

ISLAMIC SOLIDARITY ON SALE: THE NAGORNO-KARABAGH CONFLICT IN THE CONTEXT OF AZERBAIJAN'S NATION BRANDING ENDEAVOURS

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Abstract

To reach their political goals, countries try to craft an image acceptable to the international community as reliable allies standing for similar values. Since its independence, Azerbaijan has been actively working on its branding as a country that bridges the West and the Islamic world. To do this, Azerbaijan creates its image as a secular, multicultural state and a leading state among Islamic countries with a firm support of Islamic solidarity. Positioning Azerbaijan as an advocate of Islamic solidarity, Ilham Aliyev then embarks on the next step of his plan to demand the Islamic world's solidarity about the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. Thus, nation branding in the case of Azerbaijan is not only about creating an image of a possible investment place or touristic destination; official Baku "sells" its solidarity pursuing the political goal of getting the support of Islamic countries against Armenia.

Keywords: nation branding, Nagorno-Karabagh, Azerbaijan, Islamic solidarity.

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Introduction

Countries in the modern world strive to project-specific images that will make them desirable partners, investment hubs, tourist destinations, and political allies. This branding is how a country's image can be created or changed, monitored, evaluated, and actively managed to improve its reputation with its target audience.

After the independence, and especially since 2003 when Ilham Aliyev succeeded his father in the post of Azerbaijan's president,¹ his country has put considerable efforts into the nation branding endeavours. Through various channels, Azerbaijan sought to create an image of a country as a bridge between East and West;² the first democracy in the Islamic world³, the victim of injustice of Armenian aggression that successfully found enough strength to overcome the problem.⁴ The multi-ethnic character of Azerbaijani society gives the country yet another tool to connect state branding with "multicultural" image-making. Azerbaijan seeks to make multiculturalism, multi-ethnicity, and interreligious harmony trademarks of Azerbaijani society.

The branding of Azerbaijan and the place of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict in that we traced mainly in the speeches of Ilham Aliyev addressed to international audiences. Thus, the primary source of analysis in this paper are Ilham Aliyev's speeches published on the official webpage of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. These speeches Ilham Aliyev delivered during his two-decade-long reign, i.e., from his inauguration in 2003⁵ to 2022.

This paper considers issues related to the image of Azerbaijan created by Ilham Aliyev and the connection of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict in that nation branding process. We argue that nation-branding of Azerbaijan is highly related to the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. Whenever Aliyev stresses Azerbaijan as a desirable partner and loyal, friendly state, he makes the next step forward, describing Armenia as an unreliable and even an adversary state. By branding Azerbaijan as a multicultural state and by stressing the Islamic solidarity of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev seeks to create an image of a desired ally for the Islamic-majority countries.

1 Ilham Aliyev was elected president of Azerbaijan as a result of controversial election which was accompanied by "numerous instances of violent and excessive use of force by police, a pattern of intimidation against opposition supporters, journalists and others, which overshadowed the political atmosphere; the conditions for campaigning by governing party candidates and opposition candidates were manifestly unequal." "International election observation mission Presidential Election, Republic of Azerbaijan – 15 October 2003, Statement of preliminary findings and conclusion," <https://www.oscepa.org/ru/dokumenty/election-observation/election-observation-statements/azerbaijan/statements-3/1377-2003-presidential/file>, accessed 01.03.2022.

2 "Opening speech by Ilham Aliyev at the trilateral meeting of Azerbaijani, Iranian and Russian presidents – 8 August 2016," <https://president.az/en/articles/view/20843>, accessed 12.03.2022.

3 "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the official reception on the occasion of the Republic Day – 27 May, 2016," <https://en.president.az/articles/19986>; "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the opening of 5th News Agencies World Congress – 16 November, 2016," <https://en.president.az/articles/21720>, accessed 11.04.2022.

4 This idea can be traced in nearly every speech by Aliyev.

5 "Speech in the Inauguration Ceremony by Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan – October 31, 2003," <https://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/en/2773818.html>, accessed 11.04.2022.

The article has three main parts. The first one describes the theoretical bases on which the rest of the article operates. It represents the nation branding through which we analyse Ilham Aliyev's speeches. It also connects these phenomena with the case of the Azerbaijani nation branding activities in front of the Islamic audience and its aspirations to get support in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. The second section investigates the state of Islam in Azerbaijan. Here after a brief historical survey, we demonstrate how the state controls religious activities and use them whenever the need arises. The third part discusses the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict in the context of understanding Islamic solidarity by Ilham Aliyev.

Nation branding and the case of Azerbaijan

In his *Brand New Justice* Simon Anholt writes:

Countries behave, in many ways, just like brands. They are perceived – rightly or wrongly – in certain ways by large groups of people at home and abroad; they are associated with certain qualities and characteristics. Those perceptions can have a significant impact on the way that overseas consumers view their products, and the way they behave towards those countries in sports, politics, trade and cultural matters; it will affect their propensity to visit or relocate or invest there; their willingness to partner with such countries in international affairs; and whether they are more likely to interpret the actions and behaviours of those countries in a positive or a negative light. In short, the image of a country determines the way the world sees it and treats it. This image may be entirely accurate and fully justified, but it is more likely to be at least partly untrue and unfair, based on a whole mess of misunderstandings, prejudices, cultural differences and half-forgotten events from history.⁶

Göran Bolin Per Ståhlberg defines nation branding as “the phenomenon by which governments engage in self-conscious activities aimed at producing a certain image of the nation state.”⁷ This image is important in various spheres. Around two decades ago, Peter van Ham noted that

...crafting a brand is not only economically desirable, it has considerable political and strategic implications, affecting even the dynamic of NATO and EU enlargement. The traditional diplomacy of yesteryear is disappearing. To do their jobs well in the future,

6 Simon Anholt, *Brand New Justice: The Upside of Global Branding* (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 2003), 109.

7 Göran Bolin, Per Ståhlberg, “Between Community and Commodity: Nationalism and Nation Branding” in *Communicating the Nation: National Topographies of Global Media Landscapes*, eds. Anna Roosvall, Inka Salovaara- Moring (Gothenburg Nordicom: University of Gothenburg, 2010), 79-101.

politicians will have to train themselves in brand asset management. Their tasks will be a finding a brand niche for their state, engaging in competitive marketing.⁸

In this nation branding process, diplomacy plays a central role. Mark Leonard stresses the role of public diplomacy; however, Azerbaijan's case demonstrates that traditional diplomacy can also play that role. In general, there are a group of impacts that diplomacy can achieve in the process of nation branding. Among these impacts, one can mention a) creating positive perceptions of the country by the targeted group, b) strengthening ties, c) raising attractiveness as a destination for tourism, and c) obtaining investments.⁹ However, in the case of Azerbaijan, there is an additional impact as well – getting support against Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict.

In this theoretical research frame, we will discuss the nation branding of Azerbaijan in front of the Islamic audience. As it was discussed above, branding is a cumulative and complex effort that requires countries to implement consistency and stability to achieve the desired image in the minds of their target audiences. Azerbaijan embarked upon a number of nation branding initiatives, which aim to improve the national image, enhance its economic profile, and, more importantly, to receive support in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. The main goal was to change the image of Azerbaijan from a backward post-Soviet country to a bridge between the civilisations. Thus, the main tactics, as will be seen below, are branding Azerbaijan as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state and stressing, on the one hand, its solidarity with the Islamic world, on the other hand, making it pioneer of democracy in the Islamic world projecting a developed and strong country to pacify both East and West. However, as they can be traced in the speeches by Aliyev, this service has its price – supporting Azerbaijan in the context of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict.

Islam, Azerbaijan, and Islamic Azerbaijan

Before focusing on the speeches addressed to the Islamic audiences, we would give a brief historical background of Azerbaijani Islam, given that a significant part of its 10 million population is Muslim. Furthermore, despite the positioning of Azerbaijan as a secular state, Islam is one of the essential markers of Azerbaijani identity, for the target audiences of Aliyev which is the framework of this research for Islamic-majority countries.

A significant part of the Azerbaijani population constitutes Muslim Turks (91,6%). Most of the minorities are also mainly Muslims (Lezgins – 2%, Talish – 1,3%, Avars – 0.6%, Meskhetian Turks – 0.4%, Tatars – 0.3%, Tats – 0.3%). These are the official data, in reality, the number of minorities is much higher, as both representatives of these

8 Peter van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and reputation," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (2001): 2-6.

9 Mark Leonard, Catherine Stead and Conrad Smewing, *Public Diplomacy* (London: The Foreign Policy Center, 2002), 9-10.

minorities and researchers claim. Approximately 65% of Muslims are Shia (mainly Twelvers¹⁰), and 35% are Sunni.¹¹ The survey from 2013 by the CRRC demonstrates that “When asked about the importance of religion in their daily lives, however, a remarkable 80% of Azerbaijanis indicated that religion played a ‘very’ or ‘rather’ important role in their lives, while less than 20% stated that religion was ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ important.”¹² It also should be noted that the same survey demonstrates that the “Azerbaijanis’ active (i.e. institutionalised) religiosity as measured by mosque attendance and fasting is quite low.”¹³ This picture is the result of historical unrests that impacted the overall demography of the region and their perception of religions.¹⁴ “Although

10 The term Twelver refers to its adherents’ belief in twelve divinely ordained Imams. They also believe that the last Imam, Imam al-Mahdi, lives in Occultation and will reappear. See, Haider Najam Iftikhar, *Shi’i Islam: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

11 Altay Goyushov, “Azerbaijan,” in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe 13*, ed. Stephanie Mussig, Egdunas Raciū (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 68.

12 “Islam in Azerbaijan: A Sectarian Approach to Measuring Religiosity,” <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2013/10/islam-in-azerbaijan-sectarian-approach.html>, accessed 18.05.2022.

13 Ibid.

14 The territories of modern-day Azerbaijan faced Islam in the mid of the 7th century when as a result of the Early Muslim conquests the Caucasus became a part of the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750). It is not our goal to go deep into the historical circumstances of the transformation of the image of Islam in Azerbaijan. Thus, here we will provide a very brief summary and bibliography for further investigation.

During the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), however, this large-scale Arab state was fragmented and lost its former power. In the 11th century, the region came under the rule of the Seljuks. The immigration of Turkic tribes from Central Asia changes both the ethnic and religious features of the region. The Seljuk-Turks accepted Islam, starting to follow the Hanafi religious and legal school.

During the reign of Safavid Iran, the Shia Twelver Islam gradually spread in this region, which currently has a dominant position among the Muslims of the territories of today’s Azerbaijan. During this period, the territories of Azerbaijan appear between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shiite Safavid Iran, which has a corresponding effect on the religious image and later should play a role in Azerbaijani political environment.

With the expansion of the Russian Empire to the Caucasus, Sunni Islam expanded its influence. The Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood began to play a major role among the Muslims here. In 1870s the Tsarist government established separate governing institutions for the Shi’a and the Sunni. This phase was, in general, the institutionalisation of Islam in the Russian Empire.

Late imperial era was overlapped with the rise of nationalistic feelings among the people of the Caucasus. Unlike Armenians and Georgians who had their culturally and religiously grounded identity, the Muslim people of the Caucasus had a road to cross in search of identity. At the beginning the dominant identity marker of the Muslims of the modern day Azerbaijan was Turkic and only during several next decades the invention of Azerbaijani identity occurred. The establishment of the first republics in the South Caucasus, the conflicts between the ethnic groups and in some sense the complicated relations between the Ottomans and the Muslims of the Caucasus contributed to the formation of that identity where the religion continued to play a central role. In the last decades of the existence of the Russian Empire, the reform movement gained great popularity among the Muslim population, one of the essential elements of its speech was the criticism of the traditional education system. This also had its impact on the development of the secular intelligentsia. Jo Van Steenberg, *A History of the Islamic World 600-1800: Empire Dynastic Formations and Heterogeneities in Pre-Modern Islamic West-Asia* (Abingdon Oxon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2020); Andrew Peacock, *Early Seljuq History: A New Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Peter Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992); Vladimir Bobrovnikov, “Islam in the Russian Empire” in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 202-24; Svante Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (New York: M. E. Sharpe Armonk, 2011), 15-30.

dissemination of Islamic belief in the territories of current day Azerbaijan started in the middle of the 7th century A.D., formation of religious and ethnic identities here has always been a dynamic and complex process, which has gone through numerous changes over the course of a long, rich history, ultimately laying the foundations for the current situation.”¹⁵

During the Soviet years, the position of Islam in Azerbaijan began to weaken. In the USSR, religion was considered the *opium of the people* (*Opium des Volkes*), as Karl Marx coined it, and a phenomenon hindering the construction of communism. In the pre-revolutionary period, there were about 3,000 mosques in the territory of Azerbaijan, and already in 1933, that number was reduced to 17. However, in the years of *perestroika* (the 1980s) and especially in the post-Soviet period, Azerbaijan experienced a great religious awakening. A large number of new mosques were built, old ones were reopened, and dozens of religious organisations were registered. This will help Azerbaijan to join the family of Muslim-majority countries, to use these relations in diplomacy, and serve these relations its interests despite the stress of being a secular state.¹⁶

Paralleled to the establishment of the secular state, Azerbaijan also started positioning itself as a Muslim country. In 1993, Kurban Bayram began to be celebrated in Azerbaijan, and the Qur'an was translated into Azerbaijani. This growth of religious feelings impacts the foreign policy of Azerbaijan as well, for Azerbaijan positioned itself as a part of the Islamic world.¹⁷ However, Azerbaijani leadership navigates between the Shia and the Sunni Islamic world. The regime's support brings Islam under the state's supervision.¹⁸ The rest of the religious activities are being repressed by the Azerbaijani authorities. For example, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, founded in 1991 and registered in 1992, was closed in 1995 because this organization was accused of mixing religion and politics during municipal elections and receiving foreign funding from Iran. A year later, four members of this party were arrested on charges of anti-state activities and sentenced to several years in prison.

The Sunni-Shia divide has also become an essential part of the foreign power politics. The Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Turkey, and the countries of the Middle East are actively trying to create spheres of influence in this direction. Especially active is Iran, which has been trying to neutralise Azerbaijani nationalism which targets Azerbaijani-speaking Iranians as well. Previously, this policy was carried out openly in Nakhijevan and the Apsheron region. For religious propaganda, Iran uses its mullahs and pro-Iranian mosques in the south of Azerbaijan and areas like Nardaran, one of the most religious places in the country or “a bastion of devout

15 Altay Goyushov, “Islam in Azerbaijan (Historical Background),” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 44 (2012): 2-4.

16 The article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (adopted on 12 of November 1995) describes Azerbaijan as a secular country.

17 Altay Goyushov, “Azerbaijan,” in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe 11*, ed. Oliver Scharbrodt (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

18 Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, Nelli Minasyan, “Praying Under Restrictions: Islam, Identity and Social Change in Azerbaijan,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 5 (2017): 819-837.

Shia Muslims” as Eldar Mamedov put it.¹⁹

In the 1990s, when Heydar Aliyev banned the propaganda of Iranian mullahs, Iran changed its policy. It began to carry out the propaganda through pro-Iranian Azerbaijani mullahs, very often at cultural and public events. Due to these changes, Iran maintains its influence in the south of Azerbaijan, significantly exceeding the number of mosques in other regions. In this case, it is also important to emphasise that the mentioned southern regions are the homeland of Talish and Tat peoples.²⁰ Tehran also finances Azerbaijanis who want to study Shia theology.

Much like Iran, other Islamic countries also try to use Islam as a soft power tool in Azerbaijan. While Turkey and Iran influence the spread of politicized Sunni and Shia Islam in Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia spreads influences of Salafi Sunni Islam. The number of Sunnis in Azerbaijan, however, is increasing. In addition to Azerbaijanis, the Sunni population is also made up of national minorities, which mainly live in the northern region near the North Caucasus. These peoples were primarily divided into two parts after the collapse of the USSR – one part remained in the Russian Federation, and the other in Azerbaijan. Lezgis, Avars, Rutuls, Tsakhurs, etc. belong to their rank.

In Azerbaijan, Aliyev’s regime fully controls the country’s religious life, banning everything that is not in line with the state-backed variation of Islam. The state control extends to both mosques and Islamic educational institutions. Significantly, the case of the Baku Islamic University case vividly demonstrates the state’s control over the religion rather than the freedom and harmony about which Aliyev loves to talk. The Baku Islamic University, under the Religious Administration of Caucasian Muslims, has been operating for 20 years. University has Islamic Studies and Sharia faculties. Seeking to reduce the role of any authority, including the religious authority such as Shaykh al-Islam, Aliyev set out to close the university and established a similar institute but now under his complete control. Several representatives of the Azerbaijani government expressed their displeasure regarding the quality of education at this university. This was a signal that profound changes are expected. Already in 2018 that change happened. By order of the President of Azerbaijan, the Institute of Theology of Azerbaijan, which was already under government control, was opened.

On the other hand, Baku Islamic University announced that it will not accept new students and will only operate until the current students graduate. Moreover, the Faculty of Theology of Baku State University also joined the new institute. Through the Foundation for the Preservation of Moral Values, Azerbaijan spends a lot of money to control religious education. These actions naturally left their mark on the relationship

19 Eldar Mamedov, “Azerbaijan: Examining the Source of Discontent in Nardaran,” *Eurasianet*, 8 December 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-examining-the-source-of-discontent-in-nardaran>; Mike Runey, “Azerbaijan’s Nardaran affair,” *Open Democracy*, 24 August 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/nardaran-affair/>, accessed 25.05.2022.

20 Garnik Asatrian, Habib Borjian, “Talish and the Talishis (The State of Research),” *Iran & the Caucasus* 9, no. 1 (2005): 43–72.

between Sheikh al-Islam Allahshukur Pashazadeh and the Azerbaijani leadership since the Baku Islamic University was essentially under the latter's control, while the new institute was not.

Since the state seeks to control the religious organization of the country, these organizations become the continuation of state politics in the case of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. Since the early 1990s, more or less independent and oppositional religious Islamic organizations have been proponents of war with Armenia and frequently criticised the Government for not launching the war against Armenia.²¹ This perhaps can be considered a political step that is not about the war but against the Aliyev regime. However, the situation gradually changed in recent years, and state-backed organizations also started expressing support for the war. For instance, Haji Shahin Hasanli²² – a Shi'i preacher and a representative of the Sheikh al-Islam in a district of the capital Baku – articulated the significance of vengeance and the certainty of a future war with Armenia.²³ This gradual turn demonstrates how the state discourse is disseminated through religious organizations.

Azerbaijan tries to keep its political field away from Islamization and uses Islam only to reach its goals, such as support of the Islamic countries in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. To do this, Azerbaijan joined the branding bandwagon of states trying to sell itself as a bridge between the East and West where it can use its Islamic and secular identities in a single package. While branding Azerbaijan as a religiously harmonious, multicultural, and secular country, Ilham Aliyev stresses Azerbaijani Islamic solidarity in his speeches, linking it with the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict as a sphere where his audience should help him. This is especially obvious in his speeches in the Islamic audiences, where he demands the same solidarity toward Azerbaijan to fight Armenia. The following paragraphs of the paper will investigate these branding steps deeper.

Aliyev's Discourse on Islamic Solidarity

In January 2017, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev signed an order declaring the year 2017 a Year of Islamic Solidarity.²⁴ "The Order says Azerbaijan was one of

21 Altay Goyushov, "Azerbaijan," in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe 13*, eds. Stephanie Mussig and Egdunas Raciūnas (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 56.

22 Haji Shahin Hasanli, "On 8 November 2022 Haji Shahin Hasanli was awarded with an honorary decree by the Ministry of Defense" Facebook, 8 November 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=674700967351527&set=a.256363962518565>.

23 Hacı Şahin Həsənli, "Şəhidlərimizin intiqamı alınmalıdır," [Our Martyrs must be Avenged] *Day.az*, <https://news.day.az/azerinews/1096612.html>, accessed 01.07.2022.

24 "President Ilham Aliyev declares 2017 Year of Islamic Solidarity," *Azər Tac*, 10 January 2017, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/President_Ilham_Aliyev_declares_2017_Year_of_Islamic_Solidarity-1025354; "Meeting on declaration of 2017 'Year of Islamic Solidarity' held by Cabinet of Ministers in Baku," *AzVision*, 14 January 2017, <https://en.azvision.az/news/56584/meeting-on-declaration-of-2017-year-of-islamic-solidarity-held-by-cabinet-of-ministers-in-baku-.html>, accessed 10.08.2022.

the main centers of Islamic Civilization for many centuries. The country played an important role in spreading out the religion of Islam and reestablishing the Islamic Renaissance.”²⁵ Throughout that year and after that, Aliyev will often mention the idea of Islamic Solidarity in many of his speeches, making it a special tool for the Azerbaijani nation branding campaign.²⁶ Nevertheless, our research demonstrates that this idea was a key component in getting the support of Muslim-majority countries in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabagh. This link we will discuss in the next paragraphs of this research.

One of the key audiences for Aliyev’s foreign speeches is the so-called Islamic World, which largely consists of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation members. Here, Aliyev’s speeches are mainly dedicated to Azerbaijan’s *Islamic solidarity*.²⁷ This idea of Islamic solidarity, however, is a melting pot. In his speeches, Aliyev tries to accumulate all the things needed for Azerbaijan in this dimension, representing it as a part of Islamic Solidarity. According to Ilham Aliyev, Islamic Solidarity is based on shared values, and unity among the Muslim world, which also means addressing similar issues on an international platform. Notably, in one of his speeches Aliyev said: “The people of Azerbaijan have preserved their national and spiritual values over the centuries. Islamic values are an integral part of our national and spiritual values. The tranquillity and mutual understanding observed in the religious sphere in our country, the unity among Muslims, and the regulation of interreligious relations at a high level – all these are factors strengthening our country today.”²⁸

In parallel with the so-called spiritual enrichment of the term Islamic Solidarity, in 2010, there was an idea of mixing it with the financial and economic systems.²⁹ In

25 “President Ilham Aliyev signed Order on Declaration of 2017 Year of Islamic Solidarity,” *Azər Tac*, 10 January 2017, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/President_Ilham_Aliyev_signed_Order_on_Declaration_of_2017_Year_of_Islamic_Solidarity-1025501, accessed 10.08.2022.

26 “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the First Summit on Science and Technology of Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Astana – 10 September 2017,” <https://president.az/en/articles/view/25189>; “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at Receptions of Ambassadors and Heads of Diplomatic Missions of Muslim Countries in Azerbaijan – 13 June 2017,” <https://president.az/en/articles/view/24398>; “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Conference on OIC Emergency Summit on Jerusalem – 13 December 2017,” <https://president.az/en/articles/view/26561>; “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the reception of the heads of diplomatic missions and international organizations of Muslim countries in Azerbaijan on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan – 08 June 2016,” <https://president.az/en/articles/view/20241>; “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Opening of the 12th Session of ISESCO General Conference – 26 November 2015,” <https://president.az/en/articles/view/17313>, accessed 31.03.2022.

27 The article “Position of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Nagorno-Karabagh conflict” by Araks Pashayan discusses activities and resolutions of this organization in detail. Araks Pashayan, «Իսլամական Համագործակցություն կազմակերպության դիրքորոշումը Արցախյան հակամարտության հարցում» [Position of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Nagorno-Karabagh Conflict] *Merdzavor ev Mijin Arevelki Erkrner ev Zhoghovurdner* 33, no. 2 (2020): 181-205.

28 “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Opening Ceremony of the Conference on 2017- Year of Islamic Solidarity: Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue – 21 December 2017,” <https://president.az/en/articles/view/26557>, accessed 01.08.2022.

29 “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Opening Ceremony of the 35th Annual Meeting of Islamic Development Bank Group – 23 June 2010,” <https://president.az/en/articles/view/269>, accessed 10.08.2022.

the 35th Annual Meeting of the Islamic Development Bank Group, the economic and financial development are highlighted as a basis for Azerbaijan's progress and strengthening of its regional and international cooperation potential, including the energy sphere (oil and gas projects). During the speech, the Azerbaijani president mentioned the support of the organization, and its assistance during the difficult years for the country. Earlier in 2009, the year of "Baku – the capital of Islamic culture-2009,"³⁰ there was an idea formulated as "unification of Muslim world" that was probably developed into Islamic Solidarity through the Azerbaijani authorities' lens, giving the open space for further discussions. The role of mutual trade and in addition to other economic and political cooperation was pointed as a factor strengthening Islamic solidarity, giving some foundation for the discussion on the unity of Muslim countries as a part of Islamic solidarity.

Nevertheless, in many cases, this Islamic Solidarity is limited by cultural events. For instance, the Islamic Solidarity Games, organized by Azerbaijan, became another platform where Aliyev was putting some extra emphasis on emotional ties.³¹ Every event is demonstrated as a manifestation of these ideas, and this is nothing but a product-based branding of the country as a platform where Azerbaijan represents itself in the light that serves political ambitions of Aliyev.

While declaring the importance of "unity among Muslims" Aliyev's Azerbaijan is at the same time quite pragmatic in his actions. It does not tie itself with activities that can harm the non-Islamic affairs of the country. This is especially true about Azerbaijan's relations with Israel, which is a sensitive issue for Iran and Palestine. The links between Israel and Azerbaijan were established on 7 April 1992 and the next year, 1993, Israel opened its embassy in Baku. Azerbaijan, however, did not open its embassy in Israel. The reasons preventing opening of that mission in Israel, indeed, were its closeness to Iran and its membership in OIC.

Nevertheless, since the relations between Azerbaijan and Israel are pragmatic and based on mutual benefits, Israel demonstrated an understanding of this circumstance. At the same time, the two countries pursued multi-level cooperation in the spheres such as security, military procurement, and energy.³² Especially, the military and security spheres occupy the lion's share of these bilateral relations.³³

30 "Speech by President Ilham Aliyev at the Official Opening of the 'Baku – Capital of Islamic CulTure-2009' Year of Culture – 18 February 2009," http://archive.president.az/articles.php?item_id=2010051111125939&sec_id=11, accessed 10.08.2022.

31 "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the reception of the heads of diplomatic missions and international organizations of Muslim countries in Azerbaijan on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan – 08 June, 2016," <https://president.az/en/articles/view/20241>; "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the first session of 13th Summit of Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul – 14 April, 2016," <https://president.az/en/articles/view/19728>; "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the First Summit on Science and Technology of Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Astana," <https://president.az/en/articles/view/25189>, accessed 26.08.2022.

32 Alexander Murinson, "The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* 110 (2014): 14-19.

33 *Ibid.*, 21-26.

This situation changed after the 2020 War in Nagorno-Karabagh and skyrocketing tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran in 2022. On 18 November 2022 Baku made a historic decision to open Azerbaijan's embassy in the Israeli capital of Tel Aviv.³⁴ As Vasif Huseynov writes, "until now, Azerbaijan had refused to reciprocate the opening of an Israeli embassy in Baku (29 August 1993), most assuredly so as not to alienate the other Muslim countries in the region and to ensure their support in the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict."³⁵ Azerbaijan's discourse on Islamic solidarity especially developed in the speeches at the OIC platforms, was pursuing a goal "to ensure their support" in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict rather than unite Muslims or preserve Islamic values.

While demonstrating Azerbaijan as a part of the Islamic world, Aliyev also tries to show its superiority among other Islamic countries. Aliyev seeks to demonstrate that Azerbaijan is a pioneer among the Muslim countries. For instance, whenever he speaks about the First Republic of Azerbaijan, he mentions that this republic was the first democratic republic in the Muslim world.³⁶ Besides this notion, he also finds other cases to stress the role of Azerbaijan in the Islamic world. For example, he mentions the visit of the Pope or the relations with the Vatican as something that makes Azerbaijan a leader among Muslim countries.³⁷

The price of solidarity: the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict in the Azerbaijani agenda of the Islamic World

This nation branding itself as a leading member of the Islamic world, stands with the other members of the "Islamic family" and pursues political goals, among which the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict is the key one. Aliyev uses a large audience of Islamic-majority countries to present his attitude toward the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. Here he is incredibly successful given that Armenia is not represented in this arena. Thus, it is one of the audiences where Azerbaijan's picture exists without a balancing Armenian one. Here, we will discuss Ilham Aliyev's speeches mainly addressed to Islamic-majority audiences.

One of the key audiences, as it was mentioned, is the Organization of Islamic

34 Samira Abdullayeva, "Azerbaijani Parliament approves opening of embassies of Azerbaijan in Israel, Albania and Kenya," *Report News Agency*, <https://report.az/en/milli-majlis/milli-majlis-approves-opening-of-embassies-of-azerbaijan-in-israel-albania-and-kenya/>, accessed 18.11.2022.

35 Vasif Huseynov, "In Unprecedented Move, Baku Opens Embassy in Tel Aviv Publication," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 19 no. 178, <https://jamestown.org/program/in-unprecedented-move-baku-opens-embassy-in-tel-aviv/>, accessed 08.09.2022.

36 "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the official reception on the occasion of the Republic Day – 27 May, 2016," "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the opening of 5th News Agencies World Congress – 16 November, 2016."

37 "Speech by Ilham Aliyev in front of representatives of the general public at the Heydar Aliyev Center – 2 October, 2016," <https://en.president.az/articles/21268>; "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Iftar ceremony on the occasion of holy month of Ramadan – 20 June, 2017," <https://en.president.az/articles/24399>, accessed 08.08.2022.

Cooperation.³⁸ Azerbaijan has been a member of the organization since 1992. Since then, the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict has become one of the actively discussed topics of the organization. Azerbaijan, financing and hosting many activities of the organization, such as the Islamic Solidarity Games, secured the acceptance of several anti-Armenian resolutions.³⁹ Given that Armenia has no representative in the organization, Azerbaijan has no opposition here and Azerbaijan fully manipulates its discourse.

In his speeches at the OIC meetings, Ilham Aliyev highlights Azerbaijan as a part of the Islamic world and as a bridge between the Islamic East and the West. Nevertheless, this organization's impact is spreading beyond its borders as well since Azerbaijan coordinates its steps against Armenia in other places. For example, many Islamic countries support Azerbaijan in the UN. Ilham Aliyev mentions this in his speeches:

Cooperation with Muslim countries is one of the priorities of our foreign policy. I emphasized this while talking about foreign policy priorities at the official reception dedicated to the Republic Day. At the same time, we successfully cooperate and always support each other in international organizations. Whenever issues related to Azerbaijan are discussed in the UN, we feel the support of Muslim countries. For our part, we always support Muslim countries in the United Nations. During the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul in April, we demonstrated this solidarity once again. As you know, the summit adopted a very serious document related to the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabagh conflict.⁴⁰

38 Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is the second largest organization after the United Nations with a membership of 57 states spread over four continents. The Organization is the collective voice of the Muslim world. It endeavors to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world. The Organization was established upon a decision of the historical summit which took place in Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco on 12th Rajab 1389 Hijra (25 September 1969) following the criminal arson of Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem. In 1970, the first ever meeting of Islamic Conference of Foreign Minister (ICFM) was held in Jeddah which decided to establish a permanent secretariat in Jeddah headed by the organization's secretary general. Amb. Hissein Brahim Taha is the 12th Secretary General who assumed the office in November 2021. The OIC Charter was adopted by the 3rd ICFM session held in 1972. The Charter laid down the objectives and principles of the organization and fundamental purposes to strengthen the solidarity and cooperation among the Member States. Over the last 40 years, the membership has grown from its founding members of 30 to 57 states. "History of Organization of Islamic Cooperation", Organization of Islamic Cooperation," https://www.oic-oci.org/page/?p_id=52&p_ref=26&lan=en, accessed 08.05.2022.

39 "Final Communiqué of the 7th Session of The Islamic Summit Conference Casablanca, Morocco (13-15 December 1994)," <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=4320&refID=1212>; "Final Communiqué of the 8th Session of The Islamic Summit Conference Tehran, Iran (9-11 December 1997)," <http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/8/8th-is-summits.htm#FINAL%20%20COMMUNIQUE>; "Final Communiqué of the 9th Session of The Islamic Summit Conference Doha, Qatar (12-13 November 2000)," http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/9/9th-is-sum-final_communique.htm; "Resolution no.21/9-P(IS) on the aggression of the Republic of Armenia against the Republic of Azerbaijan," Resolution on Political Affairs adopted by the twenty-ninth session of the Islamic conference of foreign ministers, 25-27 June 2002, <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=4283&refID=1182>, accessed 01.09.2022.

40 "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the reception of the heads of diplomatic missions and international organizations of Muslim countries in Azerbaijan on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan – 8 June 2016," <https://president.az/en/articles/view/20241>, accessed 08.09.2022.

In front of this audience, Aliyev uses vocabulary entirely understandable to them and stresses the spheres where the goals of Azerbaijan and the OIC overlap. In particular, fighting islamophobia, dialogue with the rest of the world, and preserving the Islamic heritage are the main narratives Aliyev supports. In all these cases, Aliyev makes a two-step move. First, he highlights the role of Azerbaijan in the Islamic world. Then he jumps to the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict demanding or appreciating solidarity from the other members of the OIC.⁴¹

Azerbaijan considers cooperation with Islamic countries a priority. In recent years, Baku has hosted about 10 summits of ministers of foreign affairs, culture, tourism, education, and labour of OIC member countries. I highly appreciate the activity of the OIC in terms of mutual support and solidarity. Islamophobia today is one of the most serious threats in the world. We strongly condemn this trend. Islam is actually a religion of peace, mercy, tolerance and justice. The identification of Islam with terrorism is an erroneous and biased approach. It is Muslim countries that suffer from terrorism the most.

Dear participants of the Summit! I would like to draw your attention to the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. For more than 20 years, Armenia has pursued an aggressive policy against Azerbaijan. As a result of this policy, 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory, including Nagorno-Karabagh and seven adjacent districts, has been occupied. A policy of ethnic cleansing has been carried out on these lands. More than a million of our compatriots have become refugees and internally displaced persons. Armenia has committed the Khojaly genocide. The international community and international organizations recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and are in favour of a fair settlement of the conflict in accordance with international law. The UN Security Council has adopted four resolutions in connection with the conflict. These resolutions demand an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Armenian forces from Azerbaijani lands. Similar decisions and resolutions have been adopted by the Non-Aligned Movement, the OSCE, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and other organizations. I would like to once again express my sincere appreciation to the OIC for its fair resolution supporting a settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabagh conflict within the framework of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. However, aggressive Armenia ignores these resolutions and regularly resorts to armed provocations to disrupt the process of negotiations. One of them was carried out in early April. As a result of an armed attack, Azerbaijani soldiers and civilians were killed. The OIC has decided to establish a contact group at the level of Foreign Ministers to deal with Armenia's aggression against Azerbaijan. Thank you for this decision.⁴²

41 "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the first session of 13th Summit of Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul -14 April 2016," <https://en.president.az/articles/19728>; "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the first Summit on Science and Technology of Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Astana – 10 September 2017," <https://president.az/en/articles/view/25189>, accessed 12.07.2022.

42 "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the first session of 13th Summit of Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul -14 April 2016."

When talking to the other organization members, he mainly appreciates their actions to help Azerbaijan against Armenia. However, when he is talking to the Azerbaijani audiences about the role of Muslim countries, he starts stating that since Azerbaijan is a part of the Muslim world, they *have* to show solidarity. In this case, Aliyev presents Muslim mosques as not only Azerbaijani heritage but Islamic in general. For example, in one of his speeches in front of the families of war victims, Aliyev accuses leaders of Muslim countries who visit Armenia, saying, “What kind of contacts can there be with Armenia, which is responsible for the destruction of Muslim mosques? ... We say openly that solidarity should be not in words, but in deeds.”⁴³ Aliyev here stresses the price of Islamic solidarity that he has in his mind, which is nothing else but the subject of political trade. The same lexicon is followed in other speeches addressed to this inner audience.⁴⁴

Unlike these speeches, phrasing completely differs when he talks to an Islamic audience outside Azerbaijan. Indeed, he does not say anything critical to the Muslim leaders visits to Armenia. Here, he stresses that Armenia *cannot be a friend*, and rather Muslim countries *should not be friend* Armenia.⁴⁵ For example, he states, “Muslims of the world should know that Armenia, which has destroyed our sacred mosques, cannot be a friend of Muslim countries.”⁴⁶ Another example from the speech by Aliyev at the 7th Summit of Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States: “Armenia is trying to establish close cooperation with Muslim countries. However, having destroyed mosques sacred to Muslims around the world, Armenia cannot be a friend of Muslim countries. The vandalism against our religion shows the Islamophobic essence of Armenia.”⁴⁷

Aliyev positions himself as a strong leader who can talk to other state heads demanding solidarity. With this *macho* image, he mobilizes masculinity as a resource in statecraft. These speeches demonstrate that Aliyev sells Azerbaijani Islamic solidarity. He first positions Azerbaijan as a leading member of the “Islamic family of countries,” describing Azerbaijan as a most reliable ally and a road to development and strength. After that, he raises the question of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and vividly demands support in that conflict in return for Azerbaijan’s Islamic solidarity.

43 “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the ceremony to give out apartments and cars to families of martyrs and war disabled -21 July 2020,” <https://en.president.az/articles/39951>, accessed 08.08.2022.

44 “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the ceremony to mark 100th anniversary of Baku State University – 26 November 2019,” <https://en.president.az/articles/34985>, accessed 10.08.2022.

45 In his speeches, Ilham Aliyev periodically dehumanize Armenians in his speeches. More see, Naira Sahakyan, “The rhetorical face of enmity: The Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and the dehumanization of Armenians in the speeches by Ilham Aliyev,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2153402>.

46 “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Conference on OIC emergency summit on Jerusalem.”

47 “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the 7th Summit of Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States – 15 October 2019,” <https://en.president.az/articles/34458>, accessed 11.09.2022.

Conclusion

Nations work to make an image that will be acknowledged within the world community as a reliable partner maintaining the same beliefs to attain their political targets. Since 1991, Azerbaijan has made a concerted exertion to position itself as a multicultural country that serves as a crossroad between the West and the Islamic world. To do this, Azerbaijan develops a picture of itself as a country that is an advocate of Islamic solidarity. Coming back to the words of Simon Anholt, it becomes evident during the Azerbaijani nation branding Aliyev crafts an image that is “at least partly untrue and unfair, based on a whole mess of misunderstandings, prejudices, cultural differences, and half-forgotten events from history.”⁴⁸

While crafting Azerbaijan’s image, Aliyev tries to emphasize his country as an example of multiculturalism where the inter-religious dialogue succeeded. For this purpose, the Azerbaijani president actively uses religion-related platforms to a) present itself as a multi-religious country with strong support of Islamic solidarity and b) highlights its leading role among the Muslim countries. This dual nature, in understanding Aliyev, is a key to making Azerbaijan a needed connecting link between Islamic countries and the rest of the world. “We want interreligious dialogue to strengthen in the Muslim world, in Europe, and throughout the world in general.”⁴⁹

While examining the nation branding in Azerbaijan, we identified the discourse of Islamic solidarity as a vital component of that brand. The link between this nation branding component and the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict looks significant. When Aliyev positions Azerbaijan as a leading country in the Islamic world and brands it as a state with solid Islamic solidarity, the next step is demanding support from those Islamic countries in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. This idea is a key in the speeches by Ilham Aliyev addressed to Islamic-majority audiences, where he describes Azerbaijan as a member of the Islamic community and a defender and preserver of Islamic cultural heritage. At the same time, by posing Azerbaijan between the Islamic East and the West, Aliyev nominates Azerbaijan as a connecting link and essentially offers its services. However, the following paragraphs of his speech usually demonstrate the price for that service – the support of the Islamic world in the conflict against Armenia for Nagorno-Karabagh. That support Aliyev seeks to obtain political isolation of Armenia and resolutions condemning Armenia as an aggressor state.

48 Anholt, *Brand New Justice*, 109.

49 “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Opening Ceremony of the Conference on 2017 – Year of Islamic Solidarity: Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue.”

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