed in local (Armenian and Azerbaijani) as well as international media. Thus, I analyze Armenian, Azerbaijani and international media publications about the Conflict and demonstrate how Islamic discourses were amplified in them. Social media analysis is also relevant to this study since the latest armed confrontations over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh led to many discussions on various social media platforms where the War and the Conflict were discussed, among other thing, along religious lines.

Overview of Chapters

This Master's thesis consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter of this thesis explores the ancient history of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh and illustrates how territory, ethnicity, and religion interweave in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and how 'Muslimness' becomes territorial in various discourses in Azerbaijan after the start of the conflict in the late 1980s. The second chapter delves into the religious landscape of the Republic of Azerbaijan to examine how Islam 'works' in the country. The main aim of this chapter is to illustrate the contemporary policies of regulating, shaping, and developing an Azerbaijani version of Islam that takes into account the struggles and challenges of the country, especially in light of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The second chapter follows a historical approach as well, yet it does not examine Azerbaijani Islam 'in its full chronological extent', but rather focuses on how Islam was inherited from an atheist Soviet Socialist state into the modern republic of Azerbaijan. This chapter deals with Azerbaijan's first three presidents years of rule (1991-2003), while the third chapter deals with the Islamic policies introduced during Azerbaijan's fourth president Ilham Aliyev (2003-ongoing). The third chapter demonstrates the contradictory nature of religious policies in Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan and elaborates on how the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict shapes the religious landscape of the country. The third chapter looks into the relevance of key concepts such as Islamic solidarity and pan-Islamism, while also illustrates why and how Azerbaijani society and politics might be studies from a post-secular perspective. The last fourth chapter deals with the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani War over Nagorno-Karabakh. It first gives a brief overview of the War and then discusses the various allegations of foreign jihadi mercenary fighters in and around Nagorno-Karabakh during autumn 2020. Lastly, the chapter illustrates how Islam was instrumentalized by Azerbaijani and non-Azerbaijani governments, religious authorities and media. The thesis ends with a conclusion which addresses the end result of the research and provides an answer to the research question.

1: History of the Disputed Region of Nagorno-Karabakh: From Ancient State Formations to the 1994 Ceasefire Agreement

The South Caucasus is a region unlike any other. The region, occupying an area of around 186,000 square kilometers, is home to a great diversity of ethnicities, languages, and religions. Located on the border between Asia and Europe, the South Caucasus has a complex and complicated history. Throughout much of its past, different empires and states took control of the South Caucasus and its people, leaving their influences amongst the nations of the region. A great deal of the contemporary history of the South Caucasus owes to the seven decades of the Soviet-Russian rule. Accordingly, the current political landscape and unresolved disputes of the region take their roots in the long history of foreign imperial- mainly Soviet-Russian- rule.

This chapter deals with the history of Nagorno-Karabakh, one of those disputed territories of the South Caucasus. The chapter particularly illustrates the history of the region from a religious perspective as a zone of dispute and confrontation between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis.

Background to the South Caucasus and Karabakh: Naming the Disputed Region between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

To get an idea of how complicated the political situation is in the South Caucasus, it is perhaps sufficient to note that out of the six state entities of the region only three are internationally recognized – the republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.[2] Alongside these three de jure recognized republics, three other de facto independent states – the republics of Abkhazia, Artsakh, and South Ossetia – have enjoyed broad areas of self-governance for decades.[3] The existence of these small states has defined much of the challenges of the contemporary South Caucasus. This mountainous region of small countries has suffered from major economic blockades, closed borders, and interethnic violence largely because of the existence of these disputed regions and the

[2] Azerbaijan and Georgia are fully recognized by all UN member states, while Armenia, as of 2022, has not been recognized by one UN member state- the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. All three South Caucasian countries are UN member states.

[3] When referring to Artsakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia as republics in this research, I do not express an personal stance on the matter of their sovereignty.

question of their independence. The international recognition of these three self-proclaimed republics has proven difficult: throughout their decades-long existence only Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been able to get some international recognition by a handful of countries.[4]

The 'most unrecognized' of these three South-Caucasian de-facto independent republics remains the Republic of Artsakh, more widely known as Karabakh or Nagorno-Karabakh in international politics and discussions.[5] This 'no man's land' is a small mountainous area, which is internationally recognized as part of the Republic of Azerbaijan, but since 1991 has been controlled by the ethnic Armenians of the region who declared the region independent on the verge of the collapse of the USSR.[6] Since its de-facto independence of 1991, the matter of Nagorno-Karabakh's belonging entered international politics and has been known as 'Nagorno-Karabakh conflict', comprising a segment of larger post-Soviet conflicts.

With different levels of intensity, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has sparked the interest of international media since the late 1980s, when the Karabakh movement started in the dying Soviet Union as a national struggle of ethnic Armenians for the unification of the Nagorno-Karabakh region with Soviet Armenia. The question of Nagorno-Karabakh's belonging, its political status, its borders, international recognition, and many other matters have never been fully hammered out, nor have they been easy to understand. In fact, few things are undisputed when it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh; even the naming of the region is not unanimously accepted and reflects the complex history of what is internationally known as Nagorno-Karabakh.

For many the naming of this region/republic might be confusing. On the one hand, most people refer to the conflict and the region as (Nagorno) Karabakh, while on the other hand the self-proclaimed republic itself has been known as the Republic of Artsakh since 2017. The reason behind this confusion is rooted in a kind of a 'name politics' that reflects the Armenian or Azerbaijani claims of belonging of this small mountainous region.

[4] Abkhazia and South Ossetia are recognized by five UN member states: Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Vanuatu, and Syria.

[5] Some non-UN member states recognize Artsakh's independence. Those are Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria – the other unrecognized republics of the post-Soviet space. UN member Armenia also does not recognize Artsakh to be able to maintain neutrality and refrain from one-sided actions until the complete resolution of the conflict.

[6] The area of the Armenian control over Nagorno-Karabakh has changed throughout different phases of the conflict, though. Since late 2020, the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh has controlled a much smaller territory that it did prior to the 2020 war.

Armenians have historically called this region Artsakh – a name denoting one of the 15 provinces of the medieval Mets Hayk, the Kingdom of Armenia. Some scholars hold that 'Artsakh' is believed to stem from Armenian king Artashes's (190-159 BC) name. Nagorno-Karabakh, though, has a more intriguing etymology. 'Karabakh' is a Turkic-Persian word-expression, meaning 'black garden' (Lang 1981, x). Although now it is perhaps more appropriate to interpret the 'blackness' of the garden in terms of the sufferings it has caused to several generations of Armenians and Azerbaijanis, it initially meant 'fertile.' To add more linguistic fusion to the naming, the 'Nagorno' part in 'Nagorno-Karabakh' is of Russian origin, meaning 'mountainous' (De Waal 2003, 8) The naming of the region, as seen from theses linguistic blends, is neither straightforward nor unanimous and resonates within the complex past of the region. That being said, since the 14th century the Turkish-Persian Karabakh took over the Armenian Artsakh, and since the then the region has been more widely known as Karabakh (De Waal 2003, 8). Even the Armenians themselves have referred to the region as Karabakh and the people living there as 'Karabakhtsi.' Until relatively recently, the name 'Artsakh' was a rather forgotten historical term that got revived only because the Karabakh movement started in the late 20th century along with the revival of the Armenian nationalism. The preference over the term Artsakh had become so vital among the Armenians for their claim of the region's Armenian roots that in 2017 the former 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' got officially renamed the Republic of Artsakh (Political Geography Now, 2018). The conflict, nevertheless, never ceased to be called Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It should be noted, though, that Azerbaijanis never refer to the region as 'Artsakh,' while 'Karabakh' is common in both Armenian and Azerbaijani discourses. In short, when one is dealing with the self-proclaimed republic, 'Artsakh' is perhaps more appropriate to use, while when talking about the conflict or the region 'Nagorno-Karabakh' is more applicable.[7]

[7] Since 'Karabakh' is more widely used, neutral, and known internationally, this research will mostly use that term to talk about the region's history, without any political considerations. The 'Nagorno' component was a later Russian addition. The conflict is called 'The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict' since it began in the 1980s as a dispute between Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAO). Hence, when referring to the conflict, the term 'Nagorno-Karabakh' will be used.

Karabakh and its *'Unpredictable Past'* of Ancient and Medieval Times: The Meeting Point between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Christians and Muslims.

Karabakh's history, like its name and political status, has been one full of complexities and important nuances. The history of this landlocked mountainous region cannot be taken for granted in any research on Nagorno-Karabakh. For many decades, since even before the start of the Karabakh dispute in the late 1980s, Armenian and Azerbaijani historiographies have been 'fighting' over earlier, original belonging of the region (De Waal 2003, 149-151). Even nowadays in important political discussions, such as the 2020 political debate between Armenia's prime minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev, the question of Karabakh's origins remains a hot topic (Eurasianet, 2020). To this day, Armenian and Azerbaijani historians are debunking each other's claims, reasserting that Karabakh is originally either only Armenian or only Azerbaijani. Similar to several other disputed areas in the world, Nagorno-Karabakh has been described as a region with an *'unpredictable past'* (De Waal 2003, 146).

Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis designate a special place for Karabakh in their self-realization of ancient nations with a distinct history. Thomas De Waal, the author of perhaps the most critically acclaimed and famous book on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, comments on the conflicted history of Karabakh, saying:

> Two versions of history collided on this road. To hear the Armenians and Azerbaijanis tell it, this was the fault line between Christians and Muslims, Armenians and Turks, west and east. The trouble was neither side could decide where the boundary lay… The cultural and symbolic meaning of Nagorny[8] Karabakh for both peoples cannot be overstated. For Armenians, Karabakh is the last outpost of their Christian civilization and a historic haven of Armenian princes and bishops before the eastern Turkic world begins. Azerbaijanis talk of it as a cradle, nursery, or conservatoire, the birthplace of their musicians and poets (De Waal 2003, 3).

The ancient and medieval history of Karabakh is a rather conflicted matter. Both the Armenian and Azerbaijani historiographies have put a special emphasis on these periods specifically to legitimize the current claims over Nagorno-Karabakh. As per the Armenian historiography the

[8] Thomas de Waal refers to the region as Nagorny Karabakh, not Nagorno-Karabakh. The former is a less common spelling, while the former is how the region is usually referred to.

area of the region currently known as Karabakh, comprises of two Armenian provinces – Utik and Artsakh. The common discourse is to extend the 'Armenianness' of these territories to the ancient Kingdom of Urartu (9th-6th centuries BC). It is not uncommon to trace the origins of the Armenian 'Artsakh' to the Armenian Kingdom of Urartu, where it appeared as 'Urtekhe' or 'Urtekhini' (Ulubabyan 1994, 12-13). Movses Khorenatsi (5th century AD), the champion of ancient and early medieval Armenian historiography, attested that Artsakh was part of the Armenian dynasty of Ervandunis (4th-2nd centuries BC). Furthermore, the Greek geographer Strabo (64/63 BC - 24 AD) indicated that during the reign of Artashes I of the Artaxiad (Artashesian) dynasty, Artsakh had already been under permanent Armenian control. As for medieval sources, Artsakh and Utik – the two easternmost provinces of the Kingdom of Armenia, roughly corresponding to today's disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh – are included in the famous 7th century Armenian atlas 'Ashkarhatsuits.' Thus, Armenian sources claim that Artsakh and Utik remained part of the Kingdom of Armenia up until its fall in 428 AD. After 428 Artsakh and Utik came under the control of another neighboring Kingdom – Aghvank or Caucasian Albania[9] (Geukjian 2012, 30-31). This medieval kingdom roughly corresponded to the borders of today's Republic of Azerbaijan. According to the common Armenian historiography, the Kingdom of Caucasian Albania was heavily influenced by and dependent on Armenia and the Armenian Church. After the Arab and later Turkic invasions in the South Caucasus, Islam was spread in the previously Christian lands, and eastern parts of the former Caucasian Albania got Islamized, while the western parts, including the lands of Artsakh and Utik, stayed Christian and its population got assimilated with Christian Armenians and Georgians. The Armenian historiography does not suggest any direct link between the modern Azerbaijani nation and the ancient Caucasian Albanians. The Islamized Caucasian Albanians, Armenian scholars hold, got assimilated with the Iranians and Turks, got highly influenced by them, and thus the modern Azerbaijani nation was born with a Shi'i Muslim religious tradition and an Oghuz Turkic language (Tonoyan 2012, 128-130; Geukjian 2012, 31-32).

In sum, the Armenian history canon has 'claimed ownership' over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh through emphasizing the Christian-Armenian history of the region, while minimizing the Muslim-Azerbaijani heritage. As for Caucasian Albania, the dominant discourse is that it was heavily

[9] Caucasian Albania is not to be confused with the country in the Balkans. These are completely unrelated political-geographic entities.

Armenianized and dependent on a stronger and more established Armenian statehood, and that the modern Turkic Azerbaijanis did not share much with the ancient Caucasian Albanians.

The Azerbaijani historiography has tried to prove the opposite. Like the Armenians historians have tried to minimize the role of Turkic-Muslim influences on Karabakh, the Azerbaijani history canon has underestimated the importance of the Armenian traces. The main divergence from the Armenian historiography is that Azerbaijani scholars do claim that the modern Azerbaijani nation is the direct descendant of the medieval kingdom of Caucasian Albania. The Azerbaijani scholarship holds that Artsakh and Utik became part of Caucasian Albania long before 428 (Geukjian 2012, 33-34). De Waal, writing on the *unpredictable past* of Karabakh, refers to Azerbaijani scholars like Buniatov, who in the 1960s challenged the common view about Caucasian Albania. *"The scholarly consensus,"* as per De Waal, before Buniatov's academic career, was similar to that of the Armenian history canon: Caucasian Albanians were a Christian people but after the Arabo-Muslim invasions of the 10th century, they got assimilated with other nations of the region. Hence, partly Caucasian Albanian heritage can be traced in all the contemporary peoples of the Caucasus, but 'pure' Caucasian Albanians disappeared as a separate political and cultural entity centuries ago. Buniatov's main argument is that Caucasian Albanians did not vanish in the Middle Ages but survived until modernity. The Armenians however, Buniatov holds, have suppressed the Albanian identity, the Albanian Church, translated the Albanian literature into Armenian and then destroyed the originals. The Armenians of Karabakh, as per the Azerbaijani historiography, are not really Armenians but at best Armenianized Albanians and at worst 19th-century immigrants from other nearby Armenian-populated regions (De Waal 2003, 152-153). Since the medieval Caucasian Albania covered the territory of today's Nagorno-Karabakh, much of Eastern Armenia, all of Azerbaijan, and parts of Dagestan, the Azerbaijani historiography legitimized its claims over the disputed territories with Armenia (which throughout history also included large parts of the eastern regions of Armenia) through a direct lineage between the modern Azerbaijanis and ancient Caucasian Albanians (Geukjian 2012, 34).

Buniatov's tradition of Azerbaijani history and Karabakh's original belonging was further developed by Mamedova in the 1970s. Mamedova argues that all Armenian Christian heritage found in contemporary Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are actually Albanian. All the traces of Christian Albanian (hence, Azerbaijani) cultural heritage, as per Mamedova, were deliberately

destroyed by Armenians. A particular challenge to the legitimacy of the Azerbaijani historiography has been the existence of many medieval Christian-Armenian sites in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. A large number of these sites have inscriptions in medieval Armenian. On the issue of Armenian inscriptions on many of the churches and monasteries of Karabakh, Mamedova held that although the inscriptions were written in Armenian, the builders of those cultural-religious sites, the aristocracy of Karabakh, did not refer to themselves as Armenians, but rather as Albanians, 'Aghvank' in medieval Armenian. Furthermore, Mamedova suspected that the Armenian inscriptions could be superimposed over the original writings later in the 19th century. Thus, the Azerbaijani scholarship has undermined the pre-modern Armenian traces of Nagorno-Karabakh, claiming that the Christian-Armenian heritage of the region either belongs to the culture of medieval Caucasian Albanians, the ancestors of modern Azerbaijanis, or, in the case of Armenian inscriptions, might be a later falsification (De Waal 2003, 153-155).

The notion of territory, as seen from the paragraphs above, has been crucial in the realization of both Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalisms. The territory of Nagorno-Karabakh has become the center of nationalist aspirations for both peoples. Nationalistic feelings towards the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh could perhaps be explained in the mutual exclusion of each other from the history of the region. The importance of understanding one's nation in territorial terms also helps explain mobilization for and attachment to a territory. As Geukjian puts it: "When the territorialization of nationalism becomes a significant feature, nations residing and associating themselves with defined territorial borders usually show more attachment to territory" (Geukjian 2012, 4). Furthermore, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis believe that *"they were there first,' 'they had a superior right to that territory over all others."* As a result, Geukjian argues, "ethnicity became the primary feature in this argument and was often used to define 'the rights of citizenship'" (Geukjian 2012, 30). For Armenians, thus, Karabakh is an inseparable part of the nation's Armenian-Christian history with its medieval churches and monasteries, while for Azerbaijanis Karabakh is the bastion for the Azerbaijani identity and its territory is held as an ancient cradle for the development of the Turkic-Muslim identity of modern Azerbaijanis.

Karabakh in the Modern Era: From Armenian *Meliks* and the Turkic Karabakh *Khans* to the Armenian-Tatar Skirmishes of 1905-1906.

From the 16th century onwards Karabakh became one of the sites of contestation for the Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires. Nevertheless, for much of 16th-18th Karabakh was under the Persian Safavid rule with short periods of Ottoman dominion. Since Karabakh was part of the Safavid Empire and was previously administered within Karabakh-Ganja *baylarbaylik* (a Safavid administrative division) and ruled by a Safavid governor *baylarbayi*, the Muslim-Turkic trace became more apparent in this period of history. The Ziyadoghlu family of the Turkic Gajarid/Qajar dynasty (1789-1925), for example, were known to be the *baylarbayi*s of Karabakh under Safavid Persian rule (Imranli-Lowe 2022, 19-20).

Armenian historians emphasize the importance of the Armenian *meliks* or local princes of 17th-century Karabakh. In the 17th century Karabakh was already surrounded by Muslim empires, the Safavid Empire to the south/north/east and the Ottoman Empire to the west. In this period, not only in Karabakh but also in many other Christian-Armenian territories of Anatolia and the South Caucasus, Armenians relied on the protection of other powerful Christian rulers of the West and Russia. It is documented by the Armenian historiography how the *melik*s of Karabakh wrote a letter to the Pope, the Christian state of the Electoral Palatinate, and the Russian tzar Peter the Great, asking for protection from neighboring Islamic states (De Waal 2003, 149). However, Armenian scholars of history have ignored the fact that those *melik*s were heavily dependent on the Muslim Karabakh khans (Geukjian 2012, 32). In fact, the Christian *melikdoms* of Karabakh were given larger autonomy and privileges by Nadir Shah, Muslim by religion and of Turkic Afshar tribe. In 1736, Nadir Khan crowned himself Shah of Persia, putting an end to the Safavid rule. Thus, he trusted the governance of Karabakh to the local Christian princes, the *meliks* of Karabakh (Imranli-Lowe 2022, 20-21). It is interesting to note that even contemporary authors refer to the *meliks* of 17th-century Karabakh differently. Here again the 'academic rivalry' revolves around the real ethnicity of the meliks. De Waal, J. Walker, and Geukjian refer to them as 'Armenian *meliks*,' while Imranli-Lowe opts for 'Albanian *meliks*.' In his acclaimed monograph *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through War and Peace*, De Waal admits to being very conflicted in the maze of Karabakh's *'unpredictable past'*, also when it comes to the early modern period. To get a better understanding of the history and ethnic belonging of Karabakh's 17th-century *meliks*, De Waal sent a list of questions to Professor Robert Hewsen of Rowan College,

New Jersey, a scholar of Caucasian history. Hewsen, as per De Waal, referred to his 1982 article and critiqued both Azerbaijani historian Buniatov 'for bad history' and Armenian Mnatsakanyan 'for being selective with evidence.' On the issue of continual survival of the Caucasian Albanians, Hewsen concluded that it is rather difficult to find their traces and that perhaps Udins, a small Christian nation living in modern-day Azerbaijan can be considered the descendants of the Christian Albanians. As for the *meliks* of Karabakh, De Waal reports that Hewsen had not found any reasonable evidence that these local princes considered themselves anything but Armenian (De Waal 156-157).

The Armenian *melikdoms* fell into decline after the death of Nadir Shah in 1747. From 1747 until the Russian invasion of the early 19th century, Karabakh was mostly governed by Turkic rulers of the Djivanshir tribe (J. Walker 1996, 96). The Turkic Djivanshir rulers of this period are known to history as the Khans of Karabakh (Imranli-Lowe 2022, 21). The founder of the Khanate Panah Khan (1693-1763) successfully subjugated the five Karabakh *melikdoms* to this new Turkic-Muslim rule with the help of Armenian Melik Shahnazar (died in 1792), who found himself in opposition to the rest of the Armenian meliks. These two allies built the fortress of Shusha/Shushi.[10] This city-fortress soon became the seat of the Khans of Karabakh (J. Walker 1996, 96). From that point on, the city of Shusha/Shushi played a significant role in the history of the region and was held by both Armenians and Azerbaijanis to be the cultural-religious hub of Karabakh.

The 19th century brought about new changes in the political landscape of Karabakh and the South Caucasus in general. In the north the Russian Empire was getting stronger, and since the days of Peter the Great (1672-1725) this rising northern power had shown a constant interest in the Caucasus. Although the first Russian military campaign in the Caucasus was successfully completed in 1722, after Peter the Great's death, the Russians did not show much interest in the region until the beginning of the next century (Shafiyev 2023, 92). After Tsitsianov's (1805) conquest of Karabakh and the signing of the Gulistan treaty in 1813, a significant part of the South Caucasus, including Karabakh, fell under Russian control. After the official establishment of Russian rule in Karabakh in 1813, the only non-Russian governing body in Karabakh was the

[10] Azerbaijanis refer to the town as Shusha, while Armenians use Shushi. Internationally, the town is mostly known by its Azerbaijani name.

Turkic-Muslim Karabakh Khanate. Initially the Russians let the Khanate exist and enjoy semi-independence. The situation changed in 1822 when the Karabakh Khanate was abolished, and the region became a mere peripheral zone of the Russian Empire. Although Karabakh was under Russian hegemony, throughout different periods of Russian rule, its territory was included in various administrative divisions of the Russian Empire, all of which had a Turkic-Muslim majority. Hence, under imperial Russia, Karabakh was first incorporated into the Caspian province, then Shemakha (Baku) province and finally Elizavetpol province in 1868. All these provinces stretched eastward into the Turkic-populated areas of the South Caucasus, roughly corresponding to the area of the contemporary Republic of Azerbaijan. J. Walker argues that since the earliest periods of Russian rule in Karabakh till the declaration of independence of the Republic of Artsakh (then Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) in 1991, the Armenian majority of this mountainous region was 'administratively united with Turko-Islamic peoples' and had to struggle for the preservation of their Christian-Armenian identity (J. Walker 1996, 96-97). Intriguingly, Imranli-Lowe argues for the opposite; she holds that the Russian imperial aspirations resonated with the Armenian cause of claiming ownership over Karabakh. As per Imranli-Lowe, after Karabakh was 'liquidated and dismembered' as a 'political entity and natural geographical whole', the Russian imperial government abolished the Albanian Catholicosate in Karabakh and subordinated the Albanian Church to the Armenian Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin. As a result, the Albanian-Christian identity was suppressed, and Albanians of Karabakh (essentially Christian Azerbaijanis) were forcefully 'Armenianized.' This, according to Imranli-Lowe, was a thought-out project by the Russian imperial rule to create "a Christian buffer zone along its borders through the settlement of the loyal Christian population among the Muslims of the occupied territories, which would separate the Muslims of the southern Caucasus from their co-religionists in the Ottoman Empire and Persia" (Imranli-Lowe 2022, 22).

All the Armenian-Azerbaijani historical disagreements about the Russian rule over Karabakh aside, one thing is clear: the Russian imperial rule played a big role in developing a new phase of Armenian-Christian and Turkic-Muslim rivalry in Karabakh and beyond it. As argued by Geukjian: "All the administrative boundaries and divisions created by Russian imperial law ignored the ethnic composition of the population and their wishes. Moreover, the administrative units were intentionally designed by the Russian colonial administration not to correspond to ethno-territorial settlements" (Geukjian 2012, 39).

In spite of irregular administrative divisions, during most of the Russian imperial rule over Karabakh, the Armenian-Christian and Tatar-Muslim population of the region lived in relative peace.[11] This relative peace was disrupted in 1905-1906 when Karabakh, but also other areas of mixed Armenian-Tatar population, saw waves of interethnic skirmishes. This occurred when the Russian Empire was at its weakest, and both Armenians and Azerbaijanis 'each identified the other as a threat.' (De Waal 2003, 99). In Karabakh, the center of the interethnic violence was Shushi/Shusha, one of the most developed and prosperous cities of the Caucasus of the time (J. Walker 1996, 97).

Geukjian suggests economic reasons for the beginning of Armenian-Tatar interethnic violence in 1905. The skirmishes started in Baku, where most profitable and 'elite' jobs were occupied by Armenians, including Baku's renowned and profitable oil industry (Geukjian 2012, 43-44). Alongside industrial-economic reasons, ethno-religious differences between the two neighboring nations also played a role in fueling the skirmishes. J. Walker suggests that the clashes occurred because of "an age-old struggle of the Muslims of the plain seeking to dislodge the Christians of the highlands" (J. Walker 1996, 97). Accordingly, religious-nationalistic rhetoric among both Armenians and Azerbaijanis was slowly developing in this period.

During this time of crisis '*Diafai*' (Defense), an Islamic organization was created in Ganja to fight back against rival Armenians. The group "represented a radical Azerbaijani Muslim identity transcending national and ethnic characteristics" and was supported by radical Shi'i segments of the Azerbaijani society. During 'the second round' of skirmishes in Shusha/Shushi in 1906, the Muslim press in Baku expressed its distress with Armenians of Karabakh and suggested that 'Azerbaijani nation' and the 'Turks of Azerbaijan' should be separated from a more generic term 'Tatar,' which could be used for all Turkic nations worldwide. As the Azerbaijani nation was reshaping itself and restating its religious and ethnic identity, Armenians were doing more or less the same; they organized around the nationalistic *Dashnak* Party (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), while "Armenian national consciousness was profoundly expressed in the defense of the Armenian Church and against the Tatars and the Russians" (Geukjian 2012, 44-46).

[11] During the Russian rule the Turkic-Muslim population of the Caucasus were called 'Tatars' or 'Caucasian Tatars.' The skirmishes of 1905 and 1906 are also known in academia as Armenian-Tatar War or Armenian-Tatar massacres.

It is a curious matter that during much of the modern era the Turkic-Muslim people living in Karabakh and beyond were given different ethno-religious names. Unlike Armenians, who have always identified themselves and have been known to the world as Armenians, the emergence of the term Azerbaijani was a rather new phenomenon and was followed by a number of other ethno-religious terms: Persians, Tatars, Turko-Tatars, Azerbaijani Turks, Azerbaijani Tatars, Turks, or in religious terms – Muslims of Karabakh/South Caucasus (Imranli-Lowe 2022, 21). Although the Azerbaijani national consciousness took a long way to shape *and* "was slower to emerge than their [Azerbaijanis'] Muslim religious identity, expressed itself in the deep emotional link of Azerbaijanis with the territory of Azerbaijan" (Geukjian 2012, 46). The contemporary Azerbaijani national consciousness is thus intermingled with the nation's ethno-religious belonging and Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, taking its roots in the Azerbaijani version of their own history.

Karabakh After the Collapse of the Russian Empire: The Dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh from Independent Armenia and Azerbaijan to the Sovietization of the South Caucasus.

Since Russia was in a difficult transitionary state from a tzarist regime to a Socialist Bolshevik order, the political situation in the South Caucasus was favorable for the three main peoples – Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians – to declare independence. Hence, on May 26, 1918, Georgia declared its independence, while Armenia and Azerbaijani followed soon, declaring independence on May 28 (Souleimanov 2013, 99). However, since these nations had not enjoyed sovereignty for centuries, and since Russian imperial administrative division was designed "not to correspond to ethno-territorial settlements" (Geukjian 2012, 39), these newly independent countries were caught in a political chaos wherein each country had declared independence but none of the borders between these three states were clear. As for Armenia and Azerbaijan, the disputed territories were – from west to east – Nakhichevan, Zangezur/Syunik, and of course Karabakh. Both countries claimed all these territories and during their short existence fought over them.

The period of short Armenian and Azerbaijani independence saw a new development in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The British Empire became a regional player and sided with the newly independent Azerbaijan. What Britain essentially did during the first stages of the Karabakh

dispute between independent Armenia and Azerbaijan was to recognize Azerbaijani ownership of the disputed region and appoint Khosrov Bek-Sultanov (May 1918-June 1918) as its governor-general (De Waal 2003, 128-129). Hence the Azerbaijani Republic had the explicit support of Britain. Imranli-Lowe argues that the British support to Azerbaijan over the Karabakh issue was rightful, justified and was not only because of "the region's predominantly Muslim population, but also with the British policy, which aimed at achieving the confederation of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia under the British influence, keeping open for the British the short route to Persia and serving to some extent as a barrier to the southward expansion of Russia" (Imranli-Lowe 2022, 24). Geukjian, on the other hand, argues that the British support to Azerbaijan further escalated the conflict and furthered its settlement precisely because the British prevented the unification of Karabakh with Armenia. Of course, the Armenians of Karabakh did not accept any form of Azerbaijani dominion and rejected the pro-Azerbaijani British policies as well as Bek-Sultanov's governance (Geukjian 2012, 55).

These disagreements led to another wave of skirmishes in the region. Following this period of uneasy relationships between the two neighboring peoples, on August 22, 1919, an agreement was signed by both parties that essentially "confirmed the submission of Karabakh to Azerbaijan," while at the same time provided broad areas of autonomy, religious, cultural, educational, and other rights to the Armenian population of the region (Geukjian 2012, 57-58). Karabakh's ownership was discussed in Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) but yielded no results. Moreover, the British left Azerbaijan and Karabakh in August 1919, and the situation got out of hand (De Waal 2003, 128). Soon both sides started denying each other's rights in the region. An Armenian uprising emerged with a new wave of interethnic violence; the August 22 agreement looked good on paper but did not solve the complicated issue of Karabakh's ownership between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Several segments of the Azerbaijani society were distressed about this Armenian uprising and considered it a threat to their newly formed republic. Geukjian even argues that "All Azerbaijanis denounced the revolt and called for a holy war" (Geukjian 2003, 61). In March 1920, the historic city of Shushi/Shusha, the most populous settlement in Karabakh, with mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani population, became the center of a bloody massacre; up to 20000 Armenians were massacred in Shushi/Shusha. The March 1920 events became known as the massacre of Shusha/Shushi Armenians; the Armenian uprising against the Azerbaijani rule was silenced and hundreds died in the fortress-city (De Waal 2003, 128).

The political landscape in the Caucasus dramatically altered again starting from April 1920, when the Russian red army entered Azerbaijan, and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic got Sovietized. Azerbaijan, therefore, became the first Soviet Socialist country in the South Caucasus, soon to be followed by Armenia and Georgia. With the Sovietization of Azerbaijan, the Karabakh dispute was again in the area of Russia's political interests. On the issue of disputed territories between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Soviets adopted a pro-Azerbaijani stance since the ties between the Soviet Socialist Russia and Kemalist Turkey were getting stronger. It was a common Soviet-Kemalist ambition to provide a corridor between Soviet Azerbaijan and Turkey through the disputed territories of Nakhichevan, Zangezur, and Karabakh. Hence, Soviet Russia recognized Karabakh as part of Soviet Azerbaijan in 1920, like Britain recognized it as part of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic a year earlier (Saparov 2015, 95-96).

In December 1920, upon Armenia's defeat in the Armenian-Turkish war, Armenia too became a Soviet Socialist Republic (Saparov 2015, 99). Now that the two South-Caucasian republics were again in the Russian zone of influence, Soviet Russia initially decided to hand Karabakh to the newly Sovietized Armenia as a sort of a 'gift' for its Sovietization. Hence, in 1921 the government in Moscow asked the Azerbaijani Bolshevik authorities to recognize the transfer of the disputed territories into Armenia. Eventually, though, the Azerbaijani authorities rejected the recognition of this transfer, and especially after the signing of the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Brotherhood and Friendship in 1921, the authorities in Moscow handed Karabakh to the Soviet Azerbaijan. In the following years of 1923-1924, in the territory of Soviet Karabakh, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Okrug (NKAO) was created. More than 90 percent of the population of the NKAO were Armenians. It did not share a border with Armenia and occupied only around half of the territory of historic Karabakh (Souleimanov 2013, 101). Hence, Karabakh, although with an autonomous status, became part of Soviet Azerbaijan, and remained under its control for nearly 70 years.

The Beginnings of the Karabakh Movement Upon the Ruins of the USSR: The First Karabakh War of the 1990s and the Beginning of the *'No War, No Peace'* Era.

During the seven decades of the Soviet Azerbaijani ruler over Karabakh, the Armenians of the region were subjected to a number of discriminatory policies. Armenian culture, media, and

education were limited, and social-economic development initiatives in the autonomous region were mostly centered around Azerbaijani-populated areas. The Karabakh Armenians continued to send appeals to the central authorities in Moscow, hoping that Karabakh would be transferred to the Soviet Armenia. This, however, never happened (J. Walker 1996, 102-104).

The central Soviet authorities did not let much nationalistic rhetoric rise in any of the formerly disputed regions in the territory of USSR. Since the main Marxist-Leninist ideology of the USSR revolved around class struggle and the socialist economic model, nationalistic ambitions were silenced. Instead, the dominant ideology was that of the *'friendship of peoples'* which transcended ethnic and religious boundaries (Souleimanov 2013, 101). Thus, with the 'sleeping' nationalistic ambitions among Armenians and Azerbaijanis, not much changed in Karabakh. From 1921 until 1988, Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived in peace, in strong contrast to the pre-1921 era. The Soviet ideology of the *'friendship of peoples'* played a significant role in dismantling the ancient hatred between these two peoples. A prime example of this is the song *"Qardaş olub Hayastan Azərbaycan."* The song, whose title and the main message communicate that Armenia and Azerbaijan became brothers thanks to the Soviet rule, is sung by several popular Armenian and Azerbaijani artists. The song was first sung in April 1987 during the *'concert of friendship'* in Baku, which was organized to celebrate the Sovietization of Azerbaijan. The song is still available online but comes off as a big shock to the younger generations of Armenians and Azerbaijanis (Demokrat 2020).

Although the people of Karabakh lived through a quite peaceful coexistence during the seven decades of the Soviet rule, a potential surge of rebellion against the Soviet Azerbaijani rule could never be too far. Not only was the Armenian population of Karabakh subjected to many forms of discrimination, but the region was also one of a kind in the USSR. As De Waal has put it:

> With its majority Armenian population, Nagorny Karabakh was the only instance in the Soviet federal system wherein members of an ethnic group, which had its own Union Republic, were in charge of an autonomous region inside another Union Republic (De Waal 2003, 137).

The intensification of nationalistic rhetoric over Karabakh's ownership began when the Soviet Union was approaching its collapse. The year 1988 is considered as the start date of the Karabakh Movement, an Armenian national-political struggle whose final overarching goal was the

unification of Karabakh with the Armenian Soviet Socialistic Republic. The Movement started with protests both in the Armenian capital Yerevan and in Stepanakert/Khankendi, the capital and largest city of NKAO. The protesters were chanting *'Miatsum'* (unification) in the main squares of both cities, urging Gorbachev's government to finally unite Karabakh with Armenia (Souleimanov 2013, 108) Amid these protests, interethnic violence restarted in various parts of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Karabakh after 70 years of peace. Note even a year after the release of the pacifist Armenian-Azerbaijani song, a bloody massacre happened that took the life of dozens of Armenians. The massacre took place in February 1988, in Sumgait, an industrial city in the vicinity of the Azerbaijani capital Baku, as a direct response to the Armenian protests of unification in Armenia and Karabakh. The Sumgait pogrom was carried out in the absence of any intervention by local police or authorities (De Waal 2003, 32-34). Souleimanov argues that only after the events of Sumgait did Armenians publicly equate the Azerbaijanis with Ottoman Turks in their commemoration of the 1.5 million of victims of the Armenian Genocide on April 24, 1988. The ancient hatred between Armenians and their two Turkic neighbors was bound to accelerate (Souleimanov 2013, 119).

The Sumgait pogrom and especially the late Baku pogrom (January 1990) took place not only as a result of the peaceful *'Miatsum'* protests but also because of the Armenian military units' slow advance in Karabakh. The fighting in NKAO and surrounding territories had begun as early as 1988. The Armenian armed militias were successful in their mission of taking over villages populated by Azerbaijanis and killing or driving out the local population out of their homes (Souleimanov 109, De Waal 89).

Soon the Soviet Union got 'critically ill,' and the independence of the Union Republics was inevitable. Azerbaijan declared its independence on August 31, 1991, while the NKAO, utilizing its constitutional right as a Soviet autonomous region, declared independence shortly after, on September 2. The remaining Azerbaijani population of the NKAO did not participate in the quickly organized referendum for Karabakh's independence. Instead, more than 99 percent of the Armenians who participated in the referendum, voted for independence. The Azerbaijani parliament, however, soon adopted a resolution that abolished the autonomous status of Karabakh and recognized it as a mere province of the newly independent republic (Souleimanov 2013, 109-110).

With the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, and Armenia (September 21, 1991), a new phase of armed conflict erupted. The irregular fights of the pre-independence era were mere skirmishes compared to the all-out war of 1991-1994. Internationally, the military actions of 1988-1994 between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Nagorno-Karabakh is known as *'The First Nagorno-Karabakh War.'* Azerbaijanis also refer to the war in a similar way, while Armenians call it *'The Artsakh War of Liberation.'*

It is important to note that religious discourses became more apparent in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict after the countries' independence from the USSR. A new 'religious layer' appeared in the conflict largely due to the religious differences between the newly independent states which was fueled by deeply rooted ancient hatred and a sense of historical injustice over Karabakh (Tonoyan 2018, 19-23).

Right at the beginning of the all-out war, in February 1992, another massacre took place. It was exceptional in two respects: it took place in Karabakh, in the town of Khojaly, which was mostly populated by Azerbaijanis, and unlike the previous massacres in Sumgait and Baku, it targeted the local Azerbaijani population. The Khojaly massacre is considered one of the bloodiest pages of the modern Azerbaijani history. The massacre took place on 25-26 February, a date that was perhaps symbolically chosen by the Armenian perpetrators as revenge for the Sumgait events four years earlier. The exact number of the victims is unknown, but Azerbaijan claims the death of 485 civilians. To this day, the Armenian state does not take any responsibility for the Khojaly events and blames the death of hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians either on the Azerbaijani military forces or Armenian irregular guerilla fighters (De Waal 2003, 170-171). In Azerbaijan, however, this is an open wound, and many refer to it as *'The Khojaly Genocide,'* a naming that couples with the term 'Armenian Genocide.' Arkan Sever argues that the Khojaly massacre has been instrumentalized by Azerbaijan and Turkey to depict the Armenians as the perpetrators and 'the guilty' in the problematic relationship between Armenia and its Turkic neighbors. This, of course, also helps them essentially deny the Armenian Genocide (Sever 2018). These 'genocide fights' and the desire to appear the greater victim has been a common discourse in the relations between Armenia and its eastern and western neighbors, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

The Azerbaijani state has put the matter of recognition of the Khojaly events as a massacre/genocide on top of its foreign policy. A website has been designed by Leyla Aliyeva, the

daughter of the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, and an official slogan/hashtag, #JusticeForKhojaly has been created and in use in recent years. Among the countries that recognized the Khojaly events as genocide are Pakistan, Turkey, both important strategic allies of Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijan itself (Justice for Khojaly, n.d.). Intriguingly, these are the only three countries that have explicitly denied the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1917. It is also worth noting that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has commemorated the Khojaly Massacre multiple times since 2012, while the official OIC website does not bring any results for 'Armenian Genocide.' Furthermore, Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen, the former Secretary General of OIC, in his speech during the high-level segment of the 40th session of the Human Rights Council in 2019 in Geneva, spoke against the selective application of human rights and Islamophobia, underlining the challenges that the Islamic community is facing worldwide. In his speech he made a reference to the sufferings of Palestinians, Kashmiris, and Rohingya Muslims, and condemned "the Khojaly massacre committed by Armenia in the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan" (Organization of Islamic Cooperation 2019).

The Khojaly events shook the political reality in Azerbaijan. The country, which was already in a political crisis, delved deeper into a worse chaos when, following the Khojaly events, President Mutallibov resigned. Mutallibov had to come back to power after a month of anarchy, but soon resigned again after the Armenian military forces captured many strategic positions, including Shusha/Shushi, the cultural-historical center of Karabakh, "a place of deep emotional importance for the nationalist sentiments of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis." After the capture of the *'heart of Karabakh'* Armenians took Lachin with a land corridor that linked Karabakh with Armenia (Souleimanov 2013, 110).

After the capture of Lachin, in 1993, the Armenian forces captured several other territories that were out of the borders of the former NKAO, like Fizuli and Kelbajar. The Armenian military advance was happening at a time when domestically Azerbaijan was still tangled up in a political crisis. The political instability of Azerbaijan indeed served the interests of the Armenians, who were outnumbered by Azerbaijanis. In June 1993, the serving president Elchibey fled Baku amid a coup, and Heydar Aliyev took the presidency of the country. Aliyev came to power with a promise to create a better army and a bigger resistance against the Armenian advance. The Armenian military, however, was moving swiftly, capturing the surrounding areas of the former

NKAO – Horadiz, Kubatly, Jabrail, and Zangelan – reaching the Iranian border down the river Arax (Souleimanov 2013, 111).

The year 1993 saw a development in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh that added a new explicitly religious layer to the conflict: the deployment of Afghan *mujahideen*[12] in the war zone. The Heydar Aliyev government is known to have deployed 1500-2000 Afghan jihadi fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh at the time of a great despair when the Azerbaijani military, as mentioned above, was unable to counter the more organized and prepared Armenian armed forces. It is also remarkable that this incident apparently became a diplomatic scandal between Armenia and Afghanistan; in 1994 the acting Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosyan sent an official letter to his Afghan counterpart Burhanuddin Rabbani and prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, expressing his distress with their countrymen's involvement in the war in Karabakh. The Afghan president replied to Ter-Petrosyan in a regretful message, informing the Armenian president that he too is concerned with the *mujahideen's* deployment in the armed forces of Azerbaijan (Pashayan 2014, 155-156). The official Baku has denied that any jihadi fighters were ever involved in the zone of conflict, but "sightings of the long-haired and bearded fighters in Baku, some wearing traditional Afghan dress, became so frequent that their involvement was an open secret" (De Waal 2003, 236).

The presence of Afghan *mujahideen* in Karabakh in the 1990s is highly overlooked in studies on Islamic extremism and jihad. The reason for this is probably the fact that the first Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh erupted roughly at the same time as the armed conflicts in Chechnya and Bosnia. The overwhelming academic and media attention, thus, was on these latter conflicts. Michael Taarnby is one of the few scholars who researched this matter. He, too, argues that the reason Azerbaijani authorities deployed the *mujahideen* in Karabakh was the country's losses in the battlefield; the Azerbaijani armed forces were rather disorganized and underprepared for the war; and, furthermore, the country's ethnic minorities, like Kurds and Lezgins, were not interested in the Azerbaijani victory in the war since they had other agendas upon the collapse of the USSR. The *mujahideen*, however, were loyal and brave fighters, who fought "for gold, not for God or country." There is indeed no proof that the Afghan mercenaries were motivated to fight in this foreign war out of religious sentiments. In fact, the opposite might be true; the *mujahideen* were promised to receive around 700-1000 dollars monthly, while every

[12] 'Mujahideen' is the plural of the Arabic 'mujahid' which is a term that refers to someone who engages in jihad.

successful mission was rewarded with 5000 dollars. The lack of information that the *mujahideen* were in Karabakh for religious reasons, however, did not stop the authorities of self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic to portray their presence 'in religious terms.' In 1993, Robert Kocharyan, the head of the State Committee on Defense of Nagorno-Karabakh at the time, expressed his discontent with the Azerbaijani authorities, "The Azeris want to turn this war into a religious one, which we haven't accepted from the beginning and which we won't accept." However, Taarnby argues, agreeing with the general academic view, that the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was not and is not religious in nature (Taarnby 2008, 4).

Intriguingly, there were many other foreign nationals fighting in both Azerbaijani and Armenian armed forces. These mainly included former Soviet soldiers from Russia and Ukraine who were stationed in military bases in Azerbaijan and Armenia. With the dissolution of the USSR these soldiers chose to stay in the South Caucasus and fight for either the Armenians or Azerbaijanis in exchange of monthly salaries. As for the Armenian side, some diaspora Armenians with foreign nationalities also arrived in Nagorno-Karabakh to fight in what they thought was the lost cause of their ancestors. However, when Armenia sent a note to the UN about the involvement of foreign nationals in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, a complaint was made about the presence of Afghan, Iranian, and Turkish nationals only. The presence of Afghan *mujahideen* was, as mentioned above, an 'open secret', and Turkish instructors were invited by Azerbaijani authorities to train the local army, while Iranian military involvement in the war has not been documented (Taarnby 2008, 5).

The recruitment of *mujahideen* into Karabakh, Taarnby argues, was rooted in a secret meeting between Rovshan Jivadov, the then Deputy Minister of the Interior of Azerbaijan, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Islamist-militant group Hezb-e-Islami. Thus, many *mujahideen* ended up in Karabakh from within the Hezb-e-Islami (Taarnby 2008, 6).

The first traces of *mujahideen* in the first Nagorno-Karabakh war was documented by Armenian soldiers who discovered several Afghan and some Pakistani passports in the battleground alongside Islamic literature printed in Afghanistan (Taarnby 2008, 6). Interestingly, the Afghan fighters were 'set apart' from the local Azerbaijani military and did not interact with them much. They were also treated and fed better. One of the Afghan fighters captured in the battlefield stated that most *mujahideen* did not want to interact with the Azerbaijani soldiers because of their *'un-Islamic'* behavior and contempt to the Shariah (Taarnby 2008, 7).

Apart from Afghan and, to a lesser extent, Pakistani jihadi mercenaries, there was also a significant presence of Chechen *mujahideen* in Nagorno-Karabakh. Around 1992-1994, the Saudi military leader Saleh Abdullah al-Suweilem (1963-2002), more widely known as Ibn al-Khattab, joined Chechen *mujahideen* in Karabakh. Here he met a prominent leader of the Chechen independence movement Shamil Basayev (1965-2006). The two developed a close relationship, and after the end of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, both Basayev and Khattab were among the *mujahidee*n that left the region to Chechnya, where the fight against Russians was still in place. In Chechnya Ibn al-Khattab organized and led the International Islamic Battalion (Taarnby 2008, 9).

The year 1994 saw the last military confrontations between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, when the Azerbaijani side acted in defense as best as it could. However, at this point both sides were exhausted, so a ceasefire agreement was reached in May 1994. The leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the de-facto independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic signed the cease-fire agreement on 11-12 May, each in their respective capitals – Yerevan, Baku, and Stepanakert (De Waal 2003, 237-239).

The First Armenian-Azerbaijani war took the lives of around 7000 Armenians and 23000 Azerbaijanis; additionally, 300 thousand Armenians and 800 thousand Azerbaijanis became refugees. On the battlefield, the Armenians won and established control in most of the former NKAO with some of its adjacent regions, but for the newly independent and impoverished Armenia, the war brought about a permanent and ongoing economic blockade by its two Turkic neighbors – Turkey and Azerbaijan (Souleimanov 2013, 111). The cease-fire agreement, however, was not a final peace agreement or any sort of other document that would put an end to the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute. From its very beginning it was shaky, and instead opened an era of *'no war, no peace'* between the two neighboring nations (De Waal 2003, 239-240).

2: Azerbaijan's Islamic Revival From 1991 Until 2003

The Republic of Azerbaijan is one of around 50 Muslim-majority countries of today's world. It is no secret that there is no uniformity in the way people in those countries practice Islam, since every Muslim-majority country has specific religious and socio-political agendas, has a distinct history, and faces unique challenges. Those and many other factors 'designate' the specifics about Islam in each of those countries.

This chapter deals with the specificities of Islam in Azerbaijan. The biggest endeavor for this chapter is to illustrate how Islam 'works' in Azerbaijan, to what extent and how it is regulated by the government, and what are the peculiar ways the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict shaped the kind of Islam (or Islams) that exists in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, in this chapter I try to shed light on the relationship between the long-established and deeply rooted Azerbaijani secularism and revived Islam to provide a comprehensive image of Islam in this post-Soviet state. Chronologically, the chapter covers the ruling periods of the first three presidents of Azerbaijan and leaves the discussion of Islamic discourses during the presidency of the last and ongoing president Ilham Aliyev to later stages.

Islam and Secularism in the Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: A Brief Overview.

The Republic of Azerbaijan, like other countries in the region, is in a unique geographical position in terms of the religiosity of its neighbors. Out of the four neighbors of Azerbaijan, two – the Republics of Armenia and Georgia – have overwhelmingly Christian majority populations, while the other two – the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey – have majority Muslim populations of Shi'i and Sunni denominations respectively. It is in this unique ethno-religious neighborhood that 'Azerbaijani Islam' has gotten its peculiarities and developed into a distinct feature of the modern Azerbaijani state. In what follows, thus, I attempt to outline the curiosities that make Azerbaijan's religious landscape intriguing.

Although estimates on the number of Muslims in Azerbaijan vary, it is safe to assume that around 90% of the population of Azerbaijan is Muslim (Motika 2001, 1). This being said, Azerbaijan has also been claimed to be 'the most atheist' in the Islamic world (World Population Review 2022). Various polls and surveys demonstrate that in fact Azerbaijan could easily be considered quite

irreligious not only among Muslim countries, but also worldwide. These two mutually exclusive facts can perhaps only be read together if one recognizes yet another peculiarity of Islam in Azerbaijan- the country's majority are 'nominal' or 'cultural' Muslims. Only 4-6% of the Azerbaijani population are 'active Muslims', i.e., "following the conducts of Islam" (Aliev 2007, 72). According to a different poll, only 3.8% of the respondents were 'firm atheists' (Valiyev 2005, 2).

Shia and Sunni Islam are both practiced in Azerbaijan. The majority of Azerbaijani Muslims, though (around 65-75%), belong to the Twelver Shia denomination of Islam. Among the Shi'i practitioners are the Azerbaijani Turks, i.e., the ethnic majority of the country, as well as the Talysh, some Kurds and Tats. Minorities like Lezgins, Tatars, Tats, Meskhets are mostly Sunnis (Motika 2001, 1). That being said, Azerbaijan is a one-of-a-kind state when it comes to Sunni-Shi'i relations; authorities have constantly tried to promote an all-encompassing Azerbaijani version of Islam that transcends divergences between these two biggest denominations. Azerbaijan, Motika (2001, 6) affirms, might be the only Muslim-majority country in the world where believers – both Sunni and Shi'i – pray in the same mosque in leadership of a single mullah.

The Constitution of Azerbaijan provides the legal framework for the country's secularity and regulations for religious activities. Article 7 of the Constitution states that *"The Azerbaijan State is a democratic, law-governed, secular, unitary republic."* Article 18 of the Constitution regulates the relations between the State and religious organizations. It states the following:

> I. In the Republic of Azerbaijan religion is separated from the State. All religions are equal before the law.
>
> II. The spread and propaganda of religions (religious movements) which humiliate human dignity and contradict the principles of humanity are banned.
>
> III. The State education system is of secular character (Constitute Project 2022).

Furthermore, Article 48 provides *"freedom of consciousness and religion,"* while Article 56 and 85 lists members of the clergy among other professionals who are *"limited in their right to be elected"* (Constitute Project 2022).

Although the Azerbaijani law provides freedom of religion and consciousness in the country, there are a number of restrictions that apply to religious communities. Since 1996 Azerbaijan requires all religious communities to be registered and approved by "traditional religious organizations." As for Islamic organizations, all of them need to be approved by the Caucasus Muslims' Board (*Qafqazya Müsülmanlar İdaräsi*) (Motika 2001, 4).

The Islamic Revival of Azerbaijan during the Short Periods of Mutalibov's (1991-1992) and Elchibey's (1992-1993) Rules.

The current religious landscape of Azerbaijan has roots in country's recent history of transition from a Soviet republic to an independent state. Scholars like Aliev (2007) believe that it was this period of power transition that stimulated the emergence of the Islamic revival in Azerbaijan.

During the seven decades of the Soviet rule (1920-1991), Azerbaijan along with the rest of the 15 Union Republics of the USSR experienced repressive religious policies. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the decades-long ideology of state atheism and religious repressions, religious revivals came forth in many former Soviet republics. As for Azerbaijan this happened in a time when Islam filled the ideological void that was left after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The emergence of Islamic revival in this period is documented in various estimates and numbers. In 1976, for example, there were only 16 registered mosques in the country, while around the time of the fall of the USSR, the number of mosques rose sharply to 200. Only a decade as an independent state and in 2001 there were already 1300 mosques across the country (Motika 2001, 2).

The Islamic Renaissance of Azerbaijan largely owes to the rule of the Aliyev family in the country. The family has ruled in Azerbaijan since 1993, for much of its existence as an independent country. The current Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev is the son of Heydar Aliyev, who ruled the country from 1993 until 2003.

Although the Aliyev family has made significant efforts to reintroduce Azerbaijan as part of the worldwide *ummah*[13], the Islamic policies during the short ruling periods of the first two Azerbaijani presidents cannot be ignored either. Under Ayaz Mutalibov's presidency (1991-1992), Azerbaijan

[13] 'Ummah' is the Arabic word for 'community.' It is a key Islamic concept that emphasizes the cruciality of pan-Islamic unity regardless of ethnonational or other divergences.

became the first country in the post-Soviet space to become a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in December 1991. With the independence of Azerbaijan, amid internal political instability and warfare in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani Muslims had the chance to perform the hajj for the first time in seven decades. Hence in 1991 around 200 people went on a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia; the number of pilgrims has steadily increased since the early days of independence (Pashayan 2014, 37).

During the short rule of the second president Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-1993) Islam became even more evident in the Azerbaijani politics. Elchibey managed to return to various Muslim communities the properties that were confiscated from them during the Soviet rule. It was during Elchibey's short rule that the state established a salary for the clergy and allowed them to raise funds (Pashayan 2014, 40).

Since independence, most Islamic holidays have come to be observed in Azerbaijan with bigger celebrations and greater significance attached to them. These Islamic holidays include Ashura, Ramadan Bayram (Eid al-Fitr), Qurban Bayram (Eid al-Adha), Movlud Bayram (Maulid), etc. Starting from the years of Elchibey's rule in Azerbaijan, Qurban Bayram and Ramadan Bayram, the two most important Islamic holidays, became official holidays (Pashayan 2014, 41). That being said, the most popular and beloved holiday in Azerbaijan remains the non-Islamic Nowruz Bayram (Valiyev 2018, 6), a holiday of Zoroastrian origin that celebrates the coming of spring and the new year (Balci and Goyushov 2014, 73).

On August 20, 1992, the Azerbaijani Parliament, Milli Mejlis, adopted a law on the freedom of religion. The law states that "religion and religious associations shall be separated from the state." Furthermore, the law states that "all religions and religious associations shall be equal in relation to the law" (Refworld 2022).

Pashayan notes that upon analyzing the 1992 Azerbaijani law on freedom of religious belief, one can conclude that during the early years of independence Islam did not come off as a 'threat' to the Azerbaijani Republic; the law did not discuss how various foreign religious movements should be treated and neither does it mention the application of any counter mechanism against the spread of radical and extremists movements (Pashayan 2014, 43).

Elchibey was known for his strong support to Turkification and pan-Turkism, and his views were getting popular in the Azerbaijan of the 1990s as the country was emerging from the rubbles of the USSR. The pure Azerbaijani identity, as per Elchibey, relies on its Turkic origins and is free from the Soviet-Russian influences that are still prevalent in large segments of Azerbaijani society (Pashayan 2014, 40). Elchibey's rule saw a significant rise of (pan)Turkic nationalism in Azerbaijan, and Islam became a secondary identity marker, as a mere segment of the bigger Turkic identity (Pashayan 2014, 43) Interestingly, during Elchibey's presidency the official language of the country, Azerbaijani, was replaced with Turkish, and the Azerbaijani nation in its turn became to be officially called Turkish[14] (Chobanyan 2018, 90). As a vigorous pro-Turkish politician, Elchibey also adopted post-Ataturk Turkey's secular nationalism as a model ideology for the young republic and strongly opposed the Iranian theocratic model of governance in the newly independent country. In spite of his policies that attempted to reintroduce Islam and Islamic heritage to the Azerbaijanis, he was very careful with Shia clerics whom he considered as possible agents of Iran (Pashayan 2014, 43).

As a pan-Turkic nationalist, Elchibey caused Azerbaijan's relations with two regional powers – Iran and Russia – to deteriorate. During the aggravating war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Elchibey's diplomacy became one of the reasons that Iran developed a better relationship with Christian-majority Armenia than with their Shi'i brethren in Azerbaijan. In a move that Svante Cornell considers lacking 'any diplomatic tact' Elchibey publicly discredited the mullah regime in Iran and anticipated that the Islamic Republic would collapse within 5 years , and that the northern part of the country, mainly populated by Azerbaijanis, would join Azerbaijan[15] (Cornell 2001, 314). As a result, during much of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Iran took a pro-Armenian stance despite the country's overwhelming public support for Shi'i Azerbaijanis against the 'infidel' Armenians (Cornell 2001, 312). The Islamic Republic acted as a sort of lifeline for the poor, economically

[14] Azerbaijani and Turkish are very close and largely mutually intelligible languages. Nevertheless, linguists classify them as separate languages, and Elchibey's policy to 'unify' them was unprecedented in the modern history of Azerbaijan. As for Turkey and Azerbaijan as state entities, they are obviously close allies and share a great deal of interests, commonalities, and political agendas. However, Azerbaijan and Turkey are recognized as two separate state formations/ territories and throughout history have functioned as such.

[15] Large areas of northern Iran are populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis. Iranian Azerbaijanis, although separated from Azerbaijanis of Azerbaijan for much of the modern history, share the same language, ethnic kin, and religion with them. Furthermore, Azerbaijanis are the second largest ethnic group in Iran (after Persians). Iran, therefore, is careful with its foreign policy with Azerbaijan as well as with Azeri irredentism (Cornell 2001, 308).

unstable and blockaded Armenia,[16] providing the populations of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh with food and other necessary goods (Cornell 2001, 308-309).

Heydar Aliyev's Presidency as a Milestone for the Islamic Revival of Azerbaijan. The Introduction of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict into the Ummah.

After Elchibey's resignation and departure to Nakhichevan amid national unrest and political instability, the ongoing rule of the Aliyev family began in Azerbaijan. Heydar Aliyev took power in the country and remained Azerbaijan's president for a decade (1993-2003). Heydar Aliyev's personality and presidency became an important milestone in the history of independent Azerbaijan. He not only restarted the long-lasting rule of the Aliyev family in Azerbaijan but also shifted the ideological focus from Elchibey's Turkey-inspired secular nationalism to a cult of his personality with a particular focus on the country's Islamic heritage.[17] Policies towards Islam changed dramatically during Aliyev's long rule; Aliyev sowed the seeds of a unique relationship between Islam and the Azerbaijani state. On the one hand Aliyev implemented a policy of stricter surveillance over Muslim communities, associations, and the clergy, while on the other hand he gave a special role to Islam in the nation-building process of post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

Heydar Aliyev's presidency was such a milestone for Islamic Revival of Azerbaijan that a whole book is devoted to this- *"Heydar Aliyev and National Spiritual Values"* by Adil Abdullah al-Falah, a Kuwaiti scholar of Islam. The book is an excellent source to reflect on Heydar Aliyev's rule from the perspective of his policies regarding Islam. Therefore, in this research I will mainly deal with his book to discuss Aliyev's role in the Islamic revival of Azerbaijan. Al-Falah describes Heydar Aliyev as an exceptional politician and a real devotee of Islam. Al-Falah affirms that although Aliyev had ruled Azerbaijan in the Soviet period, he never denounced Islam and held national-religious values of the country very high (Al-Falah 2007, 12). This point is not widely accepted; on the contrary, Heydar Aliyev has been known to be a model Soviet politician with much

[16] Since early 1990s Armenia has closed borders with both Azerbaijan and Turkey. Turkey closed the border with Armenia after Armenian forces started to advance into territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's northern neighbor Georgia could not serve as a link to the outside world since it was highly unstable and war-torn (Cornell 2001, 318).

[17] Before his political career in independent Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev had held many important positions in Soviet Azerbaijan.

disregard towards Islam. Turgut Er, a Turkish diplomat and a former press secretary for the Turkish embassy in Azerbaijan, called out the rule of Heydar Aliyev and his loyalty to the former Soviet authorities, holding that he is "known worldwide as atheist, communist and KGB general" (Panorama 2015). These allegations, however, did not stop scholars like Al-Falah to present Heydar Aliyev as an exceptional Muslim and a vigorous supporter of Azerbaijan's national and spiritual values. Whether a devoted Muslim himself or not, what is certain is that Aliyev indeed increased religious rhetoric during his rule in independent Azerbaijan and posed himself as a sort of guardian for Islamic values of the newly independent country.[18]

In his efforts to increase the role of Islam in Azerbaijan and the role of Azerbaijan in the *ummah*, Heydar Aliyev became the first Azerbaijani leader to perform the hajj. After his pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Aliyev is reported to share his impressions from the trip, saying that:

> We, Azerbaijanis, are happy to visit holy places we worship. On the invitation of the King of Saudi Arabia, I visited in 1994 the two holy cities of the Kingdom. I consider my visiting holy cities of Mecca, Kaaba, and Medina as the most important and happiest days in my lifetime. I believe that impressions we have got there would help us to get out of all difficulties and torments we suffer (Al-Falah 2007, 12).[19]

Al-Falah further argues that Heydar Aliyev has reintroduced Islam and Islamic values to Azerbaijan, disassociating the country from its Soviet-atheist past. In various speeches, Aliyev had expressed his distress with the Soviet rule in the country, blaming the 70 years of atheist ideology for the spiritual decline of the Azerbaijani people. During the international conference "Modernity and Religious-Spiritual Values," held in Baku in October 1998, Aliyev spoke out against the Soviet anti-religion policies, noting that religious repressions were "the greatest ever damage" of the Soviet rule:

> It is known that for 70 years we have been deprived of our religion and related spiritual values under the Communist regime. The greatest ever damage of the Communist ideology

[18] Al-Falah's book is not perhaps of high academic value. Nevertheless, I wanted to incorporate it into my research because he is a Kuwaiti scholar of Islam who wrote about Heydar Aliyev. This makes it an interesting publication since it sheds light on how Heydar Aliyev was perceived by a non-Azerbaijani religious figure.
[19] I consulted the English version of Al-Falah's book. His English is incorrect and confusing at times. I, nevertheless, do not make any changes to his original words and present them as they are written in the book.

to the mankind was 70-year long propaganda against the religion, prohibition, and distortion of religious values (Al-Falah 2007, 32).

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which, as a rule, is present in most political discourses about Azerbaijan, is present in Al-Falah's book as well. A whole chapter of the book is dedicated to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Titled as "Double Standards and Discrimination: Is It Just Where the Four Resolutions of the UN Security Council Demanding Armenian Armed Forces to Liberate Occupied Azerbaijani Lands are Ignored?" the chapter begins with dealing with the alleged hypocrisy of the international community towards the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. This hypocrisy, Al-Falah argues, stems from religious belonging of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Referring to Heydar Aliyev's speech at the 1998 Baku international conference "Islamic Civilization and the Caucasus," Al-Falah agrees with Aliyev that during its 7-decade-long existence the USSR's anti-religion policies were specifically targeted at Islam and Muslim communities. At the conference Aliyev boldly mentioned that it was mostly the Muslim peoples of the Soviet Union that suffered from the Soviet ideology of state atheism; Aliyev said that "there was an idea that Islam posed a particular threat to the Soviet power, while Christianity was not so dangerous for the Soviet peoples." (Al-Falah 2007, 42).

The statement that the USSR favored Christianity over Islam in its anti-religion policies deals with a rather controversial and complex matter. Ben Fowkes and Bülent Gökay, for instance, bring in a number of examples of what they call 'an unholy alliance' between Muslims and communists. Although it is true that the nature of that 'unholy alliance' saw several 'ups and downs', throughout the 20th century Muslims and communists had had various instances of cooperation against a common enemy, i.e., imperialism, embodied in the Christian West. These times of cooperation were mostly characterized with a greater tolerance towards Islam and bigger autonomy for Muslim leaders (Fowkes and Gökay 2009, 25-26).

This alleged favoritism towards Christianity and Christian peoples, Al-Falah argues, lay the foundation of an alleged pro-Armenian stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In effect, Al-Falah holds, referring to Aliyev's speeches, that the Christian world (both Russia and the West) view the conflict through civilizational-religious lines rather than addressing the sufferings on the Azerbaijani side due to the 'occupation' of Azerbaijan's 20% territory with the humanitarian crisis that followed afterwards (Al-Falah 2007, 43).

The fact that Heydar Aliyev's years of rule coincided with an increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric in relation to terrorism, and that Islam was increasingly being labeled as a 'violent, barbaric religion' contributed to an increase in perceiving the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a confrontation between Islam and Christianity. Al-Falah holds that 'Armenian aggressors,' relying on mainstream and popular ideas over the alleged danger, fundamentalism, and inherent violence of Islam and the allegedly peaceful, inherently tolerant essence of Christianity, deliberately framed the conflict as a clash between violent Islamic and defensive Christian civilizations (Al-Falah 2007, 66).

Heydar Aliyev, Al-Falah further argues, boldly stood out against this discourse, responding to such allegations, saying that:

> The Islamic religion has never called as for aggression and occupation of foreign lands. We are peace-loving nation. Our religion inspires sentiments of friendship, brotherhood, peace, and reconciliation. It is neither Azerbaijani people, or Muslims, nor Islamic religion to blame for the war. This is an aggressive war being waged against us. We are protecting our lands (Al-Falah 2007, 67).

Since religious discourses were rapidly entering the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Heydar Aliyev's foreign policy also began to develop along religious lines, especially in relation to Azerbaijan's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In this regard, one of the most crucial aspects of his foreign policy was the cooperation with Muslim-majority states in international Islamic organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). On December 10, 1997, during the OIC's 8th summit in Tehran, Heydar Aliyev thanked the organization for being the only international body to side with Azerbaijan in its struggle against the Armenian control of Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, he stated that:

> The Azerbaijani people need solidarity and spiritual-material aid from Muslim countries. Using support from its Diasporas in America and Europe, as well as Russia, Armenia is receiving spiritual, political, economic, and military aid from these countries (Al-Falah 2007, 44).

Generally speaking, throughout the rule of the Aliyev family in Azerbaijan the country has been an active member of the OIC, and the OIC, in its turn, has continuously expressed its pro-Azerbaijani stance over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.[20]

Thus, during Heydar Aliyev's years of presidency some Islamic discourse appeared in the portrayal of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While it is perhaps an exaggeration to claim that Heydar Aliyev actively portrayed the conflict as one over religion, Islamic support was sought from organizations like the OIC, while Heydar Aliyev's speeches often included Islamic rhetoric, wherein he attempted to debunk the narrative that Muslim Azerbaijanis are to be blamed for the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. In sum, whereas before 1993 discourses over Islam were barely touched upon vis-à-vis the contested ownership of Nagorno-Karabakh, Heydar Aliyev's presidency in the independent Azerbaijan was marked with a foreign policy that was aimed at a reintroduction of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as, among other things, a dispute where Muslim Azerbaijanis were victims and rightfully deserve support from the Islamic World.

The Implementation of official Islamic policies in Azerbaijan: 'Official Islam' VS Foreign Islamic 'exports' Amid the Ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict.

Not only did Islamic discourses become more apparent in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict during Heydar Aliyev's long rule, but Islam itself was shaped into what Pashayan calls a *'national project'* (2014, 44). During the short rules of the first two Azerbaijani presidents, Islam in Azerbaijan did not ultimately manage to become a 'national project.' Indeed, some laws, initiatives, and policies were introduced during Mutalibov's (1991-1992) and Elchibey's (1992-1993) presidency, but it was during Heydar Aliyev's decade-long presidency that state-sponsored and approved religious policies in Azerbaijan developed into a distinct phenomenon entangled with the contemporary Azerbaijani political agendas, realities, and challenges.

Heydar Aliyev made significant efforts to increase the reputation of high-ranking Muslim clerics so that the impact of 'non-official' and 'lived' Islam could be minimized in the country. Aliyev

[20] All the statements that the OIC has expressed about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since 2006 can be accessed on the OIC's official website (https://www.oicoci.org/search/?x_key=karabakh&x_done=Start+Search&x_where=news&x_do=1&lan=en) by searching "Karabakh" via the website's search feature.

was particularly eager to instate Haji Allahshukur Hummat Pashazade as the spiritual leader of Azerbaijan. Pashazade has been an important figure in the construction of the state-sponsored Islam. He is the grand mufti of the Caucasus, has acted as the chairman of the Caucasian Muslims Office since 1980 and was elected as the spiritual leader of Azerbaijan for life in 2003. On top of that he enjoys the honorific title of Sheikh al-Islam (Pashayan 2014, 68). In short, he is by far the most high-ranking cleric in the country and has enjoyed the full support of the Azerbaijani state especially during the long-lasting and ongoing rule of the Aliyev family.

To show how desired, state-approved forms of Islam and the state are intermingled in Azerbaijan it is perhaps sufficient to note on Pashazade's loyalty to the Aliyev family. Long after Heydar Aliyev's death in 2015, when his son Ilham Aliyev was already ruling Azerbaijan, Pashazade was doing his part to make sure Heydar Aliyev remained a national symbol and the father of the Azerbaijani nation. In a conference organized by the Caucasian Muslims Office and dedicated to Heydar Aliyev's 92nd birthday Pashazade said that "Allah has sent Heydar Aliyev to Azerbaijan with great love, and all his deeds and promises are now carrying out by President Ilham Aliyev." After his praise of Heydar Aliyev, Pashazade affirmed that "This is necessary that, Heydar Aliyev's birthday is celebrated by all Azerbaijanis. We give the younger generation of his spirit heritage" (Ahlimanoglu 2015).[21]

Pashazade's connection to the secular authorities proves that the Azerbaijani government began to put efforts into regulating and 'sorting out' Islam since the times of presidency of Heydar Aliyev. A distinction was made between a 'good' and 'bad' Islam. A desired, exemplary form of Islam was that which was sponsored and encouraged by the state. This Islam was 'led' by Azerbaijan's highest ranking cleric Pashazade, who actively supported the secular authorities of the country. This form of Islam which I choose to call 'official Islam' in this research has been a key discourse in modern Azerbaijani politics, and many researchers have emphasized its cruciality in contemporary Azerbaijan.

For much of the existence of the post-Soviet Azerbaijan and especially during the long and ongoing rule of the Aliyev family successive governments of the country were particularly careful with foreign religious influences. Those influences were thought to hamper the construction of the

[21] This quotation, which contains language errors, is taken directly from the primary source.

official Azerbaijani Islam as a 'national project.' Therefore, gradually several policies were implemented to ban, limit, shape or promote certain Islamic 'exports' coming especially from neighboring Iran, Turkey, as well as from the Arab world. In what follows, I discuss how independent Azerbaijan dealt with foreign Islamic influences until 2003, the starting year of the presidency of the current Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev. More importantly, I aim to elaborate on how official Islam, foreign religious influences and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have been interwoven during this period of post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

As mentioned earlier, since Elchibey's presidency and throughout the two successive presidencies of the Aliyev family, the Azerbaijani state has carried out careful considerations of Iranian influences into the country. That is because political influences from Iran are prone to penetrate the Azerbaijani society more easily partly due to the shared religious traditions of both countries. Out of all the post-Soviet Muslim-majority countries Azerbaijan is the only one that is not majority Sunni. Indeed, both Iranians and Azerbaijanis are majority Twelver Shi'i nations and given the geographical proximity of the two countries as well as the shared socio-cultural heritage, Iran has continually tried to influence Azerbaijan, primarily through an 'export' of the Shi'i Islam into the country, since the early 1990s (Balci 2018, 69-70).

As much as Azerbaijan and Iran share a plethora of similarities, there are major issues that characterize the complex relationship between these two neighboring states. As discussed earlier, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in particular has largely hindered the realization of better bilateral relations. As Bayram Balci puts it:

> The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict severely tested the diplomacy of the Islamic Republic, which, as self-proclaimed defender of Islam and Muslims the world over, found itself trapped between the support for the Azeri Shiites dictated by Islamic ideology and its divergent national interests, which suggested a much more restrained realpolitik (Balci 2018, 72).

The uneasy relations between Iran and Azerbaijan during the years of Elchibey's presidency took a somewhat more balanced turn during Heydar Aliyev's long rule. As part of his overarching goal to strengthen Azerbaijan's relations with Muslim-majority countries, Aliyev brought the two neighboring countries closer together. Cornell holds that he "repeatedly travelled to Tehran and Riyadh, and even tried to enhance his Islamic credentials in spite of his having been in the forefront

of Soviet atheist campaigns of the 1970s, when he was chairman of Azerbaijan's Communist party" (Cornell 2001, 315). Although the two countries enjoyed far better relations during Heydar Aliyev's presidency, the Azerbaijani agenda to promote and strengthen official Islam in the country remained unchanged. In this context, Aliyev made sure that undesired Iranian Islamic tendencies stop entering Azerbaijan. Hence, for instance, in 1995, Aliyev banned the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), which to this day remains the most successful Islamist party in the post-soviet Azerbaijan. After the ban, some of its members, being accused of espionage for Iran and attempts of a revolution, were sentenced to 10 years of prison (Pashayan 2014, 46-47). Generally, in his policies to promote the 'good,' 'desired' official Islam in Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev implemented a policy directed against foreign religious influences and undesired Islamic tendencies. Pashayan holds that all interpretations of Islam that did not conform to the desired form of official Islam were carefully discredited by the state, with the sole exception of Islamic tendencies coming through Turkish 'vessels' (Pashayan 2014, 47).In short, however, despite banning the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan and hence limiting Iranian influence through Islam, Heydar Aliyev attempted to normalize relations with Iran and demonstrated a more balanced foreign policy as opposed to that of Elchibey.

Another Islamic 'superpower' that the newly independent Azerbaijani state had to deal with was Turkey, a country that has historically had many stakes in the South Caucasian region. With the independence of Azerbaijan and other Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union, Turkey had to adjust its foreign policy to the new geopolitical reality. Out of all the Turkic countries of the former USSR Azerbaijan was the closest to Turkey, both geographically and culturally, and hence the two countries have begun to cooperate and develop bilateral relations since the early 1990s. Turkey was the first country to recognize Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union on November 9, 1991, several weeks before it recognized the independence of the rest of the post-Soviet countries.

However, like in the case of Iran, traditionally excellent relations between Azerbaijan and its close ally Turkey were also much influenced by the hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. As the all-out war was unfolding between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Turkish government found itself trapped in the difficult task to stand in full support with its closest kin Azerbaijan against Armenia, a country that had an uneasy and troubled past with Turkey. Indeed,

Turkey's somewhat balanced and neutral approach to the conflict did not last long but nevertheless it was an important part of the development of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and Islam did play a role in it.

The most overt incident that proves the aforementioned point is the 1989 interview between an American journalist and Turkey's then president Turgut Ozal. When asked about Ankara's stance in the quickly escalating Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Ozal answered that Azerbaijan, as a Shi'i-majority country, is closer to Iran than to Turkey. This instance reveals that the 70 years of the Soviet rule distanced Turkey and Azerbaijan to a degree that Ozal considered Azerbaijan's religious affiliation to Iran more important than its ethnic bond with Turkey. Moreover, it proves that in 1989, when the Soviet Union was on its knees, Ankara still did not feel 'entitled' to intervene in what it perhaps considered Moscow's internal business (Cornell 2001, 279). On top of that, another reason the Turkish government was reluctant to show overwhelming support to Azerbaijan since its adversaries were Armenians, and the charge for the Armenian Genocide was being pressed by the increasingly sovereign Armenia and especially the Armenian Diaspora. Turkey, being a Western ally and a NATO member state, feared that unrestrained support to Azerbaijan could be used against the Turkish state in a discourse of attempting another annihilation of Armenians. This point was proved when Ankara revised its policy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict after large segments of Turkish society demanded the government to stand by Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the Khojaly tragedy that happened in early 1992. Ozal, shocked by the Khojaly events and the Armenian forces' advance into territories beyond the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, said that Armenians should be "frightened a little." This sentence, of course, carried the potential to further portray Turkey as a genocidal state both by the Armenians and the West. The latter has largely recognized the charge of genocide and instrumentalized it in its relations with Ankara (Cornell 2001, 284, 288).

As a self-proclaimed secular state, Turkey manages its religious affairs via an institution called *Diyanet Işleri Başkanliği* (Religious Affairs Directorate). *Diyanet* has been around since 1924 when Ataturk created the Turkish Republic and declared it a secular state. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Turkish *Diyanet* finally had the opportunity to expand geographically to the newly independent states of *Türk dünyasi* (Turkish world), i.e., Azerbaijan and the former Soviet states in Central Asia. *Diyanet* has served as a crucial 'mechanism' to export Turkish Islam to the

Turkic-speaking peoples of the former USSR (Balci 2018, 43). As mentioned earlier, Islam coming via Turkish channels enjoyed privileges in Heydar Aliyev's Azerbaijan and were not subjected to the same level of restrictions. *Diyanet*, therefore, carried out several initiatives in Azerbaijan without fearing government surveillance. Most relevant to this research is the construction of a mosque in the Alley of Martyrs dedicated to the martyrs of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. In the years of Heydar Aliyev's presidency, when the vast majority of mosques were being constructed by the Azerbaijani state (Pashayan 2014, 44), the Turkish *Diyanet* got licensed to construct this Ottoman style mosque in that iconic location. Needless to say, the Alley is a crucial monument for modern Azerbaijani identity; as per Azerbaijan's official protocol every foreign delegation visiting the country must also pay a visit to the park-cemetery. An even bigger mosque was constructed by *Diyanet* in the capital of the Azerbaijani enclave Nakhichevan which connects the two Turkic republics via a narrow land border to the West (Balci 2018, 46).

Diyanet furthermore was constantly sending imams to Azerbaijan and receiving students from the country who were willing to study Islam in Turkey. In the framework of its educational activities, *Diyanet* distributed Islamic literature of Hanafi rite to the newly independent Muslim-majority states of the former USSR. These pieces of literature, however, were not particularly popular in Azerbaijan since the majority of the country is of the Twelver Shi'i denomination of Islam (Balci 2018, 46).

Apart from the state actor *Diyanet*, Fethullah Gülen's Islamic movement, aimed at fostering inter-faith dialogue, also became an important vessel to 'export' Islamic discourses from Turkey to Azerbaijan. Commonly known as the Gülen movement or *cemaat* (community), Gülen's ideas spread in the newly independent Turkic-speaking, Muslim-majority countries since the early 1980s with a particular success in Azerbaijan. Out of all the post-Soviet countries Azerbaijan was the most lenient and tolerant to the *cemaat* and compared to the other republics. Whereas in countries like Uzbekistan and Russia (in Turkic-speaking majority-Muslim areas) the Gülen movement was soon banned by their respective governments, in Azerbaijan no restriction was in place until 2000. From 2000 until 2005 the Heydar Aliyev government exercised control over the educational institutions built by Gülen. With the victory of Erdogan's AKP in Turkey and with a gradual reintroduction of Islam into Turkish politics, Gülen's movement was soon outlawed in both Turkey and in the post-Soviet countries where it had previously operated. Nevertheless, the fact that the

cemaat was most welcome in Azerbaijan proves the point that Islamic 'exports' coming from Turkey were mostly tolerated in the country (Balci 2018. 58-61).

It should be noted that the legal framework of dealing with foreign religious movements was also legislated during Heydar Aliyev's rule to strengthen the positions of the government sponsored official Islam. In 1995 the Azerbaijani Parliament (*Mili Mejlis*) adopted a new constitution. The 7th article of the new constitution defined the country as a secular state. The new constitution also banned the use of Islam for political purposes (Pashayan 2018, 46). In 1996, the Parliament made some amendments to the existing legislation on religious freedom; as per the new amendment, foreign citizens and persons without citizenship were prohibited to carry out 'religious propaganda.' Moreover, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter, the new all religious organizations and communities to be registered and approved by the "traditional religious organizations." Those were the Caucasus Muslims' Board, the synagogue of Baku, and the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (Pashayan 2018, 48).

Besides neighboring Iran and Turkey, Azerbaijan is also geographically close to the Arab world, and Islamic 'exports' from this part of the world have also penetrated Azerbaijan since its independence in the early 1990s. Just like in the case of Turkey and especially Iran, those religious influences have been carefully filtered and controlled by the Heydar Aliyev government to further reinforce the reputation of official Islam. While Iranian and Turkish religious influences had their own risks factors, influences coming from the Arab World were particularly concerning for the Azerbaijani ruling elite because of their alleged extremist nature.

Central to the discussion of religious influences from Arab countries is Azerbaijan's non-indigenous Salafi movement. Julie Wilhelmsen argues that Azerbaijan had its first waves of Salafi missionaries arriving from these regions in the early 1990s from neighboring Dagestan and Chechnya (Wilhelmsen 2009, 733), while Fuad Aliyev affirms that Salafism entered Azerbaijan when Arab students spread its ideas among the population of the newly independent republic (Aliyev 2020, 270-271). Whatever route Salafism took to first arrive in the country, it is known that the Azerbaijani government tolerated it until 2001 (Wilhelmsen 2009, 733).

The Salafi dawah in Azerbaijan was indeed quite successful during the first years of its appearance in the country. Arab missionaries managed to successfully organize the Salafi community around charitable organizations. The most successful of those was the Society for the Revival of Islamic

Heritage (SRIH), a Kuwaiti organization, which operated in Azerbaijan for only a period of 4 years between 1993 and 1997. During this relatively short period, however, the Abu Bakr Mosque was constructed in Baku which served as the main center for the Salafi movement in Azerbaijan. Until its closure in 2008 the mosque was the most visited place of worship for Friday prayers; it boasted around 7000-8000 attendees each week (Aliyev 2020, 271).

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and especially the humanitarian crisis that followed afterwards contributed a great deal to the spread of the Salafi dawah in Azerbaijan. The Salafi movement, often financed by wealthy Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, was particularly successful among the displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh. Since Salafi missionaries were centered around charity organizations, the poor, devasted and displaced Azerbaijanis found material and spiritual relief in them (Aliyev 2020, 284).

However, as was the case with Iranian and Turkish influences, during Heydar Aliyev's presidency and especially after the September 11 attacks, Salafi communities and movements were being increasingly controlled, limited or banned. The short-lived success of the Salafi dawah was a result of Azerbaijan's desperateness amid political, economic, and military chaos that resulted from the First Nagorno-Karabakh War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Hence, as part of his efforts to reintroduce Azerbaijan in the *ummah* and ensure a pro-Azerbaijani stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, for some time Heydar Aliyev allowed Salafi 'intervention' into Azerbaijan's religious landscape. The Salafi dawah, however, could not survive long in a country with solid secular roots, Shi'i background, and strict regulatory policies. Many Salafi organizations, like the SRIH, were gradually closed, and the remaining ones had to conform to the norms of the government-favored official Islam (Aliyev 2020, 277).

Official Islam, thus, became imbedded in the politics of Azerbaijan and soon was identified as a core discourse to analyze the religious landscape of the country. The policy of implementing and sponsoring government-approved official Islam not only involved regulations of the 'inherited' Islam of Azerbaijan, but also a strict control of foreign religious influences from Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries. Kamal Gasimov, discussing the state of relations between the Azerbaijani government and the Salafi movements, provides a sort of a definition of Azerbaijani official Islam, which he calls "traditional Islam." The 'definition,' I believe, covers what was argued in the previous paragraphs and summarizes them:

The state-constructed Islam has been named “traditional Islam” (ənənəvi islam)—it does not engage in politics; never contradicts, but supports and legitimizes the foreign and domestic policies of the government; recognizes the multi-confessional, multi-ethnic and secular nature of Azerbaijan; does not articulate contradictions between Sunnism and Shi‘ism; and does not have any connection to external Islamic institutions and powers (Gasimov 2015, 115).

3: Internal Religious Problems and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Through Secular and Islamic Discourses in Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan

In 2003, Heydar Aliyev's decade-long rule came to an end when his son Ilham Aliyev came to power.[22] As the fourth president of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev has largely continued his father's policies in most areas of governance. As for religious policies, he has significant efforts to further strengthen the discourse of official Islam in the country. What characterizes Ilham Aliyev's religious policies is that he has arguably been the most successful Azerbaijani leader to interweave the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Islam. In what follows, I illustrate how Islam and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were rendered together during the pre-2020 War period of Ilham Aliyev's presidency. I attempt to demonstrate this by first examining the internal policies regarding Islam that have been introduced during Ilham Aliyev's rule and then moving on to Islamic discourses that were utilized and politicized by Ilham Aliyev's government with regards to Azerbaijan's claims for the ownership of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The ongoing period of Ilham Aliyev's presidency in Azerbaijan has been characterized by intriguing and somewhat contradictory policies regarding Islam. On the one hand the Azerbaijani government has made significant efforts to improve the country's image among the worldwide *umma*, while on the other hand has remained largely loyal to the country's secular spirit and limited several religious freedoms that were regarded as 'too Islamic.' To elaborate on this, I first discuss two cases — the 2010 hijab ban in educational institutions and the 2015-2017 Nardaran affair — that reflect how the modern Azerbaijani state has dealt with allegedly radical Islamic discourses. Afterwards, I introduce how Ilham Aliyev's government has instrumentalized Islam in its foreign policy with regards to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The main objective of this chapter, thus, is to demonstrate how political Islam is despised in highly secular Azerbaijan, while various Islamic discourses have been politicized to support Azerbaijan's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

[22] The 2003 elections were criticized by several international organizations. Human Rights Watch (HRW), for instance, published a briefing paper in which many types of election fraud were documented. The government hindered international NGOs' monitoring, stacked election commissions, and used other techniques to ensure Ilham Aliyev's victory (Human Rights Watch 2003).

The Azerbaijani Hijab Ban in Educational Institutions: The *Sanctity* of the Secular Azerbaijani State

Azerbaijan is truly a unique country among other Muslim-majority countries with regard to its treatment of the hijab. In 2010, a big controversy arose in Azerbaijan when the government ruled that veiled students would not be let into educational institutions. Misir Medanov, the then minister of education said that "We [Azerbaijanis] are all Muslims and outside the school everyone is free to wear whatever they want". Sheikh al-Islam Pashazade also commented on the ban, saying that wearing the hijab "was decided by God and has to be followed by Muslims," while adding that Azerbaijan's "laws cannot be violated, either." With the controversy around the hijab ban, Azerbaijan's profound secularism clashed with the increasing Islamic sentiments of the Azerbaijani people. As a result, during 2010 and 2011 various protests took place in the country against the ban of the hijab in educational institutions (Abbasov 2011).

Galib Bashirov analyzed the Azerbaijani hijab ban from the perspectives of secularism, Islamism, modernity, and nationalism. This secularism-Islamism-modernism-nationalism prism offers an intriguing insight into the dynamics of internal religious policies in contemporary Azerbaijan. Bashirov argues the following:

> The debate over hijab is best understood as a battle of two sacred bodies: the state and religion. Not only has the state been sacralized in post-Soviet discourses, but also, as the reference to "the nation's core" indicates, the state and religion are understood as mutually exclusive parties fighting for the absolute allegiance of the people. In this battle, secularism supplements ideological arguments that justify and legitimize the sacralization of the state and its leadership by dismissing religion as an illegitimate phenomenon. Hijab, on the other hand, supplements the sacralization of religion, and is considered to be in a fierce battle with secularism and the sacred state (Bashirov 2020, 361).

Bashirov's observation is an intriguing and relevant one to this research. The state in Azerbaijan has indeed been sacralized by the rule of the Aliyev family. And naturally another sacred body, i.e., self-governing, robust, independent Islam, would not be tolerated. Hence, the regulation of female bodies was established as a realm to sustain the sacrality of the secular Azerbaijani state.

As Bashirov's research further illustrates, the hijab has been feared by fierce supporters of Azerbaijan's secularism as a remnant of religious past. In this sense, modernity and secularism were intermingled in the mind of those Azerbaijanis that supported the ban. Govhar Bakhshaliyeva, a member of the Azerbaijani Parliament from the ruling New Azerbaijan (*Yeni Azerbaycan*) party, commented the following around the time of the hijab ban controversy: "How appropriate is it to live with the rules and regulations of the 7th century? We need to go to the light" (Bashirov 2020, 364). Henceforth, the secular and modern were imagined as 'part of the same project,' while hijab was a symbol of backwardness and 'too much' religiosity. As Aliyev's Azerbaijan embarked on the difficult task to project Azerbaijan's image as a moderate and modern Islamic state, hijab's allegedly backward, repressive image was to be regulated. The predominant view in government and official circles, therefore, was that wearing hijab in educational institutions is anti-modern, anti-secular and hence also 'un-Azerbaijani,' i.e., against the aspirations of the modern Azerbaijani state.

In post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Islamic veiling has indeed largely been forgotten. On the issue of hijab's 'un-Azerbaijani' nature, Nayereh Tohidi reports an anecdote from 1990s Baku. In June 1992, a group of Iranian women, led by Zahra Mostafavi (Ruhollah Khomeini's daughter) visited the Azerbaijani capital. They were all covered in chadors, and this sight struck the interest of passer-by Azerbaijanis who were staring at them. A local Azerbaijani lady was among the astonished public; she asked Tohidi, the narrator, to ask the covered Iranian women whether it was not too hot for them to stay under the scorching sun in such garments. One of the women in return answered that it is indeed hot, but the flames of hell are hotter for those who do not follow Allah's orders. To this the middle-aged Azerbaijani lady answered: "What a cruel God you have! The Allah of Islam that I know of is much kinder to women" (Tohidi 2002, 865).

On the other side of the spectrum were the so-called Islamists who opposed the ban and held several protests in the streets of the capital Baku. These opposers of the ban were predominantly of Shi'i circles and were proved to have links to Iran. They claimed that banning hijab in educational institutions was a serious threat against the devoted, pious Muslim women of the country, and that Azerbaijan, as a Muslim-majority state, has no right to impose such a ban. Ilham Aliyev's government soon arrested many of the protesters and especially tracked down the members of the banned Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA). The Islamists' discourses carried a

rather anti-government and pro-Iran undertone; Movsun Samadov, the leader of the IPA, said the following during his trial after the early 2011 hijab ban protests:

> We are opposing this government, because it has subjected itself to Zionists. Zionists have put Azerbaijan under their control … the Prophet's caricatures are being drawn in newspapers, hijab is banned, mosques are being destroyed … these things cannot happen in a Muslim country (Bashirov 2020, 362).

The other group of supporters of the hijab ban in educational institutions was the so-called nationalists' group. The nationalistic discourse over the hijab ban, I believe, elaborates best how Islam 'works' in contemporary Azerbaijan under Ilham Aliyev's presidency. The nationalists' position was that hijab is not indigenous to Azerbaijan and has nothing to do with country's religious traditions. The Director of the Permanent Human Rights Committee of the National Assembly Rabiyyat Aslanova, for instance, mentioned that: "In the past, our grandmothers, mothers covered their heads with kelagayi and yaylig[23]. The niqab, the dark cover that is promoted today, is completely foreign to Islam's Azerbaijani model" (Bashirov 2020, 366).

The nationalist stance on the controversy around the hijab ban demonstrates what sort of Islamic behavior is desired in Azerbaijan and what is despised. As elaborated in the previous chapter, the ideology of official Islam was built upon a somewhat pure Azerbaijani version of Islam, free from foreign influences and non-indigenous Islamic practices. While Azerbaijan is indeed a Muslim-majority country, the cruciality of its deeply rooted secular traditions and Soviet legacies cannot be ignored. Both Islam and secularism make up 'the Azerbaijani version of Islam,' the kind of Islam that is:

> Understood to be national, widely accepted, and practiced. It refers to a specific representation of Islam that is national and indigenous in its character, and one that expresses the Azerbaijani nation's historical accomplishments of secularism, modernism, and emancipation from external, primarily Iranian, influences (Bashirov 2020. 367).

The ban of the hijab in educational institutions exemplifies the peculiarities of Islam in Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan. Loyal to the policies inherited from Heydar Aliyev, his father and

[23] Kelagayi and yaylig are types of traditional Azerbaijani female headwear.

predecessor, Ilham Aliyev has introduced measures such was the controversial hijab ban to further construct the government-approved Azerbaijani official Islam.

Islamic Radicalism That Never Was: The Nardaran Case as a Catalyst for Ilham Aliyev's Religious Policies

Another major incident that resonates with Ilham Aliyev's government's increased surveillance and control of undesirable Islamic discourses is the Nardaran case of 2015-2017. Nardaran is a suburb in the north-west of Baku. It is a place known to be inhabited by devoted, practicing Shi'i Azerbaijanis, and as such it is regarded as 'the most Islamic part' of Baku since most of the Azerbaijani capital remains a quite Western-like, flashy city, with not much Islam 'happening' in public. Nardaran has traditionally been, since the fall of the Soviet Union, ignored by the Azerbaijani authorities and remains one of the least developed parts of Azerbaijan. A busy trade neighborhood in Soviet times, modern Nardaran is a largely impoverished suburb with around 90% unemployment. Due to the harsh living conditions, the people of Nardaran have continuously voiced their distress with the Azerbaijani authorities. As a result, a number of anti-government protests has taken place in Nardaran that have been silenced by the government, often ending with the imprisonment of the protests' leaders. Those protests, although socio-economic in nature, have been framed by the Azerbaijani government as religiously inspired unrests allegedly aiming at an Iran-style Islamic revolution (Ismayilov 2019, 184-185).

Ismayilov argues that after Azerbaijan adopted an increasingly pro-Western stance in global politics, the Ilham Aliyev regime has attempted to position the country as a fierce opponent of Islamic fundamentalism, radicalism, and ultimately Islamic terrorism. The Azerbaijani historian Arif Yunus, quoted in Ismayilov's article, suggests the following: "By claiming that Azerbaijan faces a terrorism threat, the Azerbaijani government wants to show that it is in a vulnerable situation. The claim of terrorism is a good way for the government to have a dialogue with the West." Nardaran has been a hub for the IPA and the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM), both Islamic parties that advocate for more Islamic discourses and Muslim representation in the Azerbaijani politics. The IPA, MUM and other vocal Shi'i segments of Nardaran were easy 'targets' to be labeled as Muslim fundamentalists and potential threats for Islamic terrorism. While the IPA was long outlawed by Heydar Aliyev's government, the MUM was soon also accused to

be financed by Iran and be connected to the ISIS, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and the Taliban (Ismayilov 2019, 188).

In order to counter these allegedly dangerous, radical Islamic movements in Nardaran, the police were ordered by the government to carry out raids in Nardaran. In various raids in 2015, 18 MMU members were arrested. After arresting the MMU leader Tahir Baghizade, Azerbaijan's interior minister and the prosecutor-general's office announced in a joint statement that the MUM was planning to overthrow the constitutional order and establish "a religious state under Sharia law." These accusations were never proved by the state. This incident, known as 'the Nardaran case' or 'the Nardaran affair,' came to be largely understood as the unjust arrest of dozens of inhabitants of Nardaran for political reasons (Ismayilov 2019, 189). Ismayilov's ultimate stance and argument about the Nardaran case is echoed in the title of his article- *"Islamic radicalism that never was: Islamic discourse as an extension of the elite's quest for legitimation. Azerbaijan in focus."*

The 2017 trial of the convicted MUM members reveals how the arrested men experienced their detention and how they were treated by the police as allegedly radical and dangerous fundamentalist Shi'i Muslims. One of the members accused the interior minister of unnecessary and unjustified force that he used against the Muslims of Nardaran, saying that: "They sent so many forces to Nardaran as if they were liberating a village from the Armenians in Karabakh." Another MUM member reported that a police officer forcibly put vodka in his mouth in order to offend his religious feelings (Turan.az 2017).

Amnesty International has also covered the Nardaran case in an elaborate report which informs that during their trials in early 2017, the eighteen members of MUM were charged unfairly and sentenced to 10-19 years in prison. The report suggests that members of the MUM described themselves as "non-violent, conservative Shi'ites" who were merely seeking more Islamic sentiment in Azerbaijani politics. The report further mentions that the MUM members were subjected to various forms of torture, were unlawfully detained, were forced into confessions and denied medical care. In their report, the human rights organization calls upon the Azerbaijani authorities to give the imprisoned members of the MUM, among other things, a right to a fair trial (Amnesty International 2017, 1-5, 7).

The Nardaran case serves as yet another example of how Islam is shaped and regulated in Azerbaijan; the ideal Islam is not alien to the majority of the Azerbaijani people, is not 'too

Islamic,' does not contradict the secular nature of the Republic of Azerbaijan and is, of course, not financed by or linked to a foreign power.

In what follows, I will demonstrate how Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan, which has introduced a ban on the hijab in educational institutions and arrested several 'radical' Shi'i Muslims in Nardaran, in the name of the secular state, has also largely instrumentalized and politicized Islam in terms of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Superimposing these two contradictory religious policies, I aim to illustrate how Azerbaijan can internally be highly and even violently secular (in the cases of the hijab ban and the Nardaran arrests), while externally (especially with regards to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) highly Islamic.

Azerbaijan's 'Un-Secular' Foreign Policy: The Azerbaijani Portrayal of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict as a Pan-Islamic Issue Before the 2020 War (2003-2020)

The foreign policy of contemporary Azerbaijan is hard to describe as one-dimensional. Indeed, especially during the rule of the Aliyev family since 1993, Azerbaijan has tried to have a balanced foreign policy. As mentioned earlier in this research, starting from Heydar Aliyev's rise to the presidency, Azerbaijan tried to maintain good bilateral relations with both the West and regional powers, i.e., Russia, Iran, and Turkey. There is, however, another layer to the modern Azerbaijani foreign policy, which was briefly discussed in the previous chapters, namely the Islamic 'dimension'. The cooperation with Muslim-majority countries, particularly via intra-Muslim organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), is one the main areas of interest for Azerbaijani foreign affairs.

Azerbaijan became the first post-Soviet country to join the OIC in December 1991 (Azerbaijan.az). As mentioned in the previous chapter, starting from the times of Heydar Aliyev's presidency, Azerbaijan formally expressed its gratitude to the OIC as one-of-a-kind international organization that unequivocally stands by Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, it was during Ilham Aliyev's presidency that Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet country with arguably the most secular traditions in the Islamic world, became to be an exceptionally active member of the OIC. Ilham Aliyev took the cooperation between the OIC and Azerbaijan to a new level. The membership with

the OIC was soon prioritized in Azerbaijani foreign affairs as a distinct area of cooperation where Azerbaijan could freely advocate for its stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Thus, the OIC has become a unique international platform for Azerbaijan to bring forward pro-Azerbaijani and often anti-Armenian rhetoric in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Pashayan 2014, 135-136).

Since the cooperation with the OIC was prioritized by Ilham Aliyev's government, Azerbaijan continuously emphasized the need for pan-Islamic cooperation and solidarity to tackle with issues in each Muslim-majority country. At the Annual Coordination Meeting of the OIC Foreign Ministers, the then minister of foreign affairs of Azerbaijan Elmar Mammadyarov highlighted that Muslims worldwide should stand together against external and internal threats as an *ummah*. Afterwards he mentioned conflicts that the *ummah* should be concerned with – from the situation in Palestine and Israel, to the dispute over Northern Cyprus and the final settlement of the Nagorno -Karabakh conflict. On the Nagorno-Karabakh issue Mammadyarov said:

> My sincere gratitude goes to the Islamic Ummah for continued support to the cause of Azerbaijan in its efforts to eliminate the consequences of aggression by Armenia which resulted in the occupation of about 20% of Azerbaijan's territory by Armenia and almost one million Azerbaijani refugees and internally displaced persons (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan).

Believing cooperation with and support within the *ummah* to be of the utmost importance, Ilham Aliyev made sure that Azerbaijan is understood by the international community as a vigorous supporter of Islamic solidarity. In one of his speeches in 2013 he said the following: "We are making concrete steps to strengthen the pan-Islamic cooperation" (Pashayan 2014, 136).

It is important to note that during Ilham Aliyev's presidency the OIC not only condemned 'the Armenian aggression in Nagorno-Karabakh' and 'the occupation of Azerbaijani lands' but also brought forward the issue of Azerbaijani-Islamic heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh. The organization affirmed that under Armenian 'occupation' the Azerbaijani-Islamic heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh cannot be protected and is under a threat. In a resolution adopted in 2019, the OIC uses rather strong language to condemn the 'Armenian aggression' against Azerbaijanis and the 'occupation' of Nagorno-Karabakh specifically referring to the Islamic heritage in the disputed region. The resolution states:

> Emphasizing that pieces of Azerbaijani history, culture, archaeology, and ethnography remaining in its territories occupied by Armenia are an integral part of Islamic heritage, and, therefore, must be protected;
>
> Reaffirming also that the utter and barbaric destruction of mosques and other Islamic Shrines in Azerbaijani territories occupied by [Armenia], for the purpose of ethnic cleansing is a war crime and a crime against humanity;
>
> Noting the tremendous losses inflicted by the Armenian aggressors on the Islamic heritage in the Azerbaijani territories occupied by the Republic of Armenia, including total or partial demolition of rare antiquities and places of Islamic civilization, history, and architecture, such as mosques, mausoleums, graves, archaeological excavations, museums, libraries, art exhibition halls, and government theatres and conservatories, besides the destruction and smuggling out of the country of large quantities of priceless treasures and millions of books and historic manuscripts;"
>
> The resolution then goes on to severely condemn "the barbaric acts committed by Armenian aggressors in the Republic of Azerbaijan (OIC Resolution NO. 3/46-C On Protection of Islamic Holy Places).

From the passages above it is obvious that the OIC regards the question of ownership of Nagorno-Karabakh not only Azerbaijan's internal issue, but also as a pan-Islamic struggle against the 'occupiers' who pose a grave threat to the Islamic heritage of the region. This might seem like an adequate and anticipated stance over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by a pan-Islamic organization. However, in contrast to issues like that of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the OIC has not always had an unequivocal pro-Azerbaijani stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In fact, Pashayan argues that in the beginning of the 1990s, when the conflict was in its initial phase, the OIC had a much more balanced approach to the issue. In April 1992, an OIC delegation arrived in the Armenian capital Yerevan to get a better understanding of the conflict, which had already escalated to an all-out war by then. Intriguingly, the delegation expressed its readiness to support both sides for the peaceful resolution of the conflict and, moreover, affirmed that suggesting any religious undertones to the ethno-territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh should be condemned (Pashayan 2014, 136-137).

Yet after 1993, when the Armenian armed forces took control of a number of territories surrounding the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region, the OIC became increasingly pro-Azerbaijani. It was around this time that Azerbaijani forces organized a counter offensive and continually bombarded Armenian villages of Nagorno-Karabakh. Consequently, the then Armenian minister of foreign affairs Raffi Hovhannisyan sent a letter to the OIC's secretary general stating that while siding with Azerbaijan, the OIC "totally ignored the unprecedented Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia" (Pashayan 2014, 138-139).

This switch, Pashayan further holds, happened at a time when the Azerbaijani government adopted a policy of portraying Armenia as an exceptionally Islamophobic, genocidal country, while the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh was depicted as a matter of pan-Islamic action (Pashayan 2014, 141). Ilham Aliyev's 2020 remarks about the alleged grave Islamophobia in Armenia, for instance, comes to prove this point. In an interview with Azerbaijani television channels, just days before the second all-out war would erupt in Nagorno-Karabakh, Aliyev said the following:

> We are always very sensitive to any rapprochement of Muslim countries with Armenia. Because Armenia has occupied our lands. At the same time, Muslim countries should know that Armenia has committed genocide against Muslim religious sites and cultural genocide in the occupied territories. Look at the state of our mosques! Don't people in Muslim countries know that Armenians keep animals, pigs, and cows in our half-destroyed mosques? Isn't this an insult to the Muslim world? Therefore, officials of all Muslim countries should revive these images when shaking hands with an Armenian official whose hands are stained with the blood of the Azerbaijani people (Azerbaijan Press Agency 2020)

In the above-quoted speech, remarks about the condition of mosques in Nagorno-Karabakh is a particularly interesting discourse because from 2009-2013 at least fourteen mosques – both Sunni and Shi'i mosques as well as mixed Sunni-Shi'i ones – were shut down in Azerbaijan. As part of his repressive religious policies, Ilham Aliyev's government also interrupted the construction of the Fatima Zahra mosque in Baku. Moreover, students from the Jalilabad region in the south of the country were banned from visiting mosques and from taking part in religious ceremonies during the Ashura day (Ter-Matevosyan and Minasyan 2017, 8-9). It is thus intriguing that Ilham Aliyev, who shut down several mosques in Azerbaijan and internally proved to be a vigorous supporter of Azerbaijani secularism, uses strong language to accuse Armenians of allegedly

mistreating Azerbaijani mosques in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, he discourages leaders of Muslim countries from developing good bilateral relations with Armenia precisely because of what Armenians allegedly did to the mosques in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the same interview Ilham Aliyev also comments on the importance of Islamic solidarity, saying the following:

> Azerbaijan has always been very active in the way of Islamic solidarity. Many events have been held in our country. We have always tried to help Muslim countries. We have always defended the interests of Muslim countries in international organizations. At the same time, if a Muslim country nominated its candidacy for an international organization, we have always supported it during the voting. That is, this solidarity should be in deed[s], not in words (Azerbaijan Press Agency 2020)

Here it is interesting that Aliyev urges Muslim-majority countries to act *"in deed[s], not in words."* It is especially remarkable because, as mentioned above, this speech was made just days before the second Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh. It is of course difficult to determine whether Aliyev's remarks were a call to action to Muslim-majority countries in the upcoming all-out war. This speech, nevertheless, further proves how Islam was politicized in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by the Ilham Aliyev regime.

Concluding his speech, the Azerbaijani president affirmed that Armenia is one-of-a-kind Islamophobic country, saying that: "Armenia is not an ordinary country. Armenia is a country where Islamophobia is a state policy. They raise their children in the spirit of hatred for the Muslims. They want to instill this ideology in their children" (Azerbaijan Press Agency 2020)

It should be further noted that it is beyond the scope of this research to sufficiently demonstrate whether Ilham Aliyev's accusations are fact-based or not. What is relevant here is that the head of the Azerbaijani state has attempted to link the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Islamic solidarity on the one hand and Armenia's alleged Islamophobia on the other. These discourses have therefore increased Islamic rhetoric in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and that is intriguing precisely because those discourses stand in sharp contrast to the aggressive secular policies Ilham Aliyev has carried out domestically.

Theoretical Considerations and Concluding Remarks: Do Azerbaijani Politics Qualify as Post-Secular?

To further illustrate how Ilham Aliyev's years as president were characterized by different approaches towards Islam and secularism internally and externally, consider Pashazadeh's 2006 remark regarding the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan's most authoritative cleric, Sheikh al-Islam Pashazadeh threatened Armenia with a jihad, saying: "I am ready to proclaim jihad for the liberation of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. And I am ready to do so when the right time arrives" (Tonoyan 2018, 31). In Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan, where every form of Islamic radicalism is banned and suppressed, it is hardly possible to publicly threaten a group with jihad and get away with it. In a country which has constantly tried to appear modern and secular, such rhetoric would most probably lead to serious consequences for whoever has engaged in it. However, this was certainly not the case with Pashazadeh. Not only was he a government-approved cleric who has always unconditionally supported the rule of the Aliyev family, but the recipients of the jihadi threat were also the Armenians. As such, the radical rhetoric was employed in the service of the state, rather than against it. Consequently, no government action followed to address the radical-militant Islamic discourse that Pashazade used in his speech.

Thus, in Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan two distinct religious policies were applied. Internally, secularism and statehood were held sacred, to use Bashirov's terminology. Externally, however, Islam was manifested especially in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. To reflect on this theoretically, I believe it is useful to look at the Islamic/secular discourses during Ilham Aliyev's ongoing rule in Azerbaijan through a post-secular prism.

It is perhaps risky and challenging to bring in post-secular perspectives into the contemporary Azerbaijani politics. Scholars have used various post-secular theories and perspectives to reflect on predominantly Western societies and politics. Jürgen Habermas himself, who popularized the term post-secular, argues that it is only applicable "to the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where people's religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed in the post-World War II period" (Habermas 2018, 17) Apart from that, Habermas's post-secularism is tied to the multiculturalism in those affluent societies. To put it simply, the Habermasian post-secular society is, in his own word, a *"post-colonial, immigrant"* one where modernity no longer implies secular values, while religious resurgence and influence,

alongside secularism, suggest a new, post-secular reality. Religious sentiments in those former secular societies are on the rise; Muslim fundamentalists, Christian 'militants' and Enlightenment 'fundamentalists,' in Habermas's own framings, all need to coexist together in those multi-religious societies. Hence, Western secularism, backed by the Enlightenment, does not meet the needs of those societies (Habermas 2018, 24-26).

Thus, the religious landscape of Azerbaijan, as a non-Western country, has hardly been looked at through a post-secular prism. I, however, believe that it is perhaps post-secular in a different, non-Habermasian way. Elements of both solid, established secular traditions and increasing religious sentiments coexist in Azerbaijan's contemporary politics. True, each of them occupies a distinct domain, but nevertheless they are both manifest in Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan. Therefore, it would not suffice to hold that Azerbaijani politics (or even society) are either completely secular or completely non-secular. Meanwhile, theorizing the contemporary Azerbaijani politics as post-secular might be more relevant and applicable. Indeed, what I try to call a post-secular period in Azerbaijani politics followed the seven decades of Soviet atheist, 'intensely' secular rule of 1920-1991, so the 'post' can be rendered chronologically, i.e., after secularism. Furthermore, though, the 'post' also denotes that which goes *beyond* the secular, and as it was shown in this chapter Azerbaijani politics do really go beyond the secular.

To situate this post-secular perspective into the overarching theme of this thesis, I argue that the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in the 1990s and the Islamic discourses that followed afterwards made their mark in Azerbaijani politics, ultimately contributing to its post-secular shift. This shift took place as Ilham Aliyev's regime utilized and politicized Islamic discourses, such as alleged Armenian Islamophobia, Islamic solidarity, etcetera, to gain support from Muslim-majority countries especially within pan-Islamic organizations like the OIC. On the other hand, however, internally Ilham Aliyev's government carried out a strict religious policy and suppressed several Islamic practices and discourses deemed too Islamic in the name of country's secular values.

Lastly, it is crucial to understand these dynamics within modern Azerbaijan's Islamic policies to grasp how Islam mattered in the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani War over Nagorno-Karabakh, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

4: Islamic Discourses Throughout the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: From the Deployment of Jihadi Mercenaries to the Impact of Islamic Solidarity

Introduction to The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: A New Armed Confrontation Between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis

"Artsakh is Armenia, and that's it." This short sentence, expressed on August 5, 2019, by the Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, in Nagorno-Karabakh's capital Stepanakert was unprecedented. Throughout all the phases of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Yerevan had never expressed such a definitive and uncompromising statement on the status of the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh or Artsakh, as Armenians call it. The statement was made at a time when it was already clear that peace negotiations were in a deadlock, and both Armenia and Azerbaijan were not ready for serious concessions. It did not take long for Baku to respond to this. Joshua Kucera writes in an article on Eurasianet that Haqqin, an Azerbaijani news agency, connected to the country's security services, held that Pashinyan's rhetoric left no alternative for Azerbaijan but to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict militarily (Kucera 2019). Moreover, on October 3, 2019, the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev said the following about Pashinyan's statement at the Valdai International Discussion Club in Sochi, Russia:

> Well, firstly, it is, to put it mildly, a lie. Karabakh by the whole world [with its] plains, uplands, is recognized as an integral part of Azerbaijan. Armenia itself does not recognize this illegal formation. Karabakh is a historical, original Azerbaijani land. So Karabakh is Azerbaijan and exclamation mark[24] (Mehdiyev 2019).

About a year after this 'clash of statements', when all peace negotiations had been exhausted, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were caught in a devasting war in Nagorno-Karabakh. The heavy

[24] With this remark Aliyev was trying to outbid Pashayan. While Pashinyan's speech was translated to English "Artsakh is Armenia and that's it," in its original Armenian version he said: "Artsakh is Armenia and the end [of discussion]." This, in its turn, was translated to Russian as "Artsakh is Armenia and period/ full stop." Therefore, in his speech in Sochi Aliyev replied to Pashinyan in Russian, saying: "Karabakh is Azerbaijan and exclamation mark."

fights began on September 27, 2020, and on that day the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh entered a new phase; the war that had started would soon be known as the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. This war, which lasted for 44 days, ended on November 10, 2020, changing the power balance in the conflict and altering the political map of the world. The outcome of the war was that Azerbaijan restored control over parts of the former Soviet Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and much of the surrounding territories that had been under Armenian control prior to autumn 2020. Moreover, after the Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement of November 10, a Russian peacekeeping mission was deployed all along the borders of the remaining territory of the Republic of Artsakh. Alongside territory changes, the war resulted in thousands of deaths and casualties on both sides. Towns and villages in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia were shelled, civilian infrastructure was damaged or destroyed, and tens of thousands of Armenians had to leave their households as the Azerbaijanis took over. The self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, thus, lost much of its territory and population, while Azerbaijan successfully managed to get control of the territory that it deemed had been occupied by Armenians for three decades (De Waal 2021).

As Armenians and Azerbaijanis renewed armed violence for the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh, the war and the conflict in general began to be discussed worldwide. Several discussions put a particular emphasis on the fact that Karabakh is disputed between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis. The religious dimension of the conflict, which, as demonstrated in previous chapters, has long been present in the conflict, reemerged as a discourse. From the very beginning of the war, it was apparent that both sides were ready to instrumentalize religion for political and diplomatic gains. So, as Armenia's official Twitter account posted a picture with a caption *Faith & Power* of a priest posing with a cross and a gun in his hands in Karabakh's mountains (@armenia, September 27, 2020), Azerbaijani media was boasting how the *adhan* – the Muslim call to prayer – was being delivered for the first time in almost three decades in each recaptured city's mosque (Goyushov 2021).

This chapter aims to illustrate the Islamic discourses that resonated in the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh and were directly or indirectly approved or applied by the Azerbaijani government. Thus, in what follows I discuss such discourses in an attempt to evaluate how Islam 'mattered' in the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Furthermore, I aspire to show how the ethno-territorial Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reached its 'Islamic peak' in 2020 with significant Islamic 'presence' that characterized the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

The Religious Impact of the Foreign Jihadi Mercenary Fighters During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

Perhaps the most amplified Islamic discourse during and after the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh was the alleged presence of jihadi mercenary fighters in the disputed region. As much as this matter was amplified and discussed, it was also highly controversial and contested. The circulating narrative was that Turkey and Azerbaijan deployed several thousands of Islamist mercenaries to Karabakh, thus unnecessarily religionizing the war and increasing the danger it posed for the greater region. The presence of jihadi mercenaries was not only confirmed by the Armenian side, but also by several international organizations, media reports and politicians. Azerbaijan and Turkey, nevertheless, were vehemently denying any mercenary involvement on Azerbaijan's side during the 2020 war (Aljazeera 2020).

It is important to note that largely because Azerbaijan and Turkey were not only criticized by Yerevan and Stepanakert but also several other governments, the issue of foreign mercenary fighters got much amplified during and around the 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh. The French president Emmanuel Macron in particular 'popularized' the issue by criticizing Azerbaijan's close ally Turkey and accusing the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan of deploying jihadi mercenaries into the line of conflict (Irish, Rose 2020). Besides, Moscow also raised concern over the fact that foreign mercenary fighters from the Middle East were being deployed to Karabakh. The Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov even put the number of foreign mercenaries at 2000 (Azatutyun 2020).

Although foreign governments and media managed to get the world's attention for the war in Karabakh through allegations of foreign mercenaries' presence, it is especially intriguing to note what sort of narratives were constructed in Armenian politics and academia in relation to the deployment of jihadi mercenary fighters in Karabakh. The general trend in Armenian circles was to make it sound as 'dangerously Islamic' as possible. Since the matter of Islamic terrorism and

radicalism is so relevant in contemporary discussions about Islam, what Armenian politicians tried to communicate to the world was that Armenia is a sort of a 'fortress' or a 'stronghold' against international terrorism.

Thus, in their talks with foreign colleagues or international media representatives, several Armenian politicians emphasized the fact that the Armenian military had found evidence of terrorist-mercenaries from the Middle East fighting for Azerbaijan in Karabakh. Armenia's prime minister Nikol Pashinyan said the following just a few days after the start of the war: "Artsakh is fighting against international terrorism which does not recognize geopolitical borders. That terrorism equally threatens the USA and Iran, Russia and France, and Artsakh, Armenia, the Armenian nation are fighting for global security" (Bedevyan 2020).

At an interview with the German news agency *Bild*, prime minister Pashinyan warned the West about the potential Turkish imperialistic and pan-Islamic threat. He said the following: "I want to emphasize that in my opinion, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia are at the forefront of civilization today. If the international community fails to consider the situation accurately, Europe will have to see Turkey in Vienna" (The Office to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia)

It is noteworthy that Pashinyan framed the Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh as one where a 'civilizational' frontier is facing the 'uncivilized,' hence protecting the rest of the 'civilized' against the further advance of the 'uncivilized.' Pashinyan's statements indeed resonate within the notion of framing the war as a clash of civilizations- a notion that was also manifested in earlier stages of the conflict, as demonstrated in previous chapters. To break it down, the war, as suggested by prime minister Pashinyan, was not only a clash between civilizations, but rather a clash between the 'civilized,' i.e., Christian Armenians of Artsakh and Armenia, who protect the civilizational frontier, and the 'uncivilized,' i.e., the jihadi mercenaries and Islamic Turkey and Azerbaijan, who can potentially pose a grave danger to the rest of the 'civilized' in Vienna, a symbolic representation of the West. Besides, Pashinyan perhaps used Vienna in his rhetoric to warn Europe about the 'Turkish-Islamic expansion' which, if succeeded in the South Caucasus, could reach Vienna and siege the city like the Ottomans did twice, in 1529 and 1683.

Furthermore, Edmon Marukyan, the leader of the oppositional party *Bright Armenia* noted that because Azerbaijan had allegedly become a haven for terrorist groups, the West should impose sanctions against it, while Ruben Rubinyan, a member of parliament from the ruling *Civil Contract*

party said that Armenia expects the international community to severely condemn Turkey and Azerbaijan for deploying Islamist mercenaries to Karabakh. The condemnation, Rubinyan held, should be made not only and not as much for the two Armenian republics but for the sake of international and pan-European security (Bedevyan 2020).

Segments of Armenian academia also raised the issue of foreign mercenary fighters in the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh. In her 2021 article, Pashayan, one of the best-known experts of the topic in Armenian academia, holds that throughout the whole war Turkey carried an anti-Armenian campaign with *"Islamic components"* and managed to get the mercenaries from within the Sultan Murad, an armed group of jihadi mercenaries of mixed Syrian-Turkmen origin, to Karabakh in order to facilitate the advance of the Azerbaijani armed forces. She further holds that their presence in Nagorno-Karabakh crystalized the unofficial jihad that was proclaimed against the two Armenian republics. It is curious that she also mentions how Azerbaijan's mainly Shi'i religious identity was 'concealed' from mercenaries through the discourse of pan-Islamic solidarity, while she also notes that several mercenaries expressed their distress and disappointment when they learned that Azerbaijani is a Shi'i majority country (Pashayan 2021, 255).

My position is that Pashayan's arguments, like that of prime minister Pashinyan's, perhaps push the subject a bit too far. Indeed, it was documented by several international organizations that there were mercenaries in and around Nagorno-Karabakh during the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war (see below). However, I believe that their presence on the battlefield does not necessarily suggest that a jihad was proclaimed against Armenia or that Armenians were fighting against international terrorism and Islamic radicalism. Rather, the jihadi mercenaries' involvement in the war was a good opportunity for the Armenian side to instrumentalize this Islamic discourse. What I try to argue is that the mercenaries' role in Karabakh is much more nuanced. Indeed, those mercenaries were armed jihadi fighters and were from the ranks of radical Islamic groups, but it would not be entirely correct to hold that any kind of jihad was declared against Armenia or that the 2020 war was so religiously inspired.

A few days after the hostilities stopped between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report about the presence of mercenary fighters in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. This report was important in

two regards: first, as an internationally known and respected institution, the OHCHR confirmed that there were indeed mercenary fighters that were deployed to fight for Azerbaijan; furthermore, the report affirmed that the mercenaries were brought to the battlefield with Turkish assistance and were motivated "primarily by private gain, given the dire economic situation in the Syrian Arab Republic" (Kwaja et al. 2020).

Thus, what the OHCHR report and other reliable sources suggest is that the mercenaries' main motivation to fight in foreign lands was monetary rewards. The report moreover affirmed that in case of mercenaries' death their families were offered financial compensation and a Turkish nationality.

The Armenian branch of the international Open Society Foundations also published an elaborate report on the use of mercenary fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh in and around autumn 2020. The report is valuable since it is also a result of field research done in Armenia, Turkey, and Syria. The report confirms that mercenaries caught by the Armenian law enforcement bodies attested that they had been promised monthly salaries of around 2000 USD and additional 100 USD for each beheaded Armenian. Moreover, Omar Yaghi, a mercenary fighter from the Hamza division, said the following in an interview with the representatives of the organization:

> I heard that we are going to Azerbaijan… I also heard that they will add $2,000 or $3,000 to the salary we are getting now to go to that country… I don't care where it is, the important thing is the money (Open Society Foundations – Armenia, 4).

Furthermore, the International Christian Concern (ICC), an organization which aims at "rescuing and serving persecuted Christians," also affirms that Turkish and Azerbaijani governments deployed jihadi fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh who were paid 2000 USD a month (International Christian Concern 2021).

Intriguingly, there is no known evidence to me that any of those mercenaries publicly proclaimed jihad against Armenians. The overall impression from all the sources is that they got to Karabakh to fulfill a military mission and leave. Thus, it would be logical to assume that their sole mission was to fight in Karabakh, like it was the case with mercenary fighters during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, when a couple of thousands of Afghan *mujahideen* were deployed by Heydar Aliyev's government to fight for Azerbaijan in exchange of a monthly salary. In other words, the

jihadi fighters happen to be deployed in Karabakh not because they were jihadis, but because they could and were willing to fight. The Armenian side, though, tried to frame their presence in Karabakh as an indicator that Armenians are defending the frontiers of (Western, Christian) civilization and that jihad was proclaimed against the two Armenian republics.

However, although I argue that the presence of mercenary fighters in Karabakh was instrumentalized by the Armenian side to portray the conflict through civilizational lines as a clash between the 'oppressed civilized' and the 'oppressive uncivilized,' I do not hold that their presence is not at all relevant in relation to Islamic discourses. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the involvement of mercenary fighters in Karabakh is a rather nuanced matter. Thus, although efforts have been made to make their presence appear more religiously motivated than it probably was, there is no doubt that jihadi mercenaries indeed added a layer of Islamic dimension to the war. To prove this there are several accounts that need to be discussed.

In March 2021, around five months after the end of the war, the BBC published a video report about the aftermath of the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh. This report, titled as *Nagorno-Karabakh: The Mystery of the Missing Church*, addresses the disappearance of an Armenian church from the town of Jabrayil after the Azerbaijanis took control of the area. The video clearly shows how an Islamist mercenary fighter yells *"La ilaha illa Allah"* and *"Allahu Akbar"* on top of the cross-less, half-destroyed church (Fisher 2020). This report suggests that indeed Islamic-jihadi sentiments also played a role in the foreign mercenaries' involvement in the war, and that the discourse of 'liberating Muslim lands' from Christians, in Pashayan's own words (Pashayan 2021, 255), also resonated in their actions. This report also demonstrates that Ilham Aliyev's government at least tolerated such blatant jihadi-Islamic discourses by foreign fighters in the retaken towns of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories.

Other such accounts are documented by international media. The Daily Beast, for instance, reports about a video circulating on Arabic social media of Arabic-speaking fighters yelling *"Allahu Akbar"* and "*Our leader, 'til the end of time, is our master, Muhammad"* while on their way to fight alongside Azerbaijani armed forces in Karabakh. The news agency moreover reports that alongside the Sultan Murad, another Turkish-backed Islamist group, the Hamza brigade, was fighting in Karabakh. According to the Daily Beast, their leader, Sayf Balud, who was also reported to be fighting in Karabakh, appeared in an ISIS propaganda video in 2013. In the video

Balud was addressing a room full of captured soldiers from the ranks of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), who were gathered in front of the camera to repent for joining the YPG, an armed group that ISIS held was "at war with God" (Al-Binshi 2020).

In short, I argue that there was a certain religious motivation for the mercenary fighters to arrive and fight in Karabakh, but their prime motivation was the salaries that they were promised to receive. This can be confirmed by the examples I showed above; while mercenary fighters were deployed because of the financial rewards they were promised by Turkish and Azerbaijani governments, they also used Islamic rhetoric during their 'mission.'

Matteo Pugliese holds a similar position and argues that precisely because Azerbaijan is a Shi'i-secular country, an organized and systematic involvement of Salafi jihadi fighters in Karabakh would have been unlikely. He too agrees with the vast body of evidence[25] that there were indeed jihadi fighters in Karabakh and some of them carried religious sentiments while fighting against the Christian Armenians, but nevertheless affirms that 'true' jihadis were not likely to leave for Karabakh. In fact, he brings in an interesting insight from a well-known Jordanian-Palestinian jihadi ideologue, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, and states that al-Maqdisi regards dying in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict a futile sacrifice, one that does not guarantee the status of *shaheed*. On the other hand, Pugliese suggests that some jihadi ideologues, like the Saudi Abdullah al Muhaysini, who explicitly support Erdogan's policies, might have encouraged some Islamists to go and fight in Karabakh out of religious sentiments (Pugliese 2020).

In sum, the issue of foreign jihadi mercenary fighters was a matter that was much amplified in various discussions about the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh largely because of its relevance to the modern world. There is a good amount of evidence and of an international consensus that mercenary fighters were indeed deployed with the help of the Turkish government to fight against the Armenians, and that their deployment was not merely an allegation or an accusation from the Armenian side. Furthermore, I demonstrated that the issue was easily weaponized by the Armenian political elite and academia to portray the war as one where the

[25] Besides the reports from organizations that I mentioned earlier, many other reports confirmed the deployment of mercenary fighters in the line of contact between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, for example, passed a resolution on September 27, 2021, stating that there is a good body of evidence that Azerbaijan, with the help of Turkey, deployed Syrian mercenary fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 2391).

‘oppressed, civilized’ Christians were resisting against ‘oppressive, uncivilized’ Muslims and that the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was (at least partially) a jihad against Armenians. Lastly, my final argument was that although the Armenian side tried to exaggerate the religious impact the foreign mercenaries had on the development of the War, there was indeed a certain degree of Islamic sentiment present in their actions and motivation. Hence, with the deployment of foreign Islamic mercenaries to the line of contact, the Azerbaijani government, with the support of the Turkish government, added another layer of Islamic dimension to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The Azerbaijani Secular and Religious Authorities’ Islamic Discourse During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

On September 28, 2020, the day after the devastating war started in Karabakh, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) expressed yet more support for Azerbaijan. Despite the overwhelming amount of proof and a largely accepted (academic) consensus that the War was started by Azerbaijan, in its statement-support the OIC blamed the Armenian side for starting the hostilities (Organization of Islamic Cooperation 2020). However, as the Azerbaijani scholar of political Islam Altay Goyushov affirms, the OIC was hardly an exception among Islamic organizations around the Globe; many of them either explicitly supported Azerbaijan during the war or congratulated the country on its victory in the war afterwards. Goyushov further holds that this did not come out of thin air and argues that the main ‘task’ of the Azerbaijani Islamic institutions was to secure the Islamic world’s support for Azerbaijan. Thus, during the war, the Caucasian Muslims’ Board (CMB), the government-approved spiritual religious Islamic institution, gathered and published on its website all sorts of supporting statements from Islamic institutions as well as Muslim theologians and other authoritative figures from all around the world. Goyushov affirms that the CMB managed to gather pro-Azerbaijani statements from institutions such as the International Union for Muslim Scholars, the Higher Islamic Council of Algeria, the Al-Khoei Foundation in the USA, etc. (Goyushov 2021).

Goyushov also holds that Shi’i support was particularly desired since Iran’s ambiguous and often pro-Armenian stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict gave the impression that Azerbaijan, as the only other Shi’i majority country besides Iran, was betrayed by its closest religious kin. The Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi and the Qom Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Alireza

Arafi were among the Iranian religious figures who expressed their support for Azerbaijan during the wartime (Goyushov 2021).

In fact, Shi'i support for Azerbaijan was apparently so desirable that it was sometimes exaggerated. It is intriguing that Sheikh al-Islam Allahshukur Pashazadeh, Azerbaijan's highest ranking Muslim cleric and the long-ruling chairman of the CMB, triggered a diplomatic scandal between Azerbaijan and Turkey when he said the following in the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War on July 21, 2021:

"I would like to thank the president of Turkey, Mr. [Recep Tayyip] Erdogan and Ayatollah Khamenei, whose fatwa was a harbinger of victory. He issued a fatwa stating that the land of Karabakh is the land of Islam" Pashadazeh further noted that the fatwa "almost proved our [Azerbaijani] victory, it led to victory" (Natiqqizi 2021).

This statement is interesting for two reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, it led to a diplomatic scandal between Azerbaijan and its closest ally Turkey. On July 23, 2021, Erdogan's senior advisor M. Mucahit Kucukyilmaz replied to Pashazadeh, saying that "This means that while Khamenei was sending arms to Armenia, he also sent a fatwa to Azerbaijan […] But Khamenei's fatwa defeated Khamenei's weapons!" Pashazadeh's praise for Iran triggered anti-Iranian sentiments in Azerbaijan; Sheikh al-Islam was even accused of being "a puppet of the Mullah regime." To these accusations, Pashazadeh answered that he is "a man of religion, not of either Turkey or Iran," while he also affirmed 'hat some people manipulate this matter for political gains (Natiqqizi 2021). Secondly, Pashazadeh's statement of gratitude is striking because in fact no fatwa is known to be delivered by Khamenei on Karabakh. Pashazadeh himself did not elaborate on this other than saying that Khamenei's fatwa secured Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. What Khamenei is documented to have said is the following statement: "Territories seized by Armenia must be returned and liberated. This is an essential condition… These lands belong to Azerbaijan, which has every right over them." Although this statement does prove that, at least on an official level, Iran's government had a pro-Azerbaijani stance during the war, it certainly does not include any Islamic language and cannot be interpreted as fatwa. With this being the case, thus, one can assume that Pashazadeh exaggerated the statement to the level of fatwa to cater an impression of a more Shi'i-Islamic support to Azerbaijan (Natiqqizi 2021).

It is also worth noting that there was perhaps a certain degree of divergence between Azerbaijan's secular and religious leadership over Iran's position in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Thus, when Pashazadeh was expressing his gratitude to Khamenei for allegedly issuing a fatwa on Karabakh, president Ilham Aliyev was criticizing Iran as an example of a hypocritical Muslim country for allegedly siding with Armenia against Muslim Azerbaijanis. When Aliyev visited a newly inaugurated mosque in the city of Agdam, which had already been ceded to Azerbaijan, he criticized the renovation of a mosque in the historic city of Shusha/Shushi, financed by the Armenian government when the city was still under the control of the Republic of Artsakh. Goyushov holds that President Aliyev indirectly criticized Iran for allegedly supporting the destruction of the Islamic heritage of Karabakh. Aliyev said the following:

> "This renovation is a symbol of hypocrisy, merely to create the impression that the Armenian authorities renovate mosques. Unfortunately, a company from a [certain] country was involved in dozens of these ugly deeds… Armenia cannot be a friend of Muslim countries, a country which has destroyed, and desecrated mosques cannot be friendly with Muslim countries. This is hypocrisy and accepting Armenia as a friend is hypocrisy and godlessness as well. How can Muslim countries befriend those who destroyed this mosque? Let them bare responsibility and answer these questions. I do not need their answers. They should answer before their own people. How can they make friendship with those who have destroyed mosques and desecrated them by allowing cows inside? Let the people of those Muslim countries answer these questions" (Goyushov 2021).

It is relevant to further note that Ilham Aliyev continued to use the same Islamic rhetoric that he used right before the war, as illustrated in the previous chapter. The narrative here is that precisely because Armenians have allegedly destroyed the Islamic heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories, no Muslim country should have good bilateral relations with the Republic of Armenia. More crucial to this research is the notion of instrumentalization of Islamic solidarity by Azerbaijani authorities in context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

The Islamic Solidarity and the *Ummah* in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: The Pro-Azerbaijani Islamic Support and Its Implications

The notion of Islamic solidarity, as demonstrated in previous chapters, has always resonated in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As the previous chapters have shown, under the rule of the Aliyev family, Azerbaijan has tried to appear an active and devoted member of the worldwide ummah. As a result, since the early 1990s the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has taken a decisive pro-Azerbaijani stance and regarded the Armenian control over Nagorno-Karabakh as an occupation of Azerbaijani-Muslim lands. In the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War the notion of Islamic solidarity was even more apparent than in earlier stages of the conflict. As demonstrated in earlier in this chapter, various Islamic organizations, Muslim theologians, and other authoritative figures expressed their support for Azerbaijan's claim over Nagorno-Karabakh, framing armed conflict as a war of liberation of Muslim lands. In what follows, I demonstrate more instances of more pro-Azerbaijani support that did not involve Azerbaijani 'intervention' and were expressed independently.

As for the Turkish support for Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, it was much more anticipated given the plethora of ethno-linguistic ties the two countries enjoy as well as the fact that they have been excellent allies since Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. However, as has been noted in the previous chapter, Islamic discourses occupied a marginal space in Turkey's overwhelming pro-Azerbaijani stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute conditioned by the fact that Turkey has a Sunni majority, while Azerbaijan is a majority Shi'i country. Nevertheless, an intriguing Islamic term has been used by Turkey's president Erdogan in relation to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh on October 6, 2020. Erdogan said that he supports Azerbaijan unconditionally and furthermore blessed the *ghazwa*[26] of his *"Azerbaijani brothers"* (Bulut 2022). Erdogan's use of this word, thus, was a clear example of increasing Islamic rhetoric in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and an interesting discourse in Turkey's pro-Azerbaijani stance, which previously largely lacked Islamic components. Uzay Bulut, a Turkish journalist based in Israel, argues that the use of the term *ghazwa* proves that the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was understood as a jihad by the Turkish president (Bulut 2022). It is also important

[26] The term *ghazwa* refers to the Prophet Muhammad's expeditions against the neighboring non-Muslim populations in the 7th century (Lewis et al, 1991).

to look at this discourse in the context of Erdogan's larger anti-Armenian sentiment. Just a few months before the war started in Nagorno-Karabakh, in May 2020, Erdogan used the derogatory phrase 'leftovers of the sword.' This expression is widespread in Turkey and is used mostly as a ethnic slur towards Turkey's remaining Greeks, Assyrians and especially Armenians, most of whom perished from the territory of modern-day Turkey around the time of the First World War. For many Armenians, this expression carries a certain religious load. It is not simply an example of anti-Christian hate speech, but also a degrading term that refers to the descendants of survivors of the Christian massacres as some sort of *"infidel trash"* (Kezelian 2020).

While support from Muslim-majority countries as well as from various Islamic organizations and authoritative clerics was not the trend during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War[27], the Aliyev regime's active attempts to situate the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the pan-Islamic agenda certainly 'paid off' in the 2020 War. Azerbaijan enjoyed support not only from traditionally pro-Azerbaijani Muslim governments, organizations or figures, but also from the ones that were not interested in the conflict when it was emerging the late 1980s and early 1990s. This fact shows that during the rule of the Aliyev family, Azerbaijan indeed became more 'known' and 'understandable' to the Muslim *ummah*. While in the beginning of the conflict, the Islamic world was just getting to know Azerbaijan as long-lost kin emerging from the rubbles of the godless Soviet Union, during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan had already proved to be an active member of the worldwide Islamic community and had managed to generate pro-Azerbaijani support among the *ummah*.

The Pakistani government and non-governmental circles in particular expressed their unequivocal support to Azerbaijan. While there were many allegations that Pakistan even helped Azerbaijan militarily by deploying Pakistani mercenaries to the region, the official Islamabad formally denied any Pakistani military involvement (Ahmad 2021). The Pakistani government, nevertheless, emphasized its pro-Azerbaijani approach in the War as well as during the recent history of the conflict. Consequently, Pakistan has refused to recognize the Republic of Armenia (not the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh) because of its stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and remains, to this day, the only country that does so (Pashayan 2021, 115). Soon after the Azerbaijani

[27] As mentioned in the previous chapter, even the OIC did not have an unequivocal pro-Azerbaijani stance in the beginning of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh, the government officially congratulated "the fraternal Azerbaijani people on the liberation of the territories" (Azernews 2020). Islamic discourse was not explicitly expressed by the official Islamabad in its supportive statements towards Azerbaijan, but in several non-governmental circles the matter of Islamic solidarity was emphasized. Tufail Ahmad holds that, for instance, the Islamist Daily Ummat newspaper wrote that "Pakistan and Turkey are siding with the brother-Islamic country of Azerbaijan." The newspaper further wrote that the Pakistani government had expressed its support for Azerbaijan because Pakistan is "a close ally [of Turkey] and a Muslim country" (Ahmad 2021). It is intriguing that in some foreign media articles Pakistan's support for Azerbaijan was also perceived along religious lines. Georgios Lykokapis from *The Greek City Times*, a diaspora Greek news and lifestyle platform, which showed an overwhelming pro-Armenian stance during the War, held that "Pakistan is more Turkey than Turkey" and argued that Islamabad has continuously instrumentalized Islam in its refusal to recognize Armenia "as long as it occupies the "Muslim lands" of Nagorno-Karabakh" (Lykokapis 2022).

While Pakistan's pro-Azerbaijani stance in the War could be anticipated given the shared geopolitical interests of Azerbaijan and Pakistan as well as each other's support in the territorial disputes over Nagorno-Karabakh and Kashmir, there were various Islamic discourses during the 2020 War that were completely new in the history of the conflict. In fact, viewing the conflict through the prism of Islam was not limited to Muslim countries and their governments, but could also be found among Islamist organizations.

The Hizbut Tahrir group in Malaysia, which was established in 2004 as a branch of the larger Hizbut Tahrir movement, published a piece about the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War on December 24, 2020, titled *"Lessons from Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict."* The piece essentially argues that although Muslim Azerbaijanis won in the war and Muslim lands were liberated, the *ummah* cannot be glad for the outcome of the War because non-Muslim Russia's influence increased as a result of the war, and Russia remains the major player in the region instead of Turkey. The piece further argues that Turkey and Azerbaijan essentially instrumentalized Islam in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War instead of actually waging war for the sake of the *ummah* and justice for the Muslim population of the region. The piece moreover suggests that although the war ended with a victory of the Muslim side:

> Nothing is done to cease the oppression on our people elsewhere; in Burma, China, and many other parts of the world. Nagorno-Karabakh is a standing example that as long as Islam is not the true goal, nothing can be done or will be done for our fellow brothers.

In sum, Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia's (HTM) ultimate argument is that the creation of a pan-Islamic caliphate is of the utmost importance for the liberation of all Muslim lands, not in the way Azerbaijan and Turkey did, i.e., as HTM argues, through prioritizing geopolitical dominance over justice, but through pan-Islamic action that does not overlook other Muslim groups that are subject to oppression (Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia 2020).

The view that the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 was one that pitted Christians against Muslims also seems to have enjoyed some popular support beyond states and organizations. This can be seen, for example, on the Facebook page of the *Voice of the Ummah*, an English-language platform, with around seventeen thousand followers. The group released a video on November 11, 2020, captioned as *"Nagorno-Karabakh liberated from Armenian occupiers."* The whole video post is full of Islamic rhetoric, and the newly established Azerbaijani control in Nagorno-Karabakh is portrayed as an important victory for the *ummah*. The video celebrates the Azerbaijani victory in the war, suggesting that while the Armenian forces were retreating, Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev affirmed that "after 28 years, the Adhan will be heard in Shusha." Towards the end of the video more Islamic rhetoric is used to present the War. The Facebook post illustrates the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani War over Nagorno-Karabakh in the following way:

> The liberation of Nagorno-Karabakh, formerly part of the Ottoman Khilafah[28], demonstrates that the kuffar are not invincible and the Ummah has the capability to remove occupation and control its own destiny. Muslims should tear up the likes of the Oslo Accords and reject Western institutions that keep them subdued and work towards liberating Palestine, Kashmir, and all other occupied Islamic lands. This is the first time since the destruction of the Khilafah that Islamic land has been independently liberated by a Muslim army. If this is the outcome without a unified leadership, imagine what can be achieved with one (The Voice of Ummah, November 11, 2020).

[28] Khilafah is the Arabic term for 'Caliphate.'

Several things are truly striking in the Islamic rhetoric used by the Voice of the Ummah's portrayal of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. First, the notion of framing the war as an armed confrontation between the believers and the *kuffar* (unbelievers or infidels) is a trope that is not common in discussions about the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Second, it is intriguing that the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh is equalized with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Indian-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir, and the Azerbaijani victory is rendered as the first among the chain of coming victories for the liberation of Islamic lands. Moreover, it is curious that the online platform gives such a big historical importance to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as allegedly the only instance after the fall of the Caliphate when a Muslim army singlehandedly liberated its lands.

The cases discussed above come to prove that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had indeed become to be more known to the Muslims all around the world by the start of the 2020 War. This was achieved partly due to Azerbaijan's reemergence as an active member of the *ummah*. In sharp contrast to the First Nagorno-Karabakh War of the 1990s, Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute became more 'understandable' and 'recognizable' for Muslims all around the world. As a result, more Islamic discourses were present during the 2020 War than ever before, and while the conflict remained mostly ethno-territorial, the influence of political Islam and Islamic solidarity on the War could not go unnoticed.

Theoretical Considerations: The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Orientalization of Azerbaijanis

Farid Shafiyev, an Azerbaijani scholar of history, affirms that the trope of orientalism is present in international imaginations of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. His latest publication focuses on the issue of Azerbaijanis' orientalization in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War through Western and Russian media. Shafiyev's main argument in his article is that Armenians have framed the conflict in an orientalist manner for the international community, particularly relying on the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh is contested by Muslim Azerbaijanis and Christian Armenians (Shafiyev 2022, 88-89). Shafiyev essentially blames Western far-right circles and liberals who both allegedly view the conflict through what he believes is an Armenian-manufactured orientalist trope. For the far-right, Shafiyev holds, Armenians are sort of a drop of

Christianity in a vast Islamic ocean that needs to be protected from 'barbaric' Muslims, while for the liberals, they are, by the virtue of being Christian, a 'civilized' nation. Thus, he argues that both liberals and the far-right side with Armenia in the Conflict. Azerbaijanis and Turks are imagined to be neither, and hence, Shafiyev argues, they are orientalized in the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (Shafiyev 95-96). Intriguingly, Shafiyev also holds that the alleged Western and Russian support for Armenia is a unique occurrence in the contemporary world, especially in the post-Soviet space, where all other Russian military interventions are despised and criticized by the West. Meanwhile, Shafiyev holds, when it is about the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the West even expects Russia to intervene to save the 'oppressed Christian' Armenians from the hand of 'barbaric Muslim' neighbors. This anomaly, Shafiyev argues, also owes to the orientalist understanding of the Conflict and the orientalization of Turks and Azerbaijanis (Shafiyev 2022, 103).

I believe that Shafiyev's claims are indeed intriguing and worth incorporating into my research to critically reflect on them. Shafiyev's 'orientalization thesis' is especially relevant to discuss in light of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as Shafiyev himself published his pieces on this matter after the War and in connection to it.

Religion plays a central role in Shafiyev's arguments on Azerbaijanis' orientalization during the Conflict and especially during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Shafiyev blames both Armenian lobbyists and segments of Western/Russian politicians and media for falsely portraying the War as one where a small, poor Christian nation is fighting against jihadism for its survival. He, moreover, refers to international law and affirms that it recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, while he also expresses his distress that this discourse was not emphasized by the Western/Russian media and instead orientalist tropes were dominant in them (Shafiyev 2022, 99-100). In other words, Shafiyev's orientalization is a prism through which Azerbaijanis are viewed inherently dangerous, barbaric, and uncivilized largely because of their affiliation with Islam, while Armenians are viewed as the victims of this 'Islamic barbarism' precisely because they are Christians.

In certain ways, I can see Shafiyev's point and would therefore agree that Azerbaijanis were, to a certain degree, orientalized by some segments of Western politicians and media. Indeed, blatantly Islamophobic right-wing politicians in Europe, like the Dutch Geert Wilders and the French Eric

Zemmour, instrumentalized the war, framing it in religious terms, to push their anti-Muslim agenda in their respective countries. On October 6, 2020, Geert Wilders tweeted that he "will always support my [his] Christian Armenian friends against the violent Islamic barbarism of Azerbaijan" (@geertwilderspvv, October 6, 2020), while Zemmour, who was a presidential candidate at the time, visited Armenia's capital Yerevan in December 2021 and held that the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was a "confrontation between Christianity and Islam" (Azatutyun 2021). While in Yerevan he also tweeted the following: "From Yerevan to Nanterre, from Qaraqosh to Saint-Etienne-du-Ruvray, Christians of the East and West are in grave danger" (@ZemmourEric, December 12, 2021)

The above-mentioned discourses leave no place of doubt that segments of the European far right framed the conflict as a clash between 'civilized' Christians and 'barbaric' Muslims, and hence the thesis of Azerbaijanis' orientalization, brought forward by Shafiyev, is indeed relevant. However, there are some important details that Shafiyev fails to discuss.

Nowhere in his recent publications does Shafiyev mention the fact that the Azerbaijani government, with the help of the Turkish government, brought in several Islamic discourses and religionized the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Shafiyev does not discuss the instances when Ilham Aliyev triggered the 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric and discouraged any Muslim country to have good bilateral relations with Armenia. He blames the European far right for deploying Islamophobic, orientalist narratives during the War (and does so rightfully) but fails to mention that Turkey's Erdogan blessed Azerbaijan's *ghazwa* against Armenians and used the derogatory 'leftovers of the sword' term, addressing the remaining Christian nations of the country. Furthermore, Shafiyev fails to acknowledge that Turkish and Azerbaijani governments deployed a significant number of jihadi mercenaries to the battlefield to help the Azerbaijani armed forces advance during the War. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, on the issue of foreign jihadi mercenaries the Islamic rhetoric was, in certain cases, exaggerated by the Armenian side. Nevertheless, I have also demonstrated that the jihadi mercenaries' deployment did increase Islamic rhetoric and helped to see the war through along 'civilizational lines' as an armed confrontation between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis. Thus, my argument is that while Azerbaijanis were orientalzied and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was religionized by some Western/Russian politicians and media, the Azerbaijani and Turkish governments also

contributed to it, and this research has attempted to show that through relevant media sources and academic literature.

Another details that is problematic in Shafiyev's work is that he actively denies the Armenian Genocide and frames it as yet another Armenian fabrication in an attempt to orientalize the Turks as barbaric and uncivilized nation (Shafiyev 2022, 91-92). This, I believe, is a very dangerous trope, particularly in academic discussions; it is one thing that the Armenian Genocide has been vehemently denied by the Turkish and Azerbaijani governments, but another thing when a scholar exploits it to build a certain theory through genocide denial. The use and abuse of the Armenian Genocide (or any other genocide for that matter) by politicians is a somewhat known matter and would not surprise anyone. However, I believe and hope that in modern academia genocide denial should be ruled out. It is especially the case when the academic paper in question, like that of Shafiyev's, is not just a product of some superficial, biased local academia, but is published by the well-known Routledge. Such discourses in academia, I believe, not only distort the facts (since it has been established that what happened to the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire around the time of the First World War was a genocide) but is also unethical; I do believe that diminishing the tragedy of the Genocide and framing it as a mere attempt to orientalize the Turks is a disrespect to the victims of the Genocide and should not be considered in academic research.

In sum, Shafiyev has pointed out to an intriguing and relevant theoretical frame of Azerbaijanis' orinetalization in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Based on my research and the empirical evidence demonstrated in this study, I believe that Azerbaijanis were indeed orientalized by various segments of international politicians and media, particularly owing to their Muslim identity. However, I also note that Shafiyev ignores Turkish and Azerbaijani governments' efforts to religionize the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and increase Islamic discourses around it, thus contributing to the notion of framing the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a clash of civilizations and ultimately further orientalizing Azerbaijanis and Turks. Moreover, he commits to the unethical task of denying the Armenian Genocide in his research merely to argue that it was fabricated by the Armenians to further orientalize Turks.

Conclusion

This Master's thesis examined the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh from an Islamic perspective. Through a historical overview of the conflict, the research showed the ways Islam 'evolved' since the beginnings of the conflict in the late 1980s to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. The research has made an extensive use of media sources to discursively analyze the speeches made by various politicians, religious figures, and other actors about the role of Islam in the conflict. Apart from that, this thesis analyzed relevant academic literature to reflect on the Islamic discourses that resonated in several stages of the conflict. The research has paid particular attention to the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani War over Nagorno-Karabakh since it was the most recent armed confrontation between the two nations as well as the one where Islamic (and generally religious) discourse where most apparent.

One of the main goals of this research was to demonstrate how the ethno-territorial Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which started upon the rubbles of the atheist Soviet Union, gradually began to acquire more and more Islamic undertones. Thus, in chapter one, I first illustrated the ancient history of the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, where Christian-Armenians and Muslim-Azerbaijanis lived side by side throughout the rule of various foreign empires. Here I demonstrated how important Karabakh is for both nations and how both Armenians and Azerbaijanis consider Karabakh as part of their modern identity. Moreover, I attempted to show how Karabakh's history or, in De Waal's framing, its *'unpredictable past'* resonate in contemporary discussions about Karabakh's contested ownership. The first chapter also delved into the beginnings of the modern Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, illustrating how and why it started and to what extent Islam mattered in those initial stages of the conflict. Thus, my research attempted to show that in the later 1980s and early 1990s, when the conflict and the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1991-1994) were just starting, Islam played a rather marginal role.

The second chapter dealt with the Islamic Renaissance of Azerbaijan, which began when the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This chapter elaborated on the peculiarities of the reviving Islam in Azerbaijan and showed how Islamic discourses reappeared in Azerbaijan's political landscape. Through an analysis of the ruling periods of the first three Azerbaijani presidents — Ayaz Mutallibov (1991-1992), Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-1993) and Heydar Aliyev (1993-2003) — this chapter attempted to demonstrate how the Armenian-

Azerbaijani Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh shaped Islam in first twelve years of Azerbaijan's independence. My findings, thus, illustrated that much of the foreign Islamic influences from neighboring Islamic superpowers Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia penetrated the Azerbaijani society through the instrumentalization of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and the humanitarian crisis that followed afterwards. Moreover, in this chapter I demonstrated how Heydar Aliyev made significant efforts to reintroduce Azerbaijan in the *ummah* and gain Islamic support from Muslim-majority countries through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The third chapter dealt with the period of Ilham Aliyev's presidency, which began in 2003 and continues up to this day. The main focus of the chapter was to show how vital Ilham Aliyev's rule was in the development of the peculiar relationship between the Azerbaijani state and Islam. My findings demonstrated that on the one hand the Azerbaijani state was highly secular and did not tolerate any Islamic notions deemed 'too Islamic,' while on the other hand emphasized on the urgency of pan-Islamic action and Islamic solidarity for the pro-Azerbaijani settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Here I attempted to theorize Azerbaijani politics as post-secular, referring to its contradictory religious policies. Moreover, I demonstrated in the third chapter that the cooperation with the OIC has been held of high importance in Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan. Within this organization, the Azerbaijani government has managed to communicate its expectations from Muslim-majority countries regarding the support to the pro-Azerbaijani settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The third chapter also illustrated how Ilham Aliyev has used Islamic language to condemn Armenia as an 'occupier of Muslim lands' and portrayed the country as a state where Islamophobia is a state policy. Grasping these dynamics, as I have stated towards the end of the chapter, is crucial to get a better understanding of the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani War over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Islamic discourses that surrounded it.

In the fourth chapter, I delved into the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and presented it 'from an Islamic perspective.' After giving a short account of how the war started and what geopolitical changes it led to, I discussed the impact of the jihadi mercenaries on the development of the War. I illustrated how the discourse over the deployment of foreign mercenary fighters was vehemently denied by the Azerbaijani and Turkish authorities on the one hand and exaggerated by the Armenian political elite and segments of Armenia academia on the other hand. Through the use of relevant international reports, I demonstrated that indeed jihadi mercenaries were deployed into

the line of conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in autumn 2020. Furthermore, I attempted to show that monetary rewards served as a bigger motivation for foreign fighters to arrive in Karabakh than Islamic sentiments. However, I also attempted to outline the Islamic implications of the jihadi mercenaries' involvement in the Second-Nagorno Karabakh War, holding that their presence indeed increased Islamic rhetoric in the War. Furthermore, in the fourth chapter I discussed the Azerbaijani secular and religious authorities' Islamic rhetoric during and around the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. I demonstrated that while the religious elite of the country, led by Allahshukur Pashazade, actively gathered support from several Islamic organizations and authoritative Muslim figures, Azerbaijan's secular government, led by president Ilham Aliyev, continued its Islamic rhetoric along the same lines illustrated in the third chapter. The fourth chapter also discussed several instances of governmental and non-governmental support to Azerbaijan during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War that carried some Islamic rhetoric. In particular, I showed how Turkish and Pakistani governments expressed their support to Azerbaijan and demonstrated that their support had some Islamic implications. I also demonstrated how the Malaysian branch of Hizbut Tahrir and the Facebook group *Voice of the Ummah* reacted to the Azerbaijani victory in the War from an Islamic perspective. Furthermore, in this chapter I critically reflected on Shafiyev's paper on Azerbaijanis' orientalization within the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. While agreeing on some points with Shafiyev, I also demonstrated some of his work's shortcomings.

Thus, this thesis illustrated how Islamic discourses evolved throughout various phases of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and showed that the Conflict saw a significant rise in Islamic rhetoric since its beginnings as an ethno-territorial dispute between neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s. The research further demonstrated that during and around the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War Islamic discourses were at 'all-time high,' and Islam was instrumentalized at various points during the War.

As for a broader conclusion, this master's thesis dealt with a post-Soviet ethnoterritorial conflict and showed that religious sentiments have been instrumentalized in it. Therefore, I believe that further research on the impact of religion on other post-Soviet conflicts can be intriguing and relevant especially in this day and age, when in various parts of the post-Soviet space armed confrontations have resumed. Thus, study on instrumentalization of religion in the context of the

ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, for instance, would amplify discussions on religious discourses in post-Soviet ethnoterritorial conflicts, while a study on the instrumentalization of Christianity in the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh would become a fascinating complement to this research.

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