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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ismayilov, M. (2015). Postcolonial Hybridity, Contingency, and the Mutual Embeddedness of Identity and Politics in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Some Initial Thoughts. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 77, 7-13. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-90314-8>

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## Postcolonial Hybridity, Contingency, and the Mutual Embeddedness of Identity and Politics in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Some Initial Thoughts

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### Abstract:

Azerbaijan presents itself as a country fitting in with Western values while simultaneously adhering to Islam and associated traditional values, while also sharing some identity features with Russia and Turkey. This article provides a brief, yet critical, analysis of the dynamics of Azerbaijan's foreign policy and the country's national identity to make the case for the mutually derivative—and hence contingent—nature of the two.

(1) *“There have so far been no cases in Azerbaijan of discriminatory practices on national or religious grounds, given [one’s belonging to] different civilisations or [one’s sexual] orientation, and the like... We are not accustomed to dividing guests by religious, national, gender, or other categories. These [LGBT—Author note] people can fully rely on the hospitality, tolerance, and modernity of Azerbaijan, and there will be no problem for their free and relaxing stay in our country.”* [Ali Hasanov, head of department for social and political issues, President’s Office, 25 May 2011, <<http://news.day.az/politics/269446.html>>]

(2) *“The people of Azerbaijan continue to adhere to Islamic values and thinking; we in the religious sense rely on Islam, there is an Azerbaijani model of Islam”* [Ali Hasanov, head of department for social and political issues, President’s Office, 21 May 2012, <<http://news.day.az/politics/333625.html>>].

The above quotations highlight the Azerbaijani elite’s use of varying discourse to address concomitantly—in anticipation of Baku’s hosting of Eurovision’s 2012 edition—Western criticism of the country’s alleged mistreatment of representatives of the LGBT community, on one hand, and Iran’s criticism of the country’s overwhelming openness to the same, on the other; the presidential aide emphasising his country’s adherence to Islam and traditional values in pursuit of legitimacy with Iran and the broader Moslem community, yet citing Azerbaijan’s modernity and associated liberal values in pursuit of recognition by Europe and the West more broadly. This hybrid intentionality associated with the Baku elite’s involvement with Eurovision represents a microcosm of a broader pattern of dynamic interaction between, and the mutual embeddedness of, the country’s foreign policy dynamics and the evolving realm of its identity, on one hand, and brings to light the heterogeneity of both, on the other. This article provides a brief, yet critical, analysis of the dynamics of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy and the country’s national identity to make the case for the mutually derivative—and

hence contingent—nature of the two, a condition that renders the product of one dynamic embedded in the structural effects of the other.

### The Contextual Embeddedness of Azerbaijan’s Identity Dynamics: The Heterogeneity of Exogenous (Domestic and Foreign Policy) Determinants of the Identity Discourse at Home

On one level, the dynamics of national identity formation in post-Soviet Azerbaijan—and the hybrid nature of identity the latter process worked to engender—has been derivative of the elite’s multiple—tactical—engagements across domestic and foreign policy fields in pursuit of immediate (*ad hoc*) legitimacy and survival. There are at least two ways in which this mechanism has unfolded: one associated with the elite’s pursuit of legitimacy at home, the other revolving around their quest for international recognition.

#### International Legitimation

Not many political units—whether present day nation-states or their historical equivalents—could afford to disregard their international and/or regional surroundings in pursuit of “national” wealth and internal organisation (political institutionalisation), particularly in the early years of political formation. To the extent they could, they would either enjoy a scale that would afford them a certain degree of self-sufficiency (e.g. the United States, China, Russia) or would be pushed to remain on the margins of historical reality (e.g. N. Korea, Iran until recently). Other than these cases on the extreme ends of the range of possible outcomes, most polities are in need of external (international) recognition to be able to function, a reality formally embedded in the world’s political organisation since the advent of the United Nations and one into which Azerbaijan was (re)born in the wake of the Cold War. International (including in large measure Western) recognition had to be enlisted if the state was to continuously function as an “independent” political unit. For Azerbaijan (as for other

states in the post-Soviet bloc), the latter quickly came through, and in the form of, membership in the United Nations, which the country secured in March 1992, and in a number of regional institutional formations, including the CSCE/OSCE in January 1992, its Helsinki Final Act in July 1992 and its Charter of Paris in December the following year; these apart from a whole series of individual acts of mutual recognition that were extended through different bilateral frameworks. While these latter acts of bilateral and multilateral recognition extended a shield of juridical endorsement to Azerbaijani statehood, they fell short of protecting or otherwise (e.g. economically) sustaining it; hence, the continued need for deeper—substantive—recognition beyond the formality of legal categories.

While for those states that could afford to bear the cost of non-recognition, the latter condition—in light of the reality of present dynamics—would place them in a position to dictate the terms of globalisation (the US) or would afford them the luxury of not falling into the globalisation trap (for the better or worse of it) (e.g. Saudi Arabia, N. Korea), those like Azerbaijan that were too weak (or too cowardly? too wise?) to join the ranks of either of the above, had—by virtue of the continuously instantiated impulse to be recognised beyond the limits of their national selves—subjected the evolving nature of their domestic environments, including in large measure national identity dynamics, to the (unintended) effects of their unfolding engagements across the international realm. This unequal ratio between the international and the domestic manifested early on, including in the country's early-independence constitutional reform effort, its resultant 1995 constitution (still effective, if with amendments, today) having borrowed considerably from similar efforts of other post-Soviet states (particularly of the Baltics) on one hand and from available experiences of Western “democracies” on the other; these to ensure compliance of the country's emerging legal identity with the norms and standards of international (read Western) constitutionalism.

Subsequent years of Azerbaijan's independence witnessed two major channels by which the attitudinal and broader cultural effects of the national elite's pursuit of the recognition game across the international spectrum of power have been diffused onto the country's ideational realm: the unfolding dynamics of the country's bilateral pursuits, on one hand, and its multilateral engagements, particularly in the realm of sports and culture, on the other.

The dynamics of the country's engagements with four power centres have been particularly consequential for the evolving nature of its collective identity—Turkey, Russia, the West (the United States and Western Europe),

and the Islamic world—each pulling the nation's ideational makeup in distinct, often colliding, directions.

The elite's struggle for Western recognition—and the pursuit of cultural and geopolitical legitimation with the West the latter aspiration entailed—worked, on a par with the elite's cognitive embeddedness in their Soviet past and contrary to the effects of their involvement with much of the Moslem world, to impart—and naturalise—a secular and modern vision for statehood, on one hand, and prompted the rise of the culture of consumerist individualism, on the other; the nation's susceptibility to westernisation (artfully disguised—and again naturalised—as globalisation) also facilitated through the population's nearly “natural” exposure to a range of now pervasive media, including Internet and online social media, pop culture and Western music, Hollywood films and associated values of forced socialisation and de-privatisation of private life and marketisation of public pursuits, fast food and associated—McDonald's and Starbucks (individualist/corporate)—culture. The nation's access to various expressions of Western culture has further been facilitated through their work in and other kinds of exposure to the Western corporate environment at home, particularly as embodied by international oil corporations and audit firms that both established their presence in Azerbaijan following the latter's independence; their now frequent travels to the US or Europe (be that for leisure, study, or work); NGO involvement and the intimate engagement with the Western discursive realm the latter entails; and, finally, in view of the state's hosting international cultural or sports events of which the Eurovision Song Contest (May 2012) and the European Games (June 2015) have been by far the most important (and massive) to date. While these encounters have served primarily to “globalise” the intra-state cultural dynamics, they—particularly those facilitated through the government's hosting of massive international events at home—have also worked to indigenise it, both by providing alternative, externally conditioned domestic venues for socialisation and discourse and offering new modalities of survival for the indigenous elements outside the mainstream discourse.

Azerbaijan's intimate engagement and close association with Turkey throughout the post-independence years have been critical in terms of developing an ethnic angle to, indeed ethnicising, the otherwise civic cloak in which the ruling elite—since Heydar Aliyev came to power in 1993 and in view of the many ethnic minorities that call Azerbaijan their home—sought to wrap the nation's post-independence identity pursuits. The now famous “one nation—two states” discourse that the country's elite have used to describe

the nature of Azerbaijan's interaction with Turkey in a quest to invoke a sense of inter-country unity based on a notion of common ethnic belonging ("(pan-)Turkic identity") has in that sense been in direct opposition to the ideology of *Azerbaijanism* the same elite had suggested should inform top-down efforts at nation-building. While the latter discourse (*Azerbaijanism*) emphasised and was meant to inculcate an inclusive, civic definition of Azerbaijanis' collective—national—self (one merging the notions of nationality and citizenship in a single conceptual whole) and thus incite the people to espouse a rather cosmopolitan agenda for the nation's developmental trajectory, the former narrative (pan-Turkic association and the primacy of ethnic belonging) used the language of ethnic ties and kinship to incite the Azerbaijani and Turkic peoples to a common vision and cooperation thus imposing a rather communitarian—ethnocentric—perspective on their conception of the country's future. Among the major platforms of Turkish cultural penetration in Azerbaijan over the past two decades have been the engagement of Turkish businessmen in Azerbaijan (particularly in the food and restaurant industries), Turkish broadcasting, mutual student exchanges, as well as the operation of Turkish educational establishments (including numerous lyceums and the Qafqaz University) and Turkish-sponsored mosques in Azerbaijan (none of which has indeed been unproblematic).

In the multilateral realm and in the quest to diversify away from the sole reliance on Western power in pursuit of survival (including as reflected in their foreign policy agenda) and thus diversify the cognitive/political sources on which the state's, and the broader region's, emerging collective identity (and political culture) feed, the Azerbaijani elite have also embraced Turkey's (and Kazakhstan's) efforts at, and have grown themselves active in, promoting integration among Turkic-speaking states across the post-Soviet space; an effort that now saw the setting up in October 2009 of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (or Turkic Council), "the first voluntary alliance of Turkic states in history" (Halil Akinci, the founding Secretary-General of the Council), with Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan as its founding members. With the Council's portfolio of ongoing projects including the launch of the Turkic world TV channel TRT Avaz in March 2009 and the introduction of a mechanism for closer cooperation among Turkic diasporas across the globe and its envisaged portfolio featuring the setup of the Turkic University Association and the writing of a common history textbook, the organisation is likely to bear important cultural repercussions across the populations of the states involved.

Azerbaijan's continued engagement with Russia, particularly intensified during Ilham Aliyev's tenure as president following an extended period of coolness under Heydar Aliyev (and Yeltsin in Russia) and now reaching an unprecedented degree of (outward) intimacy following Russia's assault on Ukraine and its associated (and intended) come-back in the post-Soviet region (and in view of the West's inability to offer a viable counterpoise to Moscow on the latter's efforts to this effect), has fed and informed authoritarian tendencies in governance and the overall persistence of a patrimonial—and patriarchal—political culture. The latter linkage, including as expressed in the continued widespread presence of Russian language education provision (both at the high school and university levels), Russian-language bookstores, Russian-language newspapers and magazines, and Russian cultural houses, has also served to sustain the presence of Russian culture and the Russian language within the purview of the national cognitive space and in that sense acted as a counterweight to the elite's effort to nationalise the discursive landscape of official communication and people's daily interaction on one hand and to the post-independence onslaught of English as a new *lingua franca* and a conduit of Western knowledge and globalisation on the other. Tellingly and as a reflection of the exogenous nature of this latter dynamic, those educated in the Russian language in Azerbaijan today often find themselves locked in a tightly confined discursive universe within which they function, one detached from both domestic societal and broader international dynamics, while those in the Azerbaijani "sector" of education whose knowledge of foreign languages, international exposure and involvement with domestic and international "civil society" practices have by now evolved to be by far greater and deeper than what most of their Russian-language peers could boast of these days (their knowledge of Russian also often being far better than the latter's knowledge of Azerbaijani) tend to develop a more multi-faceted identity and as such come closer in that respect to the internationally educated Azerbaijani youth.

Azerbaijan in the wake of independence also engaged in active cooperation with and thus opened itself up to the influence of the Moslem world, including the Arab Middle East (primarily in the context of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), an effort largely driven by an imperative—particularly acute in the early years of independence—to counterbalance the Armenian propaganda machine in the information war the two sides waged around their conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the perceived advantage Yerevan has been enjoying to this effect within the Western purview (it was Pakistan, for example, then a non-permanent member

of the UN Security Council, that pushed for the adoption of the four UNSC resolutions in 1993 demanding an immediate withdrawal of all Armenian troops from the Azerbaijani territories the latter occupied) and a reality that, on a par with the upswing of Turkish influence (particularly in the context of work by Turkish educational establishments across the country), in considerable measure accounted for what many dubbed an “Islamic revival” in this post-Soviet state. Not only did this dual opening (to Turkey and the Arab world, including the latter through the intermediary of Russia’s Northern Caucasus) inform the rising number, and the rising agency, of those adhering to and espousing more traditional—faith-based—values, but it also served, including given the many Sunni (including Salafi) mosques, schools, and madrasas of which the construction the Arab and Turkish missionaries (and governments) sponsored and the kind of religious literature they worked to disseminate (particularly in the 1990s) to rapidly shift the ratio dynamics between the Sunni and Shia populations in favour of the former to establish rough parity between the two. (While Iran has also been active in promoting the Shia version of Islam, its influence largely covered the pre-existing layer of devout Shia families in set geographies and would rarely sway groups outside this latter loop.) Azerbaijan’s deepening engagement with and rising reliance on the Islamic world in pursuit of its foreign policy agenda—and consequently the elite’s intensified quest for stronger legitimacy therewith—have had a dubious effect on the country’s ideational landscape. On one level, this prompted the elite themselves to sponsor the construction of a number of new, and the reconstruction of some of the existing, mosques (of which by far the largest—the “Heydar” mosque—was inaugurated in December 2014) and otherwise promote Islamic culture, including across the multilateral plane of engagement (e.g. by having Baku selected as the capital of Islamic Culture in the context of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in 2009 and as the venue for the Islamic Games in 2017). On another level, Islamic penetration has been mitigated by a reality that much of the Islamic world itself—in view of its own recognition game it had been forced to play upon achieving independence from the grips of Western imperialism in the wake of WWI and/or WWII—has been subject to the homogenising, and sanitising, influence of Western modernity and secularism and hence traditional values, and Islam as a major expression thereof—while still overwhelmingly present in state discourse—have been pushed to the margins of micro-level dynamics of public life in most of these states. Saudi Arabia being a major exception to this effect, it was not until January 2015 that the Baku elite, given the rapidly shifting contours

of geopolitics around them, chose to reach out to and seriously engage with this country.

### Domestic Legitimation

The elite’s domestic needs for security and recognition have been ambivalent to Western discourse, less than favourable to Islam, rather favourable to the Russian cultural presence, and rather unfavourable or at best relatively neutral towards the Turkish element comprising the cultural matrix of the nation’s social dynamics.

First, the elite’s choice of and reliance on secular, and homogeneously empty, nationalism as a principal modality for domestic legitimation—including as expressed in the elite’s continuous reference to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent regions in the public discourse and excess militarisation associated therewith, on one hand, and the elite’s effort to revive and actively promote cultural heritage at home and abroad (cultural nationalism) and spearhead cultural developments and advancement internationally, on the other—has effectively served to push Islam (particularly Sunni Islam), as an alternative channel for popular mobilisation and thus a potential challenge to regime stability and elite survival, outside the officially sanctioned realm of public dynamics. The Baku government, for example, has never been enthusiastic about the operation of Turkish-sponsored mosques across the country, for, given the latter’s Sunni disposition (and their lying outside the reach of state control), they have been perceived as introducing and promoting a sectarian—Sunni–Shia—divide across the largely Shia Azerbaijani social spectrum, thereby transforming the dominant cultural, indeed nationalised, representations of Islam into a more genuine—religious—understanding (and practice) of the faith; a perception that might have factored in the ruling elite’s decision to close down in 2009, if for allegedly legitimate (technical) reasons, both of the two “Turkish” mosques (sponsored/built, that is, by the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs, or *Diyanet*) operating in the capital (one of which was later re-opened). Another frequented Sunni mosque of Salafi disposition in the capital—the Abu Bakr mosque—was also closed down in August 2008 in response to a grenade attack on the mosque that left three people dead and at least 13 injured. The imposing “Heydar” mosque the government built in part over Turkish complaints about the meager number of Sunni mosques in downtown Baku has been designed, as a matter of compromise, to service both the Shia and the Sunni segments of the population at once.

Second, the place and role of Western discourse in the elite’s pursuit of domestic legitimation has in many ways been ambivalent. On one level, the elite have been

keen to promote Western modernity and associated consumerism (including by introducing the mushrooming chains of modern brand stores and restaurants all across the capital city) as expressions of continuous development and progress and as such another key mechanism to nurture their legitimacy at home thereby opening a door to Western cultural penetration. On another level, rising levels of Western penetration, particularly as reflected in the societal internalisation of Western norms and understandings (including the associated values of human rights and liberal democracy) and the mounting pressure—including by agitated groups from within—towards instituting democratic forms of governance, have rendered the elite increasingly resistant to the deepening of this latter dynamic, Western democratic discourse increasingly viewed as a neo-imperialist mechanism of dominance and control and as such as a direct threat to regime stability and survival; a reality that, among other developments, closed the door of government funding for the nationals' pursuit of undergraduate education in the United States.

The two dynamics underlying this schizophrenic landscape of elite intentionality *vis-à-vis* Western knowledge structures have combined and collided to prompt the elite, in the long run, to seek a formula whereby Western consumerist culture and modernity would enter the state's increasingly vibrant cultural matrix without the collateral effect of liberal/democratic political penetration; while, in the immediate run, inciting them, on one hand, to undermine the available mechanisms for Western penetration at home, including as expressed in the government's ban on international broadcasts on the country's national frequencies since January 2009 and the delegalisation of foreign capital in the NGO (non-state) sector in 2014, and, on the other hand, to look for and engage with the alternative foci of power across the globe, Azerbaijan's recent involvements with such regional institutional formations as the African Union (observer since January 2011), the Non-Aligned Movement (full member since May 2011), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (dialogue partner since July 2015), as well as its deepening engagement with the United Nations (2012–2013 UN Security Council non-permanent member) and Latin American states (Azerbaijani embassies opened in Mexico in November 2009, Argentina in August 2010, and Brazil in 2012) grounded in this latter line of "operational" thinking.

And third, and not least given the country's immediate Soviet past, but also in view of President Ilham Aliyev's education-conditioned socio-cultural disposition, the composition of the ruling elite in Azerbaijan under Ilham Aliyev has been dominated by Russian-speak-

ing (if often Western-exposed) individuals—often with a dual education background, Russian (whether in the Russian language in Azerbaijan or in Russia, or indeed elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, e.g. Ukraine) and Western—a reality that has rendered the elite positively inclined towards, and their domestic legitimacy dependent upon the continued presence of, the Russian and, if to a lesser degree, Western elements of the country's identity matrix and resistant to, or at best ignorant of, the Islamic and Turkish components of the same. In what is just one expression of this latter reality and notwithstanding an allegedly important contribution, the Baku Turkish Anadolu lyceum (so far the only high school in Baku sponsored and operated directly by the Turkish government) made to raising educational standards in Azerbaijan's secondary education provision (particularly at an initial stage of the country's independence and as expressed in the consistently high results its graduates display in the centrally administered national university admission tests), and despite numerous efforts on the part of the Turkish government to that effect, the Azerbaijani government has been consistently reluctant to allow for the second such Turkish government-sponsored school to open in Baku. Other Turkish (if non-governmental) educational establishments operating in the country as part of the so-called Gulen (or Hizmet) movement, of which there were at least 27 (including the Qafqaz University, a private school, and 12 lyceums and at least 13 Araz pre-University preparatory courses dispersed across the country's various regions), had been recurrently facing political and broader societal pressure and scrutiny of various kinds, given the rather clandestine nature of the movement's operation and its allegedly subversive longer-term political agenda, until they, save the University, were finally forced to close down in June 2014, including as an extension of recent political developments in Turkey itself.

### **The Historical Embeddedness of Identity Formation: The Heterogeneity of Identity Sources of Foreign Policy**

The *degree* of their presence in and bearing on the cultural matrix of the nation's identity today largely derivative as it is from a host of exogenous influences and grounded as such in the elite's pursuit of recognition and survival, all four cultural elements have been endogenous to, and historically embedded in, Azerbaijan's internal dynamics, the country's tricolour flag (first adopted in November 1918 and readopted in February 1991) embodying three of the components (Turkic heritage; modernity and progress; and Islam) and the presence in the country of an extensive segment of the pre-existent Russian-language population in the wake of inde-

pendence reflecting the nation's historical embeddedness in a Russian cultural milieu.

Indeed, Islam arrived in this geography in the seventh century with Arabs and shrouded itself in a Shia cloak in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of the Safavi (Iranian) empire, while the country had been governed by Turkic rulers and had been part of Turkic state-like formations, not without important interruptions, since at least the 11<sup>th</sup> century and had been incorporated into the Russian (and later Soviet) empire in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; a vibrant history that defined the complexity of the nation's religious, linguistic, and partly cultural identity that has persisted to date.

Against this historical backdrop, Azerbaijan had also witnessed the rise of the home-grown, if European-inspired, cultural-enlightenment movement in Baku in the late 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a development that resulted in the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) in May 1918—effectively the first Moslem secular democracy in the Islamic world. The nation had also been the first among Moslem states and among the first globally to extend suffrage to women in 1918; had seen the production and staging of what was effectively the first opera in the Moslem Middle East (*Leyli and Majnun*, 1908), this creatively based on a dynamic synthesis of traditional mugham and European classical music; and had also witnessed the setting up and opening in Baku of what was effectively the first secular school for Moslem girls across the Russian empire (1901)—complex dynamics exposing the historical endogeneity of both democratic liberal knowledge and modernity on one hand and Islam and traditionalism on the other in the country's cultural profile. Both of these cognitive preferences are engrained in the contemporary fabric of the country's identity, including as expressed in its urban architecture; the country widely perceived, by the elite and across the society alike, as “a crossroads between East and West” and the capital hailed by many as “the easternmost city of Europe and the westernmost city of Asia” with “Old Baku,” to cite Eldar Gasimov, the male representative of Azerbaijan's winning duo in the 2012 Eurovision contest, “virtually screaming that you are in the East,” while “outside the old city a real Europe” begins. The historical endogeneity of these two seemingly opposing knowledge structures to the contemporary dynamics of state identity is particularly noteworthy given the active efforts of agents in both the Moslem Middle East (including Turkey and Iran) and the West to impose respectively Islamic/traditional and liberal/democratic notions and understandings upon Azerbaijan as exogenous values to be adopted (rather than endogenously nurtured ideals to move back to), on one hand, and dichotomise the two (as one inev-

itably threatening the existence of, rather than organically congruent with, the other), on the other.

The endogenous social-cultural dynamics have also been grounded in a more recent history associated with post-independence state building. Thus, Azerbaijani society, in view of the heterogeneity of educational opportunities opened to them beyond the limits of the national realm and given the inadequacy of tertiary education provision at home, have grown intensely stratified by educational background and associated cultural attributes (including and primarily language), between and among those who received education abroad (this group internally divided among those who received education in different countries, first and foremost Turkey, the United States, and across Europe) and those who only studied locally (the latter group, in turn, divided between those who received education in the Russian language and those who studied in Azerbaijani, as well as those who studied in Turkish lycées). With representatives of the two groups socialised in different ways—the condition of divergent socialisation sustained through tightly confined networking patterns they end up following upon graduation—they evolve to embody distinct lifestyles and espouse variant, often conflicting, visions for the country's future political development, including the foreign policy direction the latter is ought to follow. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Azerbaijan's foreign policy—coined as balanced since the early days of independence—reflected nearly perfectly this post-colonial heterogeneity of Azerbaijani society (and its elite), divided as it has been and continuously balancing between the West and Russia on one hand and the Moslem world and Israel on the other.

### In Lieu of a Conclusion

A few concluding remarks are in order.

First, the embedded nature of Azerbaijan's identity dynamics has rendered it inherently unstable, the latter being a condition of the weakness of the post-colonial polity into which the country was re-born in the early 1990s (hence, the elite's need for recognition), on one hand, and the lack of heritage of stable, uniform *national* identity markers from its pre-independence past (with the concomitant presence of several elements in the historically endogenous milieu of the Azerbaijani cultural realm having rendered the nation's ideational space susceptible to elite manipulation), on the other. Consequently, even though nation-building in Azerbaijan has in many ways been elite-driven, or perhaps precisely in view of the top-down nature of its dynamics, there has been no single master discourse derivative from the elite level, for the elite have promoted divergent, often rival, discourses to accommodate the different (domestic and

foreign policy) agendas they have pursued in the context of the early years of state-building and their associated quest for recognition and survival.

Second, and in view of the above, in the context of the unfolding state-building, with the elite compelled to address and cope with a number of associated challenges, including various external and internal state- and regime-security concerns (state-building and regime-building here understood as a congruent whole), no single national(ist) discourse is possible, for nation-building always finds itself subservient to state-building, a reality that results in a very divided discursive landscape underlying the dynamics of nation-building, marginalised as the latter is in light of the immediate, often *ad hoc*, demands of state-building. Consequently, the lesser number of, and the less severe, challenges associated with state-building (particularly in the security realm) the elite stand to face—the more self-sufficient, that is, the elite are in terms of state/ regime security provision—the more emancipated they are from the need for external support (and hence recognition), the more coherent and uniform the elite-driven nationalist discourse grows to be. Further, with multiple discourses being patronised by the state, the identity outcome is likely to be a function of bottom-up dynamics (the agency of change thus lying at the societal, rather than elite, level) and as such is contingent on the extent to which individual (including elite-sponsored) narratives are successful across and accepted within wider segments of the population outside their immediate intended consumers (e.g. if pan-Turkic ethno-nationalist discourse grows popular outside the confines of the Turkish-educated segments of the population, including for example given the broader exposure to Turkish broadcasting and the like).

Third, the tactical nature of the elite's need to promote rival discourses domestically as a function of the hybridity of their domestic and foreign policy agendas resulted in the production of a negatively neutral—

substance-free (nominal)—discursive space underlying the country's ideational field, such that one needs to embody neutral dispositions (formalism) in all of one's social and public engagements to be accepted as a legitimate member within one's social and political milieu; a reality that has manifested itself particularly strongly in popular and state attitudes towards Islam (an average—legitimate—self-identified Moslem in an Azerbaijani nominal context embodying a profile of someone who does not pray, does not grow a beard, never attends a mosque, does not know a single ayah from the Quran, and consumes alcohol).

And fourth, and to specify further the above, because it is promoted in view of the elite's need for external recognition and curbed given the imperatives of domestic legitimation, the kind of Islam “left” for the majority of the population to engage is what Ali Hasanov in the opening quote above proudly refers to as the “Azerbaijani model of Islam,” Islam as a nominal cultural trait to be discarded (and hence with little consequence for personal dynamics) rather than a faith-based lifestyle to be strictly followed, this deformation itself a remnant of the country's Soviet past (hence not indigenously Azerbaijani after all): in pursuit of nationalism-based legitimacy with the empire's Moslem population, the Soviet elite had sought to undermine and subvert true Islamic practices and dispositions in Moslem-majority territories under their control given their potential to foster *transnational* bonds and loyalties and thus viewed as posing a threat to the Soviet nationality policy and the staunchly secular ideology the latter entailed; concomitantly, they had welcomed (or in the least had not actively resisted) the wider spread of “folk” Islam, this perceived as promoting *subnational* identities and attachments (and hence posing a lesser threat), on one hand, and helping sustain the patriarchal social structures (thus facilitating Soviet rule in rural, traditional, areas otherwise left outside the Party's control), on the other.

#### *About the Author*

Murad Ismayilov is Doctoral Researcher in Development Studies at the University of Cambridge, UK.

#### *Further Reading*

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