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Multimodal Salafi Engagement with Digital Media in Azerbaijan

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“Social networks bring good and evil, but you should use them for good purposes. With the help of social networks, you have to spread the correct understanding of monotheism and the teachings of Islam with which the prophet came. You must distribute this through the media. This is a rare opportunity for you - use it and do not leave it to the evildoers and preachers of delusion.”¹

Sheikh Salih Fawzan al-Fawzan

“Religious movements are brought together—realized as movements—through the circulation of discursive forms that address religious subjects, calling them into being, uniting them in com-

mon actions of reading, listening, seeing. In the contemporary world, electronic media are central to this process. They are the dominant technologies (though by no means the only ones) through which this circulation takes place and the forms of political and religious identities are forged.”²

Brian Larkin

This paper examines Azerbaijani Salafis’ engagement with the new media technologies. Our main research questions are: how do Salafis use digital or Internet media, what are the outcomes of this interaction, and what styles of communication do Salafis employ in their cyber engagements? Salafis³ in Azerbaijan are deprived of state support and do not possess institutional power. Salafi leaders have lost their access to mosques, and therefore their channels of communication with society and the scope of their preaching became severely limited. Under such conditions of structural restrictions and exclusion from public space, the Internet offers many invaluable opportunities for Salafism. Since 2008 (with the closure of the Abu Bakr mosque, the main center of Salafi preaching), the Internet has become an important sphere for the transmission of Salafi knowledge, multi-level communication with society and authorities, disputes with rival religious groups, and the construction of religious authority.

Access to digital media has enhanced “the channels through which ideas and information can be circulated and has enlarged the scope of what can be said and to whom.”⁴ This plurality of channels allows Salafis to overcome governmental control. In addition, Internet media facilitate cross-border interaction between Salafis through-

out post-Soviet space, making it possible for them to bypass legal limitations and state borders. However, the Internet is not only a field of possibilities, but also a space that alters Salafis’ epistemology and their methods of argumentation. In other words, Salafis’ relationship with digital media should not be understood in purely instrumental terms—as “sequential processes of movement of an essentially unchanged content from source to destination”⁵—but rather as a process of interaction. The new technology shapes new forms of transmission and acquisition of knowledge, as well as the construction of a community’s identity and the authority of its leadership. In turn, Salafis give the computer-mediated environments new and unexpected meanings.

One of the main Salafi leaders in Azerbaijan—Qamet Suleymanov (b. 1970)—deploys a set of discursive and performative media strategies on the Internet in order to achieve his preaching goals and, following the loss of their mosque, preserve Salafis’ sense of belonging to a single community. At the same time, Suleymanov’s media politics aim to promote his main cause (reopening the Abu Bakr mosque) by representing Salafism as an indigenous phenomenon absolutely loyal to the political regime and compatible with the nation-state. In order to propagate and defend their causes, Salafis extend their

epistemology and interpretative approach beyond Islamic texts to various secular media sources (news, political speeches, official decrees etc.), employing the language and rhetoric of these sources for their own ideological purposes.

In the following, we will conduct a detailed analysis of the abovementioned forms of Salafi engagement with digital media. It should be noted that the cyber activity of Muslim groups in post-Soviet countries remains poorly studied. Those studies that exist tend to focus on the Internet resources of radical jihadi groups, especially from the Northern Caucasus⁶ and Central Asia,⁷ while the engagement of other Muslim sects has been largely ignored. In particular, there is a lack of research on the Internet engagement of "quietist" or "purist" Salafi groups, despite the fact that these are the largest Salafi communities in Russia, Central Asia, and Azerbaijan. This research seeks to aid in filling that gap, and analyzes previously unstudied Internet sources in Russian and Azerbaijani. However, the Internet does not replace physical reality and Salafis interact in predominantly urban environments where physical and virtual spaces are closely interconnected. As such, before examining their cyber activity, the appearance and diffusion of Salafi *da'wa* in Azerbaijan will be discussed.

Salafism in Azerbaijan: The *ahl al-sunna wa al-jama'a* Community of Abu Bakr Mosque

Back in the late 1980s, the small epicenters of Salafi preaching in Azerbaijan were student dormitories, where Arab students who came to the Soviet Union to study medicine and the oil industry taught the Qur'an, Sunna and Islamic law to ordinary Azerbaijanis. These foreign students and their most diligent local disciples made the first Azerbaijani and Russian translations of Salafi literature. However, the wide diffusion of Salafism in the capital, Baku, and other cities in Azerbaijan occurred through the activities of public and private Islamic organizations. After independence, the Azerbaijani political elite was highly interested in developing relationships with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries in order to gain their political and financial support. During the period of 1994-1999, Azerbaijan received millions of dollars of humanitarian aid under the umbrella of the King Fahd program.⁸ In addition to Saudi Islamic foundations, NGOs based in Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were also carrying out charitable activities in the capital and countryside.⁹ It goes without saying that almost all Islamic charitable organizations were involved in proselytizing activities: building mosques, distributing religious literature, and helping young Azerbaijanis gain admission to well-known Islamic universities.

By the end of the 1990s, when Heydar Aliyev centralized power in the country, the

authorities had begun to develop policies for the prevention or control of transnational religious (notably Islamic) flows. Consequently, the government of Azerbaijan closed down many of these organizations; others were closed by the governments of their own countries, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11.¹⁰ However, the curbs on foreign sponsors failed to prevent the diffusion of Salafism. In fact, if Salafism emerged in Azerbaijan as result of external influence, Salafi networks in the country have been structured around young Azerbaijanis who received religious education in Islamic countries, notably Saudi Arabia, and returned home to preach. The largest Salafi community in Azerbaijan was formed inside the Abu Bakr mosque, which was built in Baku in 1997 with the financial assistance of the Kuwaiti charitable organization “Revival of the Islamic heritage.” The mosque’s preachers were young Azerbaijanis who had graduated from the Islamic University of Medina (IUM). Qamet Suleymanov—the most charismatic and experienced IUM graduate—became he leader of the Salafi community and the imam of the mosque. His eloquent sermons drew 7,000-8,000 people; no other mosque could attract such a number of believers.

The Abu Bakr mosque’s Salafi network included a considerable number of urban educated youth, as well as civil servants, businessmen, and professionals from local and foreign companies. The mosque had a transformative impact on the religious sphere in Azerbaijan. Salafis were able to win new followers by introducing a new discourse of “bookish” Islam, which cut against the traditional Azerbaijani religious discourse of the

Shi’a and Sunni mullah-storytellers, who were mostly religiously uneducated, did not know the Arabic language, and intermingled their speeches about Islam with folk tales, anecdotes, and literary themes. Often, empowered by Salafi *da’wa*, young new lay advocates of Salafism entered into disputes with these mullahs and corrected their religious “mistakes,” demanding proof of every story they delivered.¹¹ Within the walls of the mosque, a new community was formed, many members of which described themselves either as Salafis or as *ahl al-sunna wa al-jama’a*. These self-identifications implied a claim to “orthodoxy” and a differentiation of the religion from all other forms of Islam in Azerbaijan, particularly the dominant Shi’ism.

The Abu Bakr mosque and its surroundings were places of social interaction, identity building, and meaning production, where attendees rediscovered Islamic theology and law, studied Arabic, brought friends and family members, discussed problems, and traded and read books. The exact number of Salafis in Azerbaijan is unknown, though it is generally agreed not to exceed 50,000 (not a large number for a country of almost 10 million people). However, having penetrated a new environment, Salafism was able to influence it, becoming one of the most competitive religious currents in Azerbaijan.¹²

Nevertheless, despite its successful diffusion, the spread of Salafism in Azerbaijan had—and still has—limitations, due to the nature of the socio-political context in which it operated. The appearance and practices of Salafis inspired negative reactions to them among a large number of Azerbaijanis, who

perceived this “fundamentalist” and “scripturalist” religious movement as a threat to the secular environment of the country. Meanwhile, the Shi’ites, the largest Islamic group in Azerbaijan, considered Salafism a deviant, hostile phenomenon. Local media narratives, which associated the Abu Bakr mosque and its community with international terrorism, religious fanaticism, and “the lair of Wahhabism”¹³ (especially after 9/11), also nurtured these attitudes.¹⁴

Political elites likewise viewed Salafism as a potential danger and an alien phenomenon. Unable to fully control or adapt it, they imposed structural limitations in order to prevent its diffusion. During the presidency of Ilham Aliyev, the state’s intervention into the religious sphere has increased. The state not only tried to manage and control religious movements, as it had done before, but also started creating an Azerbaijani version of “traditional Islam” (*ənənəvi islam*), which ignores differences between Shi’ism and Sunnism, does not have connections with external Islamic institutions, and never interferes in politics. Clearly, Salafism does not fit into this “ecumenical paradigm.” Thus, Suleymanov has not been appointed as an imam by the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB),¹⁵ and his community has never been registered by the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA).¹⁶ On top of that, police and local authorities, in the capital and Sumgait as well as in the regions (especially in Qusar and Zaqatala), have often responded to Salafi activities with persecution and physical violence.¹⁷ In general, the Azerbaijani authorities’ stance on Salafism could be defined as alternating between symbolic and physical violence.

Nevertheless, Salafi leaders, especially Suleymanov, recognize the existing government and the president as legitimate from the *shari’a* point of view, and call on lay Muslims to ignore the political struggle in the country. As a matter of fact, the sources of inspiration and discursive references for Azerbaijani Salafis are such authoritative creators of contemporary Salafism as ‘Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz (d. 1999), Muhammad ibn Salih al-Uthaymin (d. 2001), Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999) and Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan (b. 1933), all of whom taught political obedience to those who hold political power in the country.¹⁸ In addition to these prominent scholars, two Salafi sheikhs—Muhammad Aman al-Jami (d. 1996) and Rabi’ ibn Hadi al-Madkhali (b. 1931)—had a particular influence on Suleymanov, who proudly mentions that “he was always with sheikh Rabi’”¹⁹ and “had a personal relations with al-Jami.”²⁰ The intellectual influence of these two figures was particularly strong at the IUM in the 1990s, when Azerbaijani students were studying there. The major characteristics of this trend in modern Salafism are a strict focus on preaching and struggle against religious innovations, the refutation of political participation, fierce criticism of jihadism and political Islam, loyalty to the Saudi royal family, and all-out support for the official religious institutions and organizations of Saudi Arabia, such as the Council of Senior Ulama and the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and the Issuing of Fatwas. After returning home, IUM graduates have reproduced these same quietist Salafi ideas and practices, especially in terms of focusing on piety and preaching, ostracizing Islamists

and jihadis, and legitimizing the existing political regime²¹. Therefore, the rivals of this quietist Salafi trend, notably jihadis, frequently stigmatize its followers as *madkhali* or *jami* (the follower of al-Madkhali and al-Jami) or even, as in the case of the post-Soviet space, as *qametchi* (in Azerbaijani) or *qametovec*, (in Russian)—“the follower of Qamet Suleymanov.”

Thus, in contrast to Shi'ite Islamists (of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan or Muslim Union Movement), Salafis do not belong to the formal organizations that directly confront the current political regime. However, social movements can pose a threat to the authorities even without participating in the conventional political process. Although quietist and purist, Salafis actually challenge dominant cultural codes and create new societal identities, producing networks of activists that spread particular interpretations of Islam.²² The transformative power of “anti-political” Salafism is seen as potentially contentious by the Azerbaijani political regime. Despite strong quietism, Salafis have a very political longing: they want Azerbaijan to be ruled by the Qur'an and Sunna, but unlike the political opposition, both secular (e.g. the Musavat Party, the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party, etc.) and religious (Islamic Party of Azerbaijan and other Shi'ite Islamists), they pose a challenge to the political regime without direct collision. As sociologist Cihan Tugal has pointed out, religious social movements are able to challenge both society and the state by projecting alternative hegemony, which denaturalizes everyday life and constitutes an alternative everyday routine.²³ Through their daily

interaction on the grassroots level, Salafis have been able to transform the bodily habits, language, dress, moral codes, and everyday practices of thousands of citizens of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Hence, even if the majority of Azerbaijani Salafis follow a quietist trend, being concerned predominantly with theology rather than politics, they exert a transformative societal impact and create a new vision of a pious Muslim society and state, which indirectly challenges the current political system and, more directly, its cultural hegemony.

Despite the limitations imposed by the state, the Salafi *da'wa* continued to diffuse steadily as long as Salafis had access to the Abu Bakr Mosque. But the loss of the mosque considerably weakened the diffusion of Salafism. The reason for this was not only the aforementioned perplexing context in which Salafism operated, but also intra-Salafi conflict between its purist trend, led by Suleymanov and other IUM graduates, and the jihadis. Salafis in Azerbaijan pursued their *da'wa* when the insurgency in the North Caucasus against Russia was still ongoing and NATO was fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. In this context, Suleymanov and other IUM graduates have been involved in harsh debates with jihadis, both in mosques and in cyberspace, about whether there is a global jihad, whether Azerbaijan is a Muslim country, and whether the Azerbaijani authorities are legitimate rulers. This is yet another manifestation of the longstanding debate between two religious transnational actors, quietist and jihadi Salafis, which reached the South Caucasus in the 1990s. The Abu Bakr mosque was a place of permanent contestation between the

followers of these two transnational Salafi groups. The confrontation came to a head in 2008, when a member of the jihadi group that operated along the northern border between Dagestan and Azerbaijan threw a grenade into the Abu Bakr Mosque while people were praying.²⁴ Two people died and eighteen were injured, including Suleymanov. After this episode, authorities decided to close the mosque.

Salafism Online: Creating an Alternative Infrastructure

After the closure of the Abu Bakr Mosque in 2008, Salafism lost its former societal influence and its diffusion slowed. The Friday sermons and daily lessons were interrupted, and various shops surrounding the mosque—where religious clothing, Salafi literature, and audio and video tapes of prominent Salafi preachers were available for sale—were closed. Obviously, Salafis did not disappear overnight. But without access to the Abu Bakr mosque, their resources and capacity to spread their message diminished considerably.

Salafis started gathering and praying at the Ashur Bey (Lezgi) mosque, the “*Ilahiyyat*” mosque (in the department of theology at Baku State University), the mosque in Garachuhur district and the mosque in Mehdiabad township—all located either in Baku or its suburbs. In some of these mosques, Salafis even managed to become imams and organize small Salafi communities. However, the authorities either closed those mosques (as in the case of Ashur Bey

mosque) or the CMB succeeded in excluding Salafis from them and appointing “official” imams.²⁵ Salafi preachers have since been unable to gain the position of imam, whether in the capital, other cities, or the countryside. The loss of a physical place of worship considerably limited the public sphere in which Salafism could operate, eventually leading to its fragmentation.

Nevertheless, the limitations on the scale and scope of their activities, the fear of repression, and the desire to escape state control have simply encouraged Salafis to find other spaces for interaction. Deprived of their mosque, and barred from building a mosque in a physical space, Salafis began to actively explore virtual space. Today, Islamic presence in cyberspace is rapidly expanding, and the Internet supplements and sometimes even supplants “traditional approaches to Islamic knowledge management and dissemination.”²⁶ The fact that Azerbaijan is an “internet leader in the South Caucasus”²⁷ also makes the relocation of Salafis from the physical space to cyberspace a strategic move. According to recent statistics, nearly 80 percent of the population used the internet in 2016,²⁸ and that number is growing. In addition, the mobile penetration rate is 100 percent, which contributes to the rapid dissemination of audio and video materials.²⁹ Since the closure of the mosque, Salafis have been actively exploring the possibilities of the cybersphere and winning a new following through social media.

In fact, the media has been an integral part of the Salafi *da’wa* since its arrival in Azerbaijan. In places where Azerbaijani Salafi leaders have studied, notably around the

mosques of Medina, one can always find many small shops selling (and playing loudly) CDs by prominent Salafi sheikhs. Returning home in the 1990s, Medina graduates recreated the same familiar spatial environment: CDs with Friday sermons and lectures by Suleymanov and other Salafi preachers were sold around the Abu Bakr mosque and widely circulated among its attendees. Obviously, the official websites of such harbingers of global Salafism as Ibn Baz, Ibn-Uthaymin, al-Fawzan, al-Madkhali, and others have also influenced how Azerbaijani Salafis understand electronic media.

In 2003, Azerbaijani Salafis launched the site of the Abu Bakr mosque—*abubakr-mescidi.com*—which originally functioned primarily as a forum.³⁰ The pages of this forum constitute a living historical document on the development of Salafism in Azerbaijan, a source that makes it possible to trace the spread of Salafi theology and jurisprudence, discover what questions it evoked among Muslims, and understand how the Salafi *da'wa* was interspersed into the life of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The forum consists of numerous questions about religion, life, and politics posed by visitors, along with Suleymanov's responses to them.

The forum is not only a sphere for communication between a *mufti* (one issuing a religious opinion) and a *mustafti* (one seeking this opinion), but also a place of heated religious polemics. On its pages, Suleymanov refutes other theologies and constructs his own authority, engaging in debates with anonymous users who speak on behalf of Shi'ism and Sufism. However, his most

fierce debates occur with jihadis or those who support their ideas. The Salafi leaders view jihadis as their main competitors within the religious field, as they refer to the same corpus of textual tradition and preach nearly the same theology. In addition, Medina graduates see jihadists' radical actions as a direct threat to their local preaching because they give authorities ever-present justification for the complete prohibition of the Salafi *da'wa* in Azerbaijan. This is why a rubric on the site, named "Sects" (*firqələr*), lists *mumay'is* (*mumeyyilər*)³¹ and *kharijites* (*xəvariclər*)³² before other Islamic communities, which Salafis consider deviant (such as Sufis, Shi'ites, and Quranists³³). Besides this rubric, the site *abubakr-mescidi.com* features such sections as "Topics" (a thematic guide to the numerous textual, audio and video materials on theology, law, ethics, and marriage), "Writings" (which contains articles and Salafi books translated from Arabic into Azerbaijani language), "Fatwas" (offering a translation of fatwas by the most authoritative scholars of contemporary Salafism), "Sermons" (the majority of Friday sermons given by Suleymanov from the mid-1990s to the present day are available here), and "Inquiries" (where users can pose questions to Suleymanov or listen to his YouTube-fatwas). For now, the content of these sections is available only in Azerbaijani; the Russian version of the site is currently under construction, however.

The site of the Abu Bakr mosque is gradually being transformed into a multifunctional digital mosque equipped with religious texts, video sermons, and online lessons, which is managed by certain cyber-preachers, "the seekers of knowledge" (*elm tələbələri*),

whose written and oral materials make up its content. Their names are listed in the right corner of the site and include Suleymanov, other Medina graduates who accept his authority, and several preachers who did not study abroad but acquired religious knowledge inside the Abu Bakr mosque. The list implies that these preachers are the bearers of the most authentic Islamic knowledge in Azerbaijan, and that all visitors to the site should therefore study Islam from them.

It is immediately evident that, on the site, audio and video resources are more prominent than texts. In fact, Suleymanov and other Azerbaijani Salafi preachers prefer oral performances to written communication as a means of knowledge transmission for strategic reasons. Firstly, digital media expand their audience, especially in urban environments where people spend more time using their computers and smart phones than reading theological treatises. Secondly, the number of questions is growing; since the closure of the Abu Bakr mosque, the internet is almost the only “place” where one can ask Suleymanov for a *fatwa*. Written responses to forum questions are time-consuming, and so have not been given since 2016. Quick audio responses are preferred. In addition, the new “Questions and answers” (*Sual-Cavab*)³⁴ section provides a forum for Suleymanov to give video responses to the most important and frequent questions of his audience on a weekly or monthly basis, using various YouTube channels owned by Salafis. In the absence of a mosque, digital media have become an indispensable tool for Salafis, allowing them to sustain oral communication and visual contact with their

following, thereby compensating, to a certain degree, for the loss of physical contact in the context of the mosque, as well as providing Salafis with some publicity. Engagement in performative politics on YouTube allows Suleymanov himself to demonstrate his rhetorical skills, charisma, and other forms of accumulated spiritual capital, with the goal of building up his religious authority and winning new followers.

YouTube has a special influence on the political economy of Salafi knowledge. Salafis increasingly prefer to translate, comment, and read books by famous Salafi figures to their audience in audio format, rather than print editions.³⁵ In addition to “audio books,” Salafis translate the video-fatwas of major Salafi sheikhs from Arabic into Azerbaijani and disseminate them via the YouTube channel of *fatvalar.com*, thus familiarizing local Muslims with historical and recent developments in the field of global Salafism. Publishing religious books requires obtaining permission from the SCWRA, which is not an easy task, especially for Salafis (the Committee itself has a number of anti-Salafi publications). Under such circumstances, the medium of YouTube allows Salafi preachers to transmit religious knowledge while avoiding state-imposed restrictions.

Along similar lines, Salafis have also begun exploring Mixlr.³⁶ Through this streaming platform, Azerbaijani students studying in Medina teach the writings of well-known Salafi scholars to their Azerbaijani audience on a weekly basis. Mixlr, which can also be considered an electronic form of radio, makes it possible to transmit Salafi

knowledge—outside state-controlled channels—from the prestigious Islamic University of Medina to various parts of Azerbaijan.

Nor does Salafi strategic and creative engagement with the media end here. Since the loss of the mosque, Salafi leaders have increasingly traveled around the country to meet with Salafi communities from outside the capital. The loss of a fixed home for Salafism appears to have encouraged them to travel in order to keep *da'wa* from fading away. Suleymanov has begun to meet with Salafis more often, traveling to Qobustan,³⁷ Shirvan,³⁸ Ganja,³⁹ Quba,⁴⁰ and other cities and regions of Azerbaijan to answer people's questions. If in the past people from the countryside and suburbs came to Baku to listen to the sermons of IUM graduates, now those graduates have themselves begun to travel to meet their audience. Significantly, all these "regional meetings" are recorded and distributed on the Internet, creating a sense of cohesion in the fragmented religious community. By providing video and audio recordings of these meetings, Suleymanov demonstrates to his followers that they are a part of a large community present nearly in all the cities of Azerbaijan. These recordings simultaneously reinforce his authority by demonstrating—both to laymen and to his rivals—that he has followers in various parts of the country.

Furthermore, digital media allows Suleymanov to exert his authority even beyond the borders of Azerbaijan. As a well-known Salafi preacher, he pays short visits to Muslims in Ukraine,⁴¹ Kazakhstan, and Russia (even the far northern city of Tyumen, where a lot of Azerbaijani labor mi-

grants live),⁴² and responds to their numerous questions. Such meetings are usually held in an informal atmosphere—in a mosque, café, or private apartment—and widely circulated on the various Salafi Internet channels. Communication mainly occurs in Russian: although Suleymanov mostly speaks and writes in Azerbaijani, he never disregards Russian-speaking Muslims, especially the Russian-speaking segment of Azerbaijani society, addressing their questions both in YouTube videos⁴³ and in the Abu Bakr forum. It is apparent that his knowledge of Russian is mediocre, but this is not a significant obstacle, since his fatwas are regularly translated into Russian by his followers, as well as certain Kazakh Salafi networks. The Kazakh Salafi portal "Sunna Press" has a separate section where Muslims can ask Suleymanov questions.⁴⁴ It also directs users to "The official website of Sheikh Qamet Suleymanov in the Russian language," where he addresses the questions of Russian-speaking Muslims from nearly all post-Soviet countries.⁴⁵ Launching a personal website in Russian—the language of "international communication" among countries in post-Soviet space—is a strategic decision that enables Suleymanov to reach a broader audience of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

These local and transnational engagements within computer-mediated environments can be viewed as an extension of the Abu Bakr mosque's infrastructure in a virtual space. This conception meshes with the theory of Brian Larkin, who sees media as a part of wider infrastructure, including physical infrastructure, which connects people and facilitates the transnational circulation of ideas

and goods within and between vast urban environments.⁴⁶ When Salafis had the Abu Bakr mosque, digital media served as a virtual extension of the physical infrastructure that connected people and attracted them to the mosque and its surroundings. Then, when Salafis lost their access to the mosque, the Internet became more of an alternative infrastructure that largely substitutes for physical infrastructure. To a certain extent, the Internet compensates Salafis for limited access to mosques, television, and radio, and preserves their sense of being a single community that once gathered in the Abu Bakr mosque.

We can see that Salafis in some ways imitate and recreate their physical infrastructure in the virtual space. The reason for this is, above all, to preserve the authority of the Abu Bakr mosque and the collective memory of its community. Salafi digital media cultivate a sense among the Salafis that the mosque is still “alive,” that it functions and has an imam who continues to read Friday sermons and responds to the questions of the faithful. The fact that some of Suleymanov's video sermons are still being recorded inside the Abu Bakr mosque,⁴⁷ and that pictures of the mosque are presented on the cover of many Salafi audio tapes, could also be considered part of this symbolic politics aimed at maintaining adherents' sense of belonging to a single community.

In addition, Internet infrastructure allows Salafis to reach an uninitiated audience even beyond Azerbaijan. It facilitates transnational interaction between Suleymanov and post-Soviet Muslims, expanding his authori-

ty and creating an “imagined community” of Salafis across borders.

Salafi Media Politics: Persuasion and Muted Criticism

As was already mentioned, journalists regularly represent Salafism as a foreign export that is alien to Azerbaijani traditions. The Azerbaijani,⁴⁸ Russian,⁴⁹ and Iranian⁵⁰ media outlets package Salafism into their “rhetorical foil,”⁵¹ which does not distinguish between various trends within global Salafism and depicts local Salafis as “Wahhabis,” “terrorists,” “fundamentalists,” and “long-bearded radicals” striving to establish an Islamic state in secular Azerbaijan. Furthermore, journalists' perspectives on Salafism and its relation to religious radicalism are often colored by their choice of interview subjects, typically Shi'ite theologians associated with the CMB or SCWRA experts, both of whom take a hostile stance on Salafism. Criticisms of Salafism are also amplified in the media following local or global events related to jihadism or international terrorism.

Despite the apparent hostility of journalists, Suleymanov and other Salafi preachers have never stopped trying to approach them. The most successful in building relationships with the local media was Salafi preacher Yashar Qurbanov, a Medina graduate and close associate of Suleymanov. Owing to his exceptional eloquence, education, and personal connections, Qurbanov managed to become a host of several local radio chan-

nels, and even on a regional television channel. He focused primarily on Islamic worship and morality, avoiding controversial theological issues and Salafi polemical criticism, an approach which allowed him to temporarily evade unwanted attention.⁵² However, his main references were still the body of Islamic texts that constitutes the basic sources of Salafism, a fact that eventually led to accusations that Qurbanov's radio appearances were tantamount to a covert diffusion of Wahhabism in Azerbaijan.⁵³ These criticisms, particularly in the context of the structural limitations imposed on Salafism in Azerbaijan, led Qurbanov to follow his classmate Suleymanov in relocating his main preaching activities to cyberspace. There, he became famous for creating one of the biggest Islamic electronic libraries in Azerbaijan, *islamevi.az* (House of Islam), whose appealing slogan reads, "The house that unites us."

However, in spite of Salafi efforts, the general attitude of the media toward Salafism has not changed. Since 2014, the local media has often mentioned Suleymanov and like-minded Salafi preachers in connection with a group of Azerbaijanis who joined jihadi formations in Syria (such as ISIS or Jabhat al-Nursa). Although ostensibly negative, this occasional attention has some positive aspects for Suleymanov: it allows him to remind the public of his existence and obtain some publicity for himself and his community. In 2014, for example, he even managed to give an interview to Al Jazeera,⁵⁴ where he explained the meaning of Salafism, as well as stating that there is no jihad in Syria and that his community was by no means connected with jihadists.

He was also able to give an interview on the same topic to the popular Azerbaijani Internet news agency APA TV⁵⁵ and to the Voice of America⁵⁶.

Suleymanov therefore sees media as a platform through which he can reach a broader audience as well as protect his community from criticism. Lacking access to television or radio, he began approaching numerous websites, which have mushroomed in Azerbaijan at a frenetic pace since the mid-2000s.⁵⁷ These sites provide Suleymanov, who is excluded from the state's discussions with religious figures, with at least some opportunity to enter into a public discussion of jihad, religious radicalism, terrorism, and Wahabbism. Through his online interviews, Suleymanov responds to critics, explains his theological beliefs, and seeks to familiarize society with Salafism in order to achieve its recognition as one of the indigenous religious communities of Azerbaijan. Almost all his interviews contain three main messages to people and authorities: Salafism is not an alien phenomenon in Azerbaijan, Salafis have no connection to terrorists, and only the reopening of the Abu Bakr mosque can prevent the growth of radicalism in the country. Intriguingly, in his attempts to support and publicize his causes, Suleymanov constructs his messages by combining the Islamic concept of persuasive criticism (*nasiha*), the language and rhetoric of the secular Azerbaijani media, and locally recognizable idioms. For example, in one of his interviews he states:

Mosques are the main places where spirituality is preserved. It is mosques that have preserved the morality and spirituality of our community and our nation. It is not expedient for us to disassemble them,

especially if we don't open new ones. It seems to me that certain individuals want to evoke negative opinions among people about the president and the state. I call the closure and demolition of mosques a provocation. This is a provocation against the state and the president. The religious community of Narimanov District has always been respectful of Azerbaijani laws and has supported Mr. President Ilham Aliyev. We have never opposed our state and have distinguished ourselves from other mosques with our ideological struggle against radicalism. That is the exact reason why we have been attacked. That is why they [radicals] threw a grenade at us. Those who want to close [mosques] should visit them at least once on Friday. There is no free space in mosques anymore. Therefore, we need to build new mosques, as is being done in other countries. For example, when looking at the news about Russia, they regularly show that a church has been opened, has been repaired, and so on. But here, on the contrary, mosques are being closed, which is not a good sign. It contradicts our morality.⁵⁸

In this passage, Suleymanov represents Abu Bakr mosque not as a Salafi mosque per se, but as one of the Azerbaijani "traditional" mosques that cultivated morality and struggled against radicalism. Hence, his message implies that the closure of the mosque contradicts public morality. In order to defend his cause, he connects the closure of the Abu Bakr mosque to the issues that are part of public discourse in Azerbaijani society: the preservation of moral values and the fight against radicalism. His rhetorical strategy implies that both issues could be approached positively if authorities would reopen the mosque. In addition, the passage also contains a soft criticism of the authorities' general policy towards mosques in the country. This indirect appeal to the power-holders, combined with muted criticism of them, is part of the Islamic concept of *nasiha*, which is a softly persuasive criticism of (and courteous advice to) the authorities, without any

harsh actions or calls for resistance against them.

Another pertinent example: when asked what he thinks about the ban on wearing hijab in schools, Suleymanov answered:

It is unnecessary to play with the feelings of the faithful. This prohibition, in the first place, diminishes the influence of Azerbaijan in the Islamic world. On the other hand, it negatively affects the attitude of Azerbaijani believers toward the state. In such a context, some [third party] forces use the situation in accordance with their own [selfish] interests. In Azerbaijan, the ban on hijab is a crucial issue that provokes unpleasant popular attitudes toward the president. Artificial exaggeration of the problem [wearing hijab in schools] is not in favor of the state.⁵⁹

Unlike Shi'ite Islamists from the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, Suleymanov prohibited his followers from joining demonstrations in front of the Ministry of Education,⁶⁰ writing in the Abu Bakr forum that, "the rally in front of the ministry was a misstep, maybe in time the solution to the problem would have been found, but this rally complicated the issue even more."⁶¹ If the Shi'ite Islamists perceived the ban as an attack on Islam, Suleymanov presented it as an erroneous decision that played into hands of "some [third party] forces" that seek to spoil the relationship between the president and the people. Interestingly, his responses mimic the language and rhetoric of the official Azerbaijani media, which often associate problems in the country with the "intrigues of foreign enemies." By deploying such rhetorical strategies, Suleymanov reveals to his followers that he disagrees with the state's policies. But by blaming "third forces" and offering gently-worded advice, he also implies that he, as a preacher, is on the side of

the authorities and that his primary concern is the interests of the state.

In recent years, the Salafis began using Internet media to publicize cases of repression and violence against them. As has already been mentioned, Salafis are at times physically abused, have their beards forcibly shaved off, and are locked in police stations. Usually, these raids are “carried out by local police and local “authorities” that do what they think is demanded of them by the top, even though this is not necessarily the case.”⁶² For example, in November 2014, the police arrested a group of Salafis who had gathered and to perform religious rituals in a private apartment. In an interview, Suleymanov told a popular online news site that “radicals are being ignored, while normal people are under attack,” adding that “we do not want to blame the Ministry of Internal Affairs. But there are some individuals in this structure who misuse their position. Possibly, they incline to a certain belief and take revenge on our brothers. We are against that.”⁶³ After this event, the affected Salafis wrote letters and made a video appeal to the President and the minister of Internal Affairs, complaining about the brutality of Sumgait’s police department.⁶⁴

According to a popular Salafi formulation,⁶⁵ it is forbidden to criticize officials publicly; if they commit a serious breach of conduct, they can be criticized, but only in front of the ruler. As Salafis do not have direct access either to government structures or to the president, they send their message through the medium of the Internet, using a very common “safe” form of public criticism of officials in Azerbaijan whereby the dissatis-

fied party can blame “outside forces” (such as “malicious individuals” inside the Ministry of Internal Affairs), thus avoiding making any harsh political statements while ensuring that the appeal will go straight to the president. This approach allows Salafis both to attract attention to their problem and to show their loyalty to the state.

This form of protest not only bears the hallmark of Saudi Arabian religious discourse, which opposes direct criticism of state structures, but it could also be seen as a way of adapting to highly illiberal local political conditions. In Azerbaijan, people generally show a very low trust in government structures, associating them with “the most negative phenomena, such as injustices and unresolved problems.”⁶⁶ For example, only 32 percent of people “somewhat trust” police, and around 11 to 22 percent trust courts, whereas nearly 84 percent of the population trust the president.⁶⁷ In other words, people do not trust institutions, which they consider corrupt, and believe that their problems can only be solved by the intervention of the president. They often sign petitions in the name of the president or protest holding his portraits, indicating that they do not represent the opposition nor seek to revolt against the political regime but simply demand a solution to a certain problem (which helps them to avoid possible repression on the part of the government). Similarly, in order to defend their causes in the media, Salafis interweave their method of approaching authorities with locally recognizable idioms and locally embedded practices of protest.

“Salaf News” Media Project: Intervention into the Field of Journalism

Interaction with various private internet news agencies led the Salafis to the idea of creating their own media project, through which they could better introduce themselves to society and reach a wider audience. In 2014, Salafis launched a new media platform, Salaf News (*Salaf Xəbər*), which was theologically legitimized by Suleymanov.⁶⁸ He pointed out that journalists often inaccurately convey or completely misrepresent his words, so from now his interviews would be published on Salaf News. One of the main reasons for the creation of this Internet news agency is circumventing the information blockade under which the Salafi community found itself following the closure of the Abu Bakr mosque. The project is conceived as a Salafi voice that communicates with the public directly rather than through any third party, in an effort to represent Salafism as a local phenomenon that is fully compatible with the nation state.

Salaf News introduces itself through a special section, “Who are we, Salafis?,”⁶⁹ that sends three main messages to readers. The first message: Salafism does not contradict the values of Azerbaijani society; on the contrary, it cultivates a good attitude toward parents and preserves family ties. The second message is that the Salafis are not against science—they actually support the development of scientific knowledge and technology, but insist that Muslims have made the most scientific progress when they were most committed to the principles of

their religion. In this way, Salafis try to refute the two most common media attacks against them: “Salafism is an external hostile phenomenon incompatible with all Azerbaijani traditions” and “Salafism is inherently anti-science.” The final message emphasizes that Salafis are the movement that is most loyal to the existing political regime: “It is not important for us how a ruler came to power, whether he is fair or not, whether he is president or king—none of it is important at all. In all circumstances, obedience [to the ruler] is the *sine qua non*. Any manifestation of opposition to the Muslim ruler (in our case, Supreme Commander-in-Chief Ilham Aliyev) is forbidden (*haram*) according to the religion of Islam.”

Developing their loyalty narrative, Salafis point out that the major goal of their project is aiding the state in its fight against all “anti-patriotic and radical religious groups,” as well as contributing to “the enlightenment of citizens,” “protection of state security” and “the multi-ethnicity of the society.”⁷⁰ Salafis harness these locally recognized discourses, especially the “struggle against radicalism” and “enlightenment of the masses,” which are widely used by state structures in relation to opposing religious radicalism⁷¹, implying that the Salafi approach of going back to the Qur’an and Sunna is very much in line with the policies and goals of the government.⁷² The Salafis try to legitimize their *da’wa* by injecting it into the discourses supported by the state and by speaking in a language that is daily reproduced and repeated in the media, widely recognized in society, and does not seem dangerously provocative to the authorities.

The article “The notion of patriotism in Islam”⁷³ exemplifies the Salafi media project’s other attempt to represent Salafism as a local phenomenon by using locally recognizable idioms. First, Salaf News explains the meaning of motherland (*vətən*), referring to both the Explanatory Dictionary of Azerbaijani Language, which defines it as “the country where a person is born and grew up and where he is a citizen,” and to the various classical Arabic dictionaries (for example, the famous *Lisan al-Arab* of Ibn Mansur). Deploying Azerbaijani and Arabic languages along with the Qur’anic verses and *hadiths*, Salafis respond to the popular criticism directed against them that Salafi theological beliefs are contrary to the modern understanding of patriotism. Simultaneously, they are trying to convince lay Salafis that attachment to the national state is not alien to Islam and that their ideological opponents – Salafi-jihadis, who reject national borders, concepts, and symbols – have completely erred.

Then, the text defines the notion of patriotism as the unity of citizens, protection of the homeland, and obedience to the ruler. After a thorough explanation of all three forms of patriotism by Qur’an and Sunna, it ends with a wish to “restore territorial integrity, get back to Shusha, and perform a prayer inside in its mosques.” That is a direct reference to the main issue of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy—the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to which Azerbaijani Salafis pay particular attention. News about events from the front lines is frequently posted on Salaf News. Suleymanov also emphasizes that the war in Karabakh is a jihad and distinguishes the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from other

armed conflicts in the Muslim world. According to him, Muslims there confront infidels (*kafirlər*), while in other places Muslims are mostly fighting Muslims.⁷⁴ However, he stipulates that jihad is invalid unless ordered by the legitimate ruler (the president of Azerbaijan), so he prohibits Salafis from taking any arbitrary action regarding this issue, though he regularly affirms—particularly following skirmishes on the front lines—that Salafis will join the war against Armenian occupation as soon as mobilization is announced.⁷⁵

These statements about the motherland, patriotism, and Nagorno-Karabakh once more demonstrate Salafis’ attempts to situate themselves within the political context of Azerbaijani society, as well as point out the national dimensions of their movement. Thus, the deterritorialization of the transnational phenomenon of Salafism has certain limits in Azerbaijan.⁷⁶ Local environment and ethno-nationalist discourses clearly hamper the development of some Salafi movements,⁷⁷ but they also help them adapt to the local context and encourage them to demonstrate the “comprehensiveness” (*al-shumuliyya*) of Islam that is supposed to accommodate any cultural and political challenges. In this respect, Azerbaijani Salafis’ strategic engagements with Internet media show their ability to creatively adapt and reformulate both local narratives and Salafi concepts.

All previously mentioned approaches to the media are more obviously manifested in Salaf News’ method of combining arguments derived from religious texts with information produced by mass media. In fact,

the project's strategy of intermingling religious texts with news about politics, society, culture, technology, etc. distinguishes it from other Salafi media initiatives. The project imitates the discourse and rhetoric of professional journalism while supplementing news with religious commentary, thus melding local and global events and Salafi theology into a single narrative. Salafis apply the interpretive methods they use on Islamic texts to political and social phenomena, thus giving potential readers a vision of the world through a Salafi lens.

Salafis' intervention in the journalistic field required cultural capital ("educational credentials, technical expertise, general knowledge, verbal abilities, and artistic sensibilities")⁷⁸ typically possessed by journalists. Various aspects of Salafi media engagements--from the official name of the project (Azerbaijan Islamic Studies and News Portal) to Suleymanov's attempts to position himself as a public expert commenting on Islam and society—show that Salafis are trying both accumulate and utilize this capital. However, they do not in any way see themselves as part of the field. Salafis see journalists as a group of specialists who often distort the truth⁷⁹ and associate the Salafi community with terrorists. They see political analysts or scholars of Islamic studies as professionals who desecralize texts and pretend to be legitimate and competent interpreters of religion for local media and government structures. The Salafi media project, therefore, encapsulates a symbolic struggle against these two groups over the legitimate right to interpret both religion and the world. It strategically imitates and reformulates the rhetoric of jour-

nalists and political analysts, with the goal of dispossessing them and replacing their interpretative authority.

Salaf News emphasizes that its main object is not simply to transmit news, but to "explain many contemporary problems and events related to the Islamic world and Muslims." Therefore, "in order not to get lost in an overabundance of information," it tries to handpick the most "valuable and useful" news for readers. The site explains that news is provided selectively according to its media politics, which has the following distinctive features: (1) it always shows the source of the information; (2) it does not present news about crimes and other negative happenings without a serious need; (3) it avoids information containing speculation and lies; (4) it approaches all issues in the context of common sense; and (5) it brings good news to readers in Azerbaijan and the Islamic world.⁸⁰ (At the same time, however, the site claims that their project follows the same rules of information transfer as any other news agency, presumably in the hope that people will use it as a source of information on a regular basis.)

Salaf News applies the same criteria for distinguishing truth from falsehood to the various social and political events as Salafi scholarly tradition does while defining prophetic narrations. In this way, Salafis not only extend their epistemology and methodology beyond the texts of the Salafi canon, but they also create a hybrid discourse that mimics the rhetoric of the Azerbaijani media (especially television and broadcasting) by presenting predominantly positive news in which Azerbaijan appears as an island of

prosperity and stability in the region. The news is selectively drawn from local and global news agencies, with a focus on general wellbeing in Azerbaijan and the success of the president's domestic and foreign policies. Meanwhile, the “positive” news stories—from the creation of new infrastructure to the growth of economic indicators to the adoption of various laws aimed at facilitating people's lives—are explained and legitimized through religious texts. For example, Salaf News accompanies the story “Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree approving the ‘Regulations on the Preferential Housing System’” with a *hadith*:

“The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: Whoever relieves one of the hardships of a believer in this world, Allah will alleviate his hardship on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever relieves the needs of someone in difficulty, Allah will alleviate his needs in this world and in the Hereafter. Allah helps the servant as long as he helps his brother.”⁸¹

Similarly, a news story headlined “Ilham Aliyev: The Politics of Islamophobia, Racism and Xenophobia is Pursued in Europe” is readily available on many sites. It describes how the president condemned the EU for Islamophobia and migrantophobia following a resolution in the EU Parliament that fiercely criticized the Azerbaijani government for violating human rights. However, the Salafi media platform accompanies the story with the following commentary:

Unfortunately, support for the principle of “freedom of speech” does not prevent many Western governments from spreading hatred and insults against Islam and Muslims. But just one question arises: why does the West not apply the principle of “freedom of speech” to manifestations of anti-Semitism? It is known that the denial of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust is a criminal offense in many Western coun-

tries. Thus, despite the existence of the principle of “freedom of speech,” the laws of these countries protect a religious community of no more than 15 million all over the world, punishing those who insult them and affect their feelings. So why, then, when it comes to insulting the Muslim community of more than half a billion, does the principle of “freedom of speech” immediately disappear? Is that justice?

As for our religion, Islam prohibits anti-Semitism. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Arab has no superiority over non-Arabs. Non-Arab is not superior to Arab. As a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety.”

We ask the Almighty to give Muslims patience and punish those who condemn Islam.⁸²

The commentary both reproduces and supports the anti-Western rhetoric of the Azerbaijani government, supplying it with the anti-Jewish Salafi discourse. Deploying such media strategies, the Salafis legitimize the president's policies (in hopes of protecting the *da'wa* from possible suppression at the hand of state structures), but most importantly, they hope that such an approach would finally convince authorities to reopen the Abu Bakr mosque. At the same time, they turn the president's news, speeches, and activities into part of the Salafi *da'wa*, demonstrating that all events and phenomena find confirmation in Islamic texts.

Another recent and relevant example here would be the Salafi interpretation of the devaluation of Azerbaijani currency (*manat*) that occurred in February and December 2015. Suleymanov received numerous questions about how to cope with rising prices and whether believers were allowed to join rallies against government policies. In his video and audio performances, Suleymanov explains the devaluation as a divine punish-

ment for the sins of the people, who shortchange or bribe each other and take loans from banks.⁸³ In other words, he has used the crisis to critique the morals of society. Concomitantly, he forbids his followers to join rallies organized by the secular opposition, and calls on Muslims to endure the hardships and ask forgiveness from Allah, implying that it is not the president who is to blame for economic problems but people committing sins. In line with Suleymanov's fatwas, Salaf News supplies the president's words that the exchange rate of manat will soon stabilize and that Azerbaijan will overcome all crises alongside the following Qur'anic verse: "No creature is there crawling on the earth, but its provision rests on God; He knows its lodging-place and its repository. All is in a Manifest Book."⁸⁴

With links to its YouTube videos, Salaf News invokes the imposing corpus of fatwas of the authoritative, predominantly Saudi, Salafi sheikhs (Ibn Baz, Ibn al-Uthaymin, and al-Fawzan al-Madkhali), claiming that obedience to the ruler is not just politics, but a part of worship. Moreover, the loyalty of the Salafis stands in opposition to the rebellious stance of Shi'ites, whom the Salafi media represent as agents of external (specifically Iranian) influence.⁸⁵ This media strategy creates a persuasive discourse that frames Shi'ism as a potential danger to the Azerbaijani political regime, setting up a contrast with the supposed safety of the ultra-submissive Salafism, which would under no circumstances interfere in the political field.

It should be noted that, in addition to local news, Salaf News always has an eye on

global events related to the worldwide Muslim community (*umma*). Particular attention is paid to Azerbaijan's cooperation with the "Sunni countries": Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Pakistan. These Muslim states, especially Saudi Arabia, are represented as friendly countries through reports of economic cooperation, bilateral relations, meetings of the heads of states, provision of humanitarian assistance to Azerbaijan, and so on. Conversely, the narrative on Iran is negative, portraying it as an aggressor, as a country that causes discord between Muslims, and especially as an ally of Armenia—with which Azerbaijan is at war.⁸⁶ This type of narrative depicts Azerbaijan through a Salafi political imaginary in which it appears as an integral part of the Sunni world and as an ally of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, it also supports "official" media narrative that represents Azerbaijan as a country which has excellent relations with the Muslim world and is a model of sustainable development and religious pluralism.

As well as social and political news, the project provides various useful materials about health and technology in the style of "life hack" Internet resources, which is also part of general Salafi media strategies. Deploying religious texts, news, and various forms of useful information in digital media, Salafis try to create an all-encompassing Internet platform aimed at replacing "conventional" news sites for lay Salafis, as well as to attract a wider, uninitiated audience.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how Salafis in Azerbaijan engage with digital media after having been deprived of the Abu Bakr mosque. It argues that digital media became a virtual extension of their mosque that, to a certain extent, compensates for the absence of physical infrastructure. Having recreated their mosque in cyberspace, Salafis sustain their preaching and sense of belonging to a single community through discursive and performative media politics. The new media also makes it possible for Azerbaijani Salafis to transmit knowledge, to be involved in transnational interaction with post-Soviet Salafis, and to attract the new followers, while evading state control.

Regularly attacked by local and foreign multimedia, Salafis eventually decided to speak

for themselves in order to persuade authorities to reopen the Abu Bakr mosque. In their strategic media engagements, which aim to propagate and defend their main cause, Salafis represent themselves as an indigenous religious community by using locally recognizable idioms and imitating the rhetoric, forms, and parlance of secular journalism. By incorporating news into their system of argumentation and intermingling it with religious texts, Salafis have extended the application of their methods beyond the Islamic textual corpus. Consequently, they have created a discourse united by a single narrative that explains the happenings of the world for lay Salafis as well as the uninitiated through the Salafi *weltanschauung*.

¹ "The prominent scholar Al-Fawzan recommends the use of social media in spreading the call to Allah and responding to the advocates of misguidance" (in Arabic), YouTube video, posted by "AshashaS," May 2, 2016 <https://goo.gl/r6iN3p>

² Brian Larkin, "Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism," *Social Text* 26:3 (2008): 101.

³ Salafism is an Islamic current, which calls for Islam to be understood as it was by "pious ancestors" (*al-salaf al-salih*), the first three generations of Muslims. In fact, almost all Islamic sects appeal for an understanding of Islam along these lines, but Salafis produce a strong discourse of juxtaposition by contrasting their imitation of social and religious practices of the first Muslims with the theology of all other Islamic trends. A major component of Salafi theology is the rigorous propagation of the unity of God (*tawhid*), combat against polytheism (*shirk*), criticism of Sunni speculative Islamic theology (*kalam*), as well as all kinds of Greek influences on Islamic theological discourse, the struggle against reprehensible religious innovations (*bid'a*) and an extremely hostile attitude towards Sufism and Shi'ism, both of which are accused of innovation and polytheism. As this paper does not focus on Salafi theology, a more detailed explanation can be found in: Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009): 33-57.

⁴ Dale F. Eickelman, "Communication and Control in the Middle East," in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003): 33.

⁵ Jeremy Stolow, "Religion and Media," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 22:4 (August): 124-125.

⁶ See Alexander Knysh, "Islam and Arabic as the Rhetoric of Insurgency: the case of the Caucasus Emirate," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35 (2012): 315-337; Matteo Vergani and Dennis Zuev, "Neojihadist Visual Politics: Comparing YouTube Videos of North Caucasus and Uyghur Militants," *Asian Studies Review* 39 (2014): 1-22.

⁷ See Noah Tucker, "Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging in Central Asia," *CERIA Briefs* 11-15 (2016), accessed July 20, 2017, <https://goo.gl/d6Yke6>

⁸ Musa Qasimli, *Azərbaycan Respublikasının xarici siyasəti (1991-2003)* (Baku: Mutarjim, 2015), 296-301.

- ⁹ Rufat Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society in Independent Azerbaijan. Between Historical Legacy and Post-Soviet Reality* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2009):146-147.
- ¹⁰ Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society*, 132.
- ¹¹ Kamal Gasimov, "Examining Salafism in Azerbaijan: Transnational Connections and Local Context," in *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, ed. Ansgar Jodick (London: Routledge, 2017): 112 (forthcoming)
- ¹² Gasimov, "Examining Salafism," 113.
- ¹³ Although media and even some scholars refer to "Salafism" as "Wahhabism", here I do not use this term because "Wahhabism" is just a part of a broader Salafi tradition. In addition, Wahhabism/Wahhabite has a pejorative meaning to the people designated as such.
- ¹⁴ Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society*, 253-254.
- ¹⁵ A semi-official religious organization that supervises the religious arena in Azerbaijan by registering Muslim communities and appointing imams to mosques.
- ¹⁶ A state institution that registers all religious communities and assists the government in shaping public policy on religion.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, "Sumqayıtyly salafi: "Qollarymyza qandal vurdular, ustumuza chyxdylyar, bashymyzda oturdular," *BBC*, November 18, 2014, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/PMM5gE>
- ¹⁸ Gasimov, "Examining Salafism," 100.
- ¹⁹ "Elman Qasymovun "Biz bir idik. Ozbaklar... Hanzala qardash ..." shubhasi", YouTube video, posted by "Azer Islamoglu," January 8, 2017, <https://goo.gl/3VTq2M>
- ²⁰ "Official website of the sheikh Qamet Suleymanov in Russian language," *Qamet.com*, accessed July 20, 2017, <https://goo.gl/U76HJN>
- ²¹ Gasimov, "Examining Salafism," 111.
- ²² Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The Salafi Movement: Violence and the Fragmentation of Community," in *Muslim networks: From Hajj to Hip hop*, ed. M. Cooke & B.B. Lawrence (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 211.
- ²³ Cihan Tugal, "Transforming everyday life: Islamism and social movement theory," *Theory and Society* 38:5 (2009), 429.
- ²⁴ Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society*, 256.
- ²⁵ In general, many mosques in Azerbaijan are places of permanent contestation between charismatic imams educated abroad and "official" imams appointed by the CMB.
- ²⁶ Garry Bunt, *IMuslims: Rewiring the house of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 15.
- ²⁷ Alexey Sidorenko and Arzu Geybullayeva, "The Internet in Azerbaijan," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 15 (2010): 2-7.
- ²⁸ International Telecommunication Union, accessed July 3, 2017. <https://goo.gl/6Eqc9P>
- ²⁹ International Telecommunication Union.
- ³⁰ Forum of Abu Bakr mosque: <https://goo.gl/aXogDi>
- ³¹ From the Arabic verb *tamayya* – "to become liquid". Salafis use this stigma to designate other Salafis whom they think hide their jihadi or Islamist views. Suleymanov often stigmatizes rival Salafi preachers who challenge his authority using this term.
- ³² Kharijites are adherents to a sect that developed after the assassination of the third caliph Uthman in 656. The title is derived from the Arabic word *khuruj*, meaning "insurrection". This sect was extremely violent and declared everyone who disagreed with its ideology and policies an infidel. From the very beginning, Suleymanov stigmatized all his rivals within the Salafi movement, mostly (though not exclusively) jihadis, as *Kharijites* (which is a usual practice of quietist Salafi preachers) and popularized this term through his sermons and interviews. Interestingly, in time, local media, along with some officials, policy experts and even scholars, adopted this ideologically loaded term, using it to differentiate between Suleymanov's followers and his rivals (designating the formers as moderates and the latter as radicals). See, for example, Crisis Group, "Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State" *International Crisis Group Europe Report* (Brussels, 2008); Dobroslawa Wiktor March, "Measuring Muslims: The Problem of Religiosity and Intra-Religious Diversity," in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion: New Methods in the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Luigi Berzano and Ole Preben Riis, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 220.
- ³³ By Quranists (*Quraniġar*) Salafis mean all groups who reject prophetic narrations and accept only the authority of Quran.
- ³⁴ See abubakr-mescidi.com, accessed June 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/efQziL>.
- ³⁵ See, for example, site of the Abu Bakr mosque; Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab, "Qamet Suleymanov: "The Book of Monotheism," accessed July 2, 2017, <https://goo.gl/1qxwmV>.

- ³⁶ “Abubakr mescidi,” *Mixlr*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/VhxLCm>
- ³⁷ “Qamat Suleymanov-Qobustan, qysa sual javab”, YouTube video, posted by “abuisaselefi selefi,” June 15, 2017, <https://goo.gl/SysQit>
- ³⁸ “Sheikh Qamet: ‘Bu hizbi harakat takfirchiliyin yeni va gizli formasydyr.’ Shirvan shahari,” YouTube video, posted by “Azar Islamoglu,” October 12, 2016, <https://goo.gl/ru34Qh>
- ³⁹ “Qamet Suleymanov-Gancada qysa sual javab”, YouTube video, posted by “abuisaselefi selefi,” April 16, 2016, <https://goo.gl/r9Wj5F>
- ⁴⁰ “Qamet Suleymanov-Qubada Sual Javab”, YouTube video, posted by “abuisaselefi selefi”, June 23, 2016, <https://goo.gl/yoky31>
- ⁴¹ “Sheikh Qamet otvechaet na voprosy – 1, Ukraina,” YouTube video, posted by “Tovhide Devet,” February 6, 2015, <https://goo.gl/HvPFZt>
- ⁴² “Vstrecha Sheikha Qameta s bratyami v gorode Tyumeni”, YouTube video, posted by “Salafin Fahmi ila,” May 14, 2016, <https://goo.gl/GGPYkm>
- ⁴³ See, for example, “Qamet Suleymanov. Otvety na voprosy,” YouTube video, posted by “abuisaselefi selefi,” May 31, 2016, <https://goo.gl/AdnXVV>
- ⁴⁴ Sunna Press, accessed 23 July, 2017, <https://goo.gl/9bshoc>
- ⁴⁵ Qamet.com, “Official website of the sheikh Qamet Suleymanov in Russian language,” accessed July 20, 2017, <https://goo.gl/Xq7S2V>
- ⁴⁶ Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.
- ⁴⁷ Suleymanov is allowed to perform prayers inside the mosque with a very limited number of his closest companions, but it is still closed to the public.
- ⁴⁸ See, for example, X. Ismailov and S. Abbasov, “Logovo vahhabittov v Baku,” *Echo*, May 2, 2001, <https://goo.gl/xuhhss>; Modern, “Vahhabilar na istayir?,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/N8zH8P>; Musavat, “Vahhabi tahlukasi unuduldumu...,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/Q2Fhyx>
- ⁴⁹ For some generic examples, see Sohbet Mamedov, “Khidzhaby dlya azerbaydzhanok shyut araby,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, November 1, 2013, <https://goo.gl/FdBFjk>; Anton Evstratov, “Zakavkazskiy inkubator Salafitov,” March 3, 2016, <https://goo.gl/m191zx>;
- ⁵⁰ “Who supports Wahhabi Movements in the Republic of Azerbaijan,” *AhlulBayt News Agency*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/gchNfv>; Qafqaz, “Barrasi-ye khatar-e vahhaiyyat dar jomhuri-ye Azerbayjan,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/nY6P5Y>
- ⁵¹ Alexander Knysh, “A clear and present danger: ‘Wahhabism’ as a rhetorical foil,” *Die Welt des Islams* 44:1 (2004): 3-26.
- ⁵² For some of his radio broadcasts, see his personal channel on YouTube: <https://goo.gl/kKLryA>
- ⁵³ See, for example, “Vahhabilarin arxasynda bir general var,” *Musavat*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/Y5Vpxf>
- ⁵⁴ “Azeri selefi lideri Al Jazeera'ye konushtu,” YouTube video, posted by *Al Jazeera Turk*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/4xQvJE>
- ⁵⁵ “Suriyada doyushan azerbayjanlylar,” YouTube video, posted by *APA TV*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/UGzGyd>
- ⁵⁶ Tapdiq Farhadoglu and Parvana Bayramova, “Qamet Suleymanov: Suriyada 100 yox, 50 azarbayjanlyny oldurulduyunu demak olar,” *Amerikanyn Sesi*, January 14, 2014.
- ⁵⁷ These online news agencies gradually became more numerous, especially after 2005. According to a political analyst whom I interviewed in July 2017 (he preferred to remain anonymous), many of these sites are financed by ministers and high-ranking officials, who use them to achieve their political goals and in the information struggle against political rivals in the country.
- ⁵⁸ Parvin Abbasov, “Qamet Suleymanov: ‘İlahiyyat’ masjidinda gadanlaryn choxu bizim qardashlardy,” *Lent.az*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/pfUWti>
- ⁵⁹ “Qamet Suleymanov hijab qadagasy pisladi,” *Musavat*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/znZStN>
- ⁶⁰ After the former Minister of Education Misir Mardanov prohibited female students from wearing hijab in primary schools, a series of “anti-hijab ban” demonstrations erupted in 2010-2012, resulting in violent clashes between protesters and police in Baku.
- ⁶¹ Suleymanov’s answer on Seymur, April 28, 2011 (07:53 a.m.), *Forum of the Abu Bakr mosque*, April 11, 2011, <https://goo.gl/kwNXUz>
- ⁶² Sofie Bedford, *Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2009): 147.

- ⁶³ Murad Ahmad, “DİN-da bazi shakhsalar vazifalarından sui-istifadə edir”: Qamət Suleymanov,” *Qafqazinfo*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/gcFRey>
- ⁶⁴ “Sumqayıtly salafı: “Qollarımyza qandal vurdular, ustumuza chyxdyar, bashymyzda oturdular,” *BBC*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/PMM5gE>; “Sumqayıtly salafiləri şəhər polisində işgəncəyə məruz qaldıqlarını bildiriblər,” YouTube video, posted by “Turan agentliyi,” November 17, 2014, <https://goo.gl/ExMTuD>
- ⁶⁵ “Kutla qarşısında nazirləri tənqid etmək xəbərlərinin yolu – Şeyx Saleh al-Fovzan (video),” YouTube video, posted by “Salafxəbər kanalı,” December 20, 2016, <https://goo.gl/JcCfSr>
- ⁶⁶ Anar Valiyev, “Social Capital in Azerbaijan: Does it help to build democracy?,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 30 (2011): 11
- ⁶⁷ See Caucasusbarometer.org, accessed July 23, 2017.
- ⁶⁸ “Həyət Qamət salafilərin yeni saytı haqqında danışıq: ‘Qardaşlar məsləhətləşdilər ki...’,” *Lent.az.*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/K4YAid>
- ⁶⁹ Salaf Xəbər, “Biz salafilər kimik?,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/GT5RTu>
- ⁷⁰ Salaf Xəbər, “Dövlət başçisi üçün dua ‘Salaf-Xəbər’-in bədatidir?,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/PgFFNU>
- ⁷¹ Even a brief survey of the local media will reveal numerous references by various officials to “the religious enlightenment (*maarifləndirmə*)” in the context of the struggle against religious radicalism. For example, only in 2016, the SCWRA held hundreds of “enlightenment/educational” events (*maarifləndirmə tədbirləri*) in the capital and in the regions of Azerbaijan. See the “Events” or “Enlightenment” sections of the SCWRA’s “Society and Religion” newspaper: <https://goo.gl/9VgBxA>
- ⁷² In his various interviews with Internet news portals, Suleymanov also often inscribes his main cause (the reopening of the mosque) into the state-constructed discourse of combating religious radicalism through enlightenment. See Fariz Mirzayev, “Həyət Qamət: ‘Qanunlar dənə uyğun olmalıdır,’” *Kulis.az.*, accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/GfRbAa>
- ⁷³ Salaf Xəbər, “İslamda vətənpərvərlik anlayışı,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/fwdbVZ>
- ⁷⁴ Salaf Xəbər, “Qamət Suleymanov: Biz Qarabəy azad etməyə gətiririk,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/yDXFJN>
- ⁷⁵ Salaf Xəbər, “Jəhadə son bəş vərən hədislərlə bəy Qamət Suleymanovla eksklüziv müsahibə,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/kJxpjC>
- ⁷⁶ Gasimov, “Examining Salafism,” 122.
- ⁷⁷ Roel Meijer, “Introduction,” in *Global Salafism*: 29.
- ⁷⁸ Rodney Benson and Eric Neveu, “Introduction: Field theory as a work in progress,” in *Bourdieu and the journalistic field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Eric Neveu (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 4.
- ⁷⁹ “Qamət Suleymanov - Mədəniyyət yazıqlarına inanmayın!,” YouTube video, posted by “Tovhid Tube,” April 23, 2014, <https://goo.gl/CRBDrz>
- ⁸⁰ Salaf Xəbər, “Dövlət başçisi üçün dua”
- ⁸¹ Salaf Xəbər, “Prezident İlham Aliyev (Allah onu qorusun) fərmanı ilə Azərbaycanında ‘Güzasətli mənzil’ sistemi yaradıqlar,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/iEBZkM>
- ⁸² Salaf Xəbər, “İlham Aliyev (Allah onu qüvvətəndirsin): ‘Avropada islamofobiya, irqçilik, ksenofobiya siyasəti aparıqlar,’” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/q7pvXw>
- ⁸³ “Qiymətlərin artması üçün səbəbləri,” YouTube video, posted by “Abu Bakr Məscidi,” January 29, 2016, <https://goo.gl/XWdvAX>
- ⁸⁴ Salaf Xəbər, “İlham Aliyev (Allah onun ali ilə müsəlmanların işlərini düzəltsin): ‘Mənatın məzənnəsi ədalətliqr,’” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/rTbkkX>; Salaf Xəbər, “İlham Aliyev (Allah onu qüvvətəndirsin): ‘2016-cı il Azərbaycan üçün sənəq ilidir,’” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/9gjsry>
- ⁸⁵ For example, the site disseminated news about the operation of law enforcement agencies against Islamists led by the Shi’ite theologian Taleh Bəyirov in Nardaran in November 2015, accompanying it with comments from prominent Salafite sheikhs about the impermissibility of uprisings. Commenting on this issue to one of the local online news agencies, Suleymanov said, “Events in Nardaran indicate that ‘pro-Iranian forces’ are involved, because yesterday’s event was committed by supporters of the Shi’ite sect. I cannot claim it for sure, but the evidence gives grounds for saying this.” See: Salaf Xəbər, “Şeyx Qamət Suleyman: Nardaran hədisini pislədi, ‘Kənar qüvvələrin təsiri görünür,’” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/KwJFN5>
- ⁸⁶ Gasimov, “Examining Salafism,” 122.