

THE CRIMINAL POTRAYAL OF WAHHABIS: REPRESENTATIONS OF “WAHHABISM” IN AZERBAIJANI MAINSTREAM MEDIA

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A distorted criminal image of Wahhabis is becoming deeply seated in Azerbaijani society and disturbs devoted Muslims who follow non-traditional schools of Islam. Media agencies have misrepresented different factions of Islam which entered the country in last two decades. This has created negative image of Wahhabis and Wahhabism. This paper considers the role of mainstream online media agencies in the development of a criminal image of Wahhabi Islam and its followers in Azerbaijan. Through the examination of electronic versions of seven main media agencies in the country, this paper studies the way in which the term Wahhabi is used to produce a negative, crime associated image of this peculiar branch of Islamic faith.

This research examines the contribution of Azerbaijani online news media to the formation of intolerant opinions of Wahhabism. Based on content analyses of the daily news flow on Wahhabi affairs within the dominant news media, the study argues that the media have played an important role in the production of a prejudiced discourse on devoted Muslims of non-traditional Islam. In this discursive process, devoted Muslims have been the primary victims. In the absence of significant awareness of the Azerbaijani public on Islam, the frame through which the media propose their arguments are largely based on random criminal events, controversies around radical Islam, and claims of officials which allow Wahhabism to be seen as a threat.

1. Introduction

John Zaller notes that “Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition... information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it.”¹ Our image of the world is shaped by the information we receive, much of which originates from within the media. How the public feels about certain questions may also be rooted in their personal experience and social environment.

The image that the media puts forward becomes adopted by its audience and the stories which the media deems important become important to the general public. Elements emphasized in the media picture become prominent in the media audiences’ picture. Those elements emphasized on the media agenda become to be regarded as important by the public.²

It is accepted that the mass media is distorted by stereotypes. The media has a powerful influence on audiences shaping their attitudes, and these stereotypes may affect the perception of certain groups. The public develops that perception with the way its members are pictured in the media. Social psychologists explain stereotypes in terms of cognitive skills, as one form of mental category among many that allow us to organize the information we receive.³

¹ Zaller, John. The nature and origins of Mass Opinion, p.6

² McCombs, Maxwell. Setting the agenda: the mass media and public opinion. P.68

³ Seiter, Ellen. Stereotypes and the Media: A Re-Evaluation. 1986. p. 15-16

Media is an important source of information pertaining to the nature and causes of crime as well as solutions to crime related problems. The mass media and public perceptions of crime issues and problems are strongly linked. Through crime related stories media presents the image of criminals and fear. Gray Cavender found that some people and groups rely on media presentation, including news and commercials as well as drama, to create fear and influence public opinion and behavior. He argues that dramatic aspects of such presentations only serve to exaggerate potential problems⁴.

Media stereotypes play an essential role in forming social disintegration which results in social conflicts, violence and misunderstanding. Citizens are inundated with media images about specific events and individuals and how certain groups are portrayed in media has significant consequences for our ability to accept them. The news media stereotype because typically they portray members of diverse cultural groups within specific content categories-usually crime, entertainment, and sports-and almost never within the categories of general interest, business, education, health, and religion.⁵

Studies on the media's influence on stereotype formation in terms of crime and criminals often discuss how mass media has a direct effect on perception of crime and criminals. Since most people do not have personal experience with crime, the main source of experience with crime is through media. The mass media in general and especially the electronic media are part of a problem-generating machine geared to entertainment, voyeurism, and the quick fix rather than understanding of solid issues.⁶ Media often distorts facts by over representing criminal issues and the public often misperceives reality.⁷

Mass media exposure to criminal issues and legal control in this field leads people to have distorted or prejudiced understanding of issues. The mass media give considerable prominence to initial poor reports of corporate wrongdoing, and relatively little prominence to subsequent efforts by offending corporation to remedy the problem that gave rise to the initial complaint⁸.

Today's most obvious criminal stereotype in Azerbaijan is related to religion, especially the so called Wahhabi⁹ sect of Islam. This will be referred as Wahhabism there is no registered community and identification in Azerbaijan under this name. Research works, that will be discussed later, argue that this term is used by media and government negatively.

In recent years, the religion of Islam has been viewed with much suspicion and fear by Azerbaijani media. Events such as the blast in Abu-Bakr mosque, terror attemptson the U.S embassy, and militant activity in the north of Azerbaijan intensify this anxiety and bring individuals devoted to Islam within the gaze of public interest. Religious devotion of

⁴ Cavender, Gray. "Scared Straight": Ideology and the media. 1981

⁵ Lester, Paul Martin & Ross, Susan Dente. Images that injure: pictorial stereotypes in the media. p.3

⁶ Altheide, David. The news media, the problem frame and the production of frame. 1997. p. 647-649

⁷ Yunus, Arif. Islam in Azerbaijan, 2004

⁸ Ericson, Richard. Mass Media. Crime. Law and Justice.

⁹ A follower of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), a Muslim scholar and founder of a sect of Muslim puritans who follow strictly the original words of the Qur'an.

individuals became more and more centered in the news stories, mostly those individuals who are presented in an unfavorable light.

Although, the culture of Azerbaijan carries some elements of Islam in wedding and funeral ceremonies, most Azerbaijanis know little of the Islam, its rules and practices because of the nation's insistence on secularism. During Soviet times, religion was banned by the Communist regime and Islam was followed secretly by practicing Muslims. The Koran was translated into Russian first in 1965 in limited quality and later in 1986 with 10,000 volumes for the entire Soviet Union.¹⁰

After Azerbaijan obtained its independence in 1992, different Islamic traditions entered the country. They mostly came from Turkey, Iran and Arabic countries. Iranian Shia context was not a surprise to Azerbaijanis, 70% of whom are Shia Muslims. However, Sunni orientations from Turkey and Saudi Arabia were new to most people.

Among those orientations Wahhabism which mostly refers to people of Salafi orientation is the most controversial¹¹ and media speculation creates criminal stereotypes about adherents to Wahabi doctrine Wahhabism is a Sunni Islamic sect. Mehrdad Haghayeghi links Wahhabism to Muhammad ibn Abu al-Wahhab, born in 1691 in Najd, Saudi Arabia, who was disturbed by the superstitions of religious elites.¹² Another scholar, John Wall argues that al- Wahhab rejected popular religious practices associated with saints and their tombs¹³.

The proclaimed mission of Wahhabism was the cleansing of all religious innovations and superstitious beliefs and practices that have been widespread in Najd, according to Khalid al-Dakhil¹⁴. He points out that Wahhabism was a powerful, political urban movement in the state formation process and it brought the notion of state to replace that of the as the unifying force for the society.

Christopher Blanchard, an analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs writes that, in some Muslim nations, believers who adhere to Wahhabism prefer to call themselves "Unitarians" or "Salafiyyun" (sing. Salafi, noun Salafiyya). His CRS report for Congress updated in January, 2007 indicates that Salafism is not a unified movement, and there exists no single Salafi sect. However, Salafi interpretations of Islam appeal to a large number of Muslims worldwide who seek religious renewal in the face of modern challenges.

One of the best explanations of Wahhabism in Azerbaijan was provided by Arif Yunus, a prominent Azerbaijani historian. Arif Yunus, indicated that Wahhabism, which emerged in seventeenth century, was based on radical Islamic rules and destroyed places considered holy by population based on Prophet Mohammed's words that "There is only one God to worship." "Wahhabis prefer to be called Muslims, not followers of Wahhab. Healthy life, an ideology of brotherhood and strong knowledge of Islam got the attention of Azerbaijanis who experienced poverty, increased corruption and crime after the collapse of the Soviet Union," states Yunus. The author also mentioned that people called Wahhabis in Azerbaijan may have links with Osama bin Laden, leader of the Al-Qaeda terror organization.

¹⁰ Yunus, Arif. Islam in Azerbaijan. 2004, p.163

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Haghayeghi, Mehrdad. Islam and Politics in Central Asia", 1996.

¹³ Wall, John. Muḥammad Ḥayyā al-Sindī and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. School of Oriental and African Studies. 1975

¹⁴ Ayoob, Mohammed and Kosebalaban, Hasan , Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia. 2009

The book indicates that Wahhabism, which emerged in seventeenth century, was based on radical Islamic rules and destroyed places that the population consider holy and worshiped. Those places are usually the graves of those who are considered saints by the local population. Wahhabis claim that no one should be worshiped except God; nothing should be the source of Islam, except Qur'an. "Wahhabis prefer to be called Muslims, not followers of Wahhab," writes Yunusov.

The word Wahhabism has an extremely negative meaning in Azerbaijani society and it is used to by certain groups to blackmail opponents.¹⁵ Nicknames such as "bearded people" of "black-bearded" are also used to define Wahhabis.¹⁶

The Abu-Bakr mosque in Baku is the symbol of this conflict. It was constructed in 1997 with the financial assistance of the Kuwaiti humanitarian organization Jami'yyat al-Ihya at-Turath al-Islami (Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage).¹⁷ Since its construction the mosque has become one of the most controversial mosques¹⁸ in the history of independent Azerbaijan. The mosque was also visited by Chechen refugees, associated by many Azerbaijanis with terrorism and Wahhabism¹⁹ which established the image of the Wahhabis mosque in local media. Currently, the activity of the mosque is restricted by government as well as the function of many other mosques.

Restrictions on mosque communities were discussed by Sofie Bedford, the author of "Islamic activism in Azerbaijan" published in 2004. Bedford mentions a "black public relations strategy" being applied towards religious groups, especially toward Abu Bakr mosque community. "As for 'black PR', almost everything written about the mosque in some periods referred to them as Wahhabi," Bedford writes, "the connotation of this term connects it to extremism, radicalism, and terrorism in one way or another."²⁰

The government's negative attitude to Wahabbism/Salafism was pointed out in Svante Cornell work "The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan". The study found that the Azerbaijani government used violence against Wahhabis. "On July 12-13, in the Novkhani village of Baku, security forces of the Ministry of National Security raided a house, "killing two armed Wahhabis" and arresting six others. Later it was reported that some 30 more "followers of Wahhabism" were also arrested" describes Cornell.²¹

Abu Bakr Mosque was called a center of this sect in Baku by Tofiq Babyev 2001, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of National Security, who has been quoted by Rufat Sattarov in his book "Islam, State and Society in independent Azerbaijan", 2009, Sattarov indicates that that lack of Islamic knowledge of Azerbaijanis helped to facilitate the spread of organized Islam linked to fundamental and radical Islam.²²

However, bin Laden's link to Wahhabism is rejected by Delong-Bas. "Ibn al-Wahhab's influence can be seen in bin Laden's tendency to cite the Quran and hadith in order to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the experiences of the early Muslims to the situation

¹⁵ Sattarov, Rufat. Islam, State and Society in the independent Azerbaijan, 2009. p.251

¹⁶ Sattarov, Rufat. Islam, State and Society in the independent Azerbaijan, 2009. p.251

¹⁷ Sattarov, Rufat. Islam, State and Society in the independent Azerbaijan, 2009. p.251

¹⁸ Sattarov, Rufat. Islam, State and Society in the independent Azerbaijan, 2009. p.252

¹⁹ Sattarov, Rufat. Islam, State and Society in the independent Azerbaijan, 2009. p.254

²⁰ Bedford, Sofie. Islamic activism in Azerbaijan, 2004. Chapter 9

²¹ Cornell, Svante. The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Roads Studies Program

²² Sattarov, Rufat. Islam, State and Society in the independent Azerbaijan, 2009. Chapter 6

in which contemporary Muslims find themselves,” says Delong-Bas, “However, when it comes to bin Laden’s trademark of global jihad, the writing of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab are absent.”²³

However, none of those literatures examined analyses of media coverage on Wahhabi issues. To date, there has been no supply of research into media portrayals of Muslims and Islam in Azerbaijan, or specific type of Muslims, no in general. The image of the so called Wahhabi in media threatens the secular system and safety of the country. It ultimately has an impact on Azerbaijani citizens, creating negative opinion of devoted Muslims. In the paper, the term devoted Muslim is referred to those who follow the basic rules of Koran; pray three or five times a day, avoid alcohol and eating pork.

Specific aims of the research

The study was committed in an attempt to test more systematically some of the basic hypotheses concerning press coverage of Wahhabism. The research attempted to subject several propositions about negative press coverage to more rigorous testing.

Based on existing religious situation in Azerbaijan, information about Wahhabism in academic literature and media, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: How has Azerbaijani media portrayed certain religious people and how was the image of Wahhabis created?

RQ2: What made the religious portrayal of Wahhabis criminal?

These research questions advanced the following hypotheses:

H1: The tone of majority stories will be more negative than positive. The term “terror”, “terrorism”, “terrorist”, “radical”, “gun” were expected to be used frequently in relation to Wahhabis and Wahhabism.

H2: Most stories will not give definition of Wahhabism and will not explain why it is crime.

H3: It was also expected that majority of media coverage on Wahhabism will also include or discuss Abu-Bakr mosque or vice versa, most coverage of Abu-Bakr mosque will include the term Wahhabism. Abu-Bakr mosque is the biggest mosque in Azerbaijan and involves the biggest religious community of the country.

Research Design

Electronic Media Samples

The research was committed by content analyses of electronic versions of mainstream media in Azerbaijan. The sample of online media used for content analyses consisted of seven nationally prominent Azerbaijani media; Bizim Yol (Our way), 525-ci qazet newspapers, APA (Azerbaijan Press Agency) and Trend news agencies.

Azeri-Press Agency (APA) is the most quoted and read information agency in the country. The agency was founded in 2004, and is an independent, private information

²³ Delong-Bas, Natana. Wahhabi Islam: from revival and reform to global jihad. 2007, Chapter 6.

agency and covers important developments all over the world, especially in Azerbaijan and South Caucasus, issues online news. Azeri-Press Agency has offices in the USA, Turkey, France, Romania, Russia, Georgia and other leading countries of the world. The agency issues online news in Azerbaijani, Russian, English, French and Arabic. APA was chosen for content analyses because it is the most quoted and read information agency in Azerbaijan.

TREND is the one the most quoted news agencies as well. Founded in 1995 as a private media outlet, Trend News Agency is one leading news provider in the Caucasus and Caspian region. The portal produces articles in five languages, including English, Russian, Azerbaijani, Persian and Arabic. Trend News offers, analytical feature articles highlighting major political and economic developments and financial articles. Due to its broad readers it was chosen to represent one of most readable news agencies.

525-ci qəzet was created in 1992 as an independent newspaper. In 2009 the newspaper launched its web site. The agency also issues online news in Azerbaijani, Russian and English. It was chosen as one of the main independent online media in the country.

Bizim Yol was created in 2000 by Baheddib Heziyev. It is one of the leading newspapers in the country. *Bizim Yol* was chosen for representation of oppositional media, as well as one of mainstream newspapers.

Sample time period

The studied time period was 2007-2010. It was in last three years that many mosques were closed in Azerbaijan, a blast occurred at Abu Bakr mosque; operations of the Ministry of National Defense eliminated the activity of some radical Islamic groups. For this reason, this time period was chosen to reflect the most recent data available.

Sample design

To access the population of stories from which a sample could be drawn, the word Wahhabi Vehabi, vahabi was searched in the main pages of each website between 2007 and 2010.

Based on the fact that the highest number of search results was 40, it was decided that based on time constraints approximately 15 articles will be selected for each media agency, for a total sample size of 60 stories. The stories were not distributed by year. Yet, every year has a sample to be analyzed.

Measures

A detailed coding procedure was developed and thoroughly tested. (See Appendix 1/2/3/4/5)

Findings

82 percent of articles were hard news, while the remaining 18 percent were analyses, opinion and feature stories and interviews. All selected stories from APA and Trend news agencies were hard news. The smallest article consists of 80 words, while the longest one does 700.

In 80 percent of stories use the word Wahhabi only once and almost one third, 28 percent, also include the word "terrorist."

Results show that 88 percent of stories where Wahhabism was discussed or the word Wahhabi was used are outlined with a negative headline which means that the headline gives a sense that the story is about crime, terror, illegal issue, shooting and suspend of activity. Almost all news stories in each media agency fall into that category. Headline includes the phrases such as "Terrorists were captured," "Police are chasing...," "...group leader is killed," "One more mosque was closed," "Official is against the ban of Abu-Bakr mosque."

33 percent of those negative headlines included the word Wahhabi. "Wahhabi literature is confiscated," "Wahhabis are arrested," "A group promoting Wahhabism was banned."

The same number of negative nature also applies to general tone of coverage, 88 percent. The highest number of negative tone was observed in Trend and APA agencies. Although a story is about religious edition, it leaves a message that this education is important because the country has terror danger coming from groups such as Wahhabism. Some stories covering athletes end up with the conclusion that Azerbaijani sport is getting under dangerous influence of Wahhabis, as many athletes decide to be Wahhabi. Those stories do not include the interview of Wahhabi athlete, do not identify names, and do not explain what Wahhabism is and why it is dangerous.

No story includes interview with a Wahhabi and only one article gives definition of it and another one article explains what makes targeted people Wahhabis. As mentioned before, Wahhabism is new in the country which is mostly illiterate about Islam.

92 percent of articles are framed episodically, focusing on specific people and events and mostly focus of arrest issues of Wahhabis. In one of the articles that covered the issues of Oil Academy, which had a problem with students missing classes and, Minister of Education releases information about increased number of nonattendance at Oil Academy. The press quoted him saying that most of those students who are under investigation are Wahhabis. Most stories focus on arrest of criminal groups who are called Wahhabis by agency or in quotes from officials. News stories from APA and 525-ci qazet demonstrates only episodically framing.

High majority of stories present Wahhabism as a threat in different ways. More than 80 percent picture Wahhabis as criminals or as threats to individual and state security and secularism of the state. 67 percent of stories link that Wahhabism to terror (28percent), crime (12percent) and threat (27percent).

22 percent of stories describe Wahhabism as a radical Islam, definition of which in Azerbaijan means it is related to terror and terror is a crime.

Almost half of stories, 48 percent demonstrate that arrested person, persons taken to police stations and criminals are from Wahhabi sect. 42 percent among those explain the reason of arrest, which leaves a gap in media.

The name of Abu-Bakr Mosques is mentioned in 20 percent of the articles and only 7 percent indicates that Abu-Bakr mosque is a Wahhabi mosque.

Besides, it was figured out that 40 percent of articles use officials as a source of information. Lastly, the names of places where certain events happened were mentioned in one third of articles, (20), mostly in Bizim Yol newspaper and APA news agency. It was figured out that most events related to Wahhabism in Azerbaijani analyzed media stories include names of northern regions. Mostly mentioned regions are Baku, Zaqatala, Balaken, Sheki, Xachmaz.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to examine portrayals of Wahhabis in the media, drawing on an analysis of articles appearing in four main online media: APA and Trend news agencies, 525 and Bizim Yol newspapers from 2007 to 2010. The research examined the types of stories that used the term Wahhabi or Wahhabism (*Vahhabi*, *Vəhabi*, *Vahabi* in Azerbaijani), how Wahhabism and Wahhabis were characterized and the overall tone of stories. The study produced results that supported most hypotheses.

It shows that media agencies mostly cover Wahhabis issues in hard news, giving less space to feature, editorial, opinion and interviews.

The findings of the research strongly supported first hypotheses concerning the criminal picture of Wahhabis. Media coverage of Wahhabis depicted a criminal and threatening nature. Most of it centered on events, groups and individuals that somehow related to Wahhabism or Wahhabis. Since one third of stories linked Wahhabism to terror, it can be said that media creates stereotypes of people called Wahhabis. As the religious thoughts of devoted Muslims is not differentiated in public, the same stereotype might be applied to most devoted Muslims.

Most stories did not identify what Wahhabism is, which proved the second hypotheses. As the stories create criminal picture on specific group of devoted Muslims not including any interview, any explanation, any definition and focusing mostly on information received from officials, it might be concluded that the criminal stereotype of Wahhais might be applied to all devoted Muslims in the country.

When one ethnic or minority group is degraded, for whatever reason, we all suffer and such degradation is influenced by the means of mass communications.²⁴ As a number of researchers have documented, media is an influential factor in labeling events. Besides, as aforementioned, Azerbaijanis who experienced poverty, increased corruption and crime after the collapse of the Soviet Union, have increased tendency to be devoted Muslim²⁵. A distorted media created criminal image of certain religious people in Azerbaijan may cause new social separation and violence.

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²⁴Shaheen, Jack. Media Coverage of the Middle East; Perception and Foreign Policy.

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