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Islamic Studies in a Secular Republic: New Directions in Higher Education Transformation in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This article examines the position of Islamic studies within the transformation of higher education in secular Azerbaijan. As a Muslim-majority country with a strong secular constitutional and political identity, Azerbaijan offers a distinctive case for understanding how Islamic knowledge is negotiated in post-Soviet higher education. Using a qualitative library-based method, the article analyzes scholarly literature on Islamic heritage, Soviet secularism, state-religion relations, "Traditional Islam," and higher education reform in Azerbaijan. The article argues that Islamic studies in Azerbaijan has developed through a model of controlled integration. Islam is recognized as part of national heritage, cultural memory, and spiritual identity, yet its academic and public expression remains shaped by secular governance, state regulation, and geopolitical concerns. The findings show that Islamic studies is positioned not only as religious education, but also as cultural knowledge, national identity formation, and a potential interdisciplinary field. The article further suggests that the future of Islamic studies in Azerbaijani higher education depends on stronger academic autonomy, curriculum modernization, digital pedagogy, multilingual scholarship, and comparative research with other post-Soviet and Muslim-majority contexts.

Keywords

Islamic studies, secularism, higher education transformation, Azerbaijan, traditional Islam, post-Soviet education, religious education

Introduction

Azerbaijan occupies a distinctive position in contemporary debates on Islamic studies and higher education transformation. It is a Muslim-majority country, yet it defines itself constitutionally and institutionally as a secular republic. This dual position is not merely a formal political arrangement. It is the product of a long historical experience shaped by Islamic civilization, Tsarist rule, Soviet secularism, post-independence nation-building, and the pressure of global higher education reform. For this reason, Islamic studies in Azerbaijan cannot be understood only as a matter of religious instruction. It must also be read as part of a broader negotiation among identity, knowledge, governance, and modernization. Isakhanli and Pashayeva (2018) show that the transformation of higher education in Azerbaijan after independence has been closely connected with institutional diversification, international standards, and the reconstruction of national academic priorities. Within this process, Islamic studies appears as a sensitive but unavoidable field.

The sensitivity of Islamic studies in Azerbaijan is rooted in history. Before the Soviet period, Islamic culture was deeply embedded in the intellectual and social life of Azerbaijani society. It shaped moral vocabulary, communal practices, architecture, literacy, and cultural

memory. Yet the Soviet project radically altered the institutional place of religion. Veliyeva (2020) explains that Soviet secularization did not simply separate religion from public institutions, but also weakened the transmission of religious knowledge through education, language, and social policy. This legacy still matters. Even after independence in 1991, Islamic studies could not immediately develop as an autonomous academic field, because higher education institutions had inherited a secular epistemic structure, a bureaucratic culture, and a cautious attitude toward religion. It is therefore understandable if the re-emergence of Islamic studies in Azerbaijan has taken a gradual, controlled, and selective form.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to describe Azerbaijan as a country that merely suppresses Islamic heritage. The situation is more complex than that. Aliyeva (2023) emphasizes that the study of Islam and Islamic culture in Azerbaijan has become increasingly relevant to the reconstruction of national identity, especially in the post-Soviet period. Islamic heritage is not simply treated as theology or devotional practice. It is also framed as cultural memory, historical continuity, and civilizational inheritance. Yakubovych (2022), through his study of Azerbaijani Qur'anic commentaries, also reminds us that Islamic intellectual traditions in the Caucasus were not passive or peripheral. They developed in vernacular, local, and socially meaningful forms. This point is important because it challenges a common assumption that Islamic studies in Azerbaijan is only a recent post-Soviet concern. In fact, it has deeper roots, although those roots were interrupted and reshaped by modern political regimes.

The challenge, however, lies in how Islamic knowledge is allowed to re-enter public and academic life. Bedford et al. (2021) describe the state's promotion of "Traditional Islam" as a mechanism through which religion is incorporated into national identity while remaining under strong political supervision. This concept refers to a state-approved understanding of Islam that is local, non-political, moderate, and compatible with national sovereignty. On the one hand, it provides a framework for recognizing Islamic heritage without destabilizing secular governance. On the other hand, Gasimov (2020) argues that the bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan has positioned the state as the principal regulator and interpreter of religion. This creates a serious academic question. Can Islamic studies grow as a critical and diverse field of inquiry if the boundaries of legitimate religious knowledge are largely defined by the state?

This question becomes even more relevant when Azerbaijan is placed within its geopolitical environment. Jödicke (2017) notes that Iranian religious influence has been a persistent concern in Azerbaijani religious policy, while Ismayilov (2018a) argues that the changing landscape of political Islam in Azerbaijan must be understood through local, regional, and global pressures. Azerbaijan is located between Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the wider post-Soviet world. It is also a Shi'i-majority society with a strongly secular state orientation. Sattarov (2009) and Balci (2004) show that post-Soviet Islamic revival in Azerbaijan has never been a simple return to religion. It has involved questions of sectarian identity, foreign influence, state security, and national cohesion. In this context, Islamic studies in higher education becomes more than an academic matter. It becomes part of how the state manages memory, authority, and belonging.

The transformation of higher education adds another layer to this discussion. Azerbaijan has not only managed religion after the Soviet collapse. It has also sought to modernize its universities, adopt international standards, and align with global academic frameworks. Mammadova (2024) discusses the emergence of English-medium instruction policies in Azerbaijani higher education, while Bayramova and Aliyev (2019) examine digital innovation through the use of Moodle in Azerbaijani universities. These developments reveal that higher education reform in Azerbaijan is shaped by internationalization, digitalization, and Western academic models. The question, then, is not only whether Islamic studies can

be reintroduced into a secular system. The deeper question is how Islamic studies can be intellectually renewed within a university system that is simultaneously post-Soviet, secular, nationalist, and globally oriented.

There is also a comparative dimension that should not be ignored. Smagulov et al. (2018) show that Kazakhstan has institutionalized Islamic education within a secular society in ways that differ from Azerbaijan's more restrictive model. Nadirova et al. (2016) similarly demonstrate that religious education in Kazakhstan reflects a search for balance between secular governance and Islamic revival. These comparisons are useful because they show that post-Soviet Muslim-majority states do not follow one uniform pattern. They share the legacy of Soviet atheism, but they respond to Islamic revival, national identity, and educational reform in different ways. Azerbaijan's model appears more cautious, more security-oriented, and more strongly tied to the discourse of "Traditional Islam". This makes it an important case for understanding how Islamic studies can exist within a secular republic without becoming either fully marginalized or fully autonomous.

This article therefore examines Islamic studies as a field situated at the intersection of secular governance, Islamic heritage, higher education modernization, and post-Soviet transformation. It argues that the development of Islamic studies in Azerbaijan represents neither a simple revival of religious education nor a complete continuation of Soviet secularism. Rather, it reflects a negotiated model in which Islamic heritage is selectively integrated into higher education under the authority of a secular state. According to this reading, Islamic studies functions as cultural knowledge, a component of national identity, a regulated religious discourse, and a potential interdisciplinary academic field. The balance is not always stable. There are tensions, hesitations, and unresolved questions. Yet these very tensions make Azerbaijan a compelling case for broader discussions on Islam, secularism, and the future of higher education in Muslim-majority societies.

The central contribution of this article lies in reframing Islamic studies in Azerbaijan as part of higher education transformation rather than treating it narrowly as religious education policy. Khalilzada (2024) suggests that religion in Azerbaijan is often positioned both as a threat and as an instrument within state-religion relations. This duality is also visible in higher education. Islamic studies may be viewed with suspicion when associated with political Islam or external influence, but it may also be valued when linked to heritage, multiculturalism, national identity, ethical formation, and cultural diplomacy. Madatli (2024) helps illuminate this point by showing how national and spiritual values are interrelated in Azerbaijan's public discourse. In this sense, the future of Islamic studies in Azerbaijani higher education depends not only on curriculum design, but also on a more careful intellectual negotiation between secular principles and the legitimate academic study of Islamic civilization.

By exploring this negotiation, the article seeks to contribute to international scholarship on Islamic higher education, secularism, and post-Soviet educational reform. It also opens space for a more nuanced understanding of Azerbaijan. The country is not simply a secular state that excludes Islam, nor is it a Muslim-majority country that fully institutionalizes Islamic education. It is somewhere in between, and perhaps that in-between position is precisely what makes it analytically valuable. Islamic studies in Azerbaijan continues to move within boundaries set by history, state power, and global academic change. The task of scholarship is not to simplify these boundaries, but to understand how they are produced, contested, and possibly transformed.

Literature Review

Islamic Studies, Secularism, and Higher Education in Muslim-Majority Contexts

Islamic studies in Muslim-majority societies has never been a purely academic field in the narrow sense. It is often located at the crossing point between religion, state authority,

social ethics, cultural memory, and the politics of national identity. In some contexts, Islamic studies refers to theology, jurisprudence, Qur'anic interpretation, hadith studies, and religious teacher preparation. In other contexts, it becomes a broader field that includes Islamic civilization, history, ethics, culture, social thought, and the public role of religion. This distinction is important. When Islamic studies enters higher education, it does not simply bring religious content into the university. It also raises questions about what counts as legitimate knowledge, who has the authority to interpret Islam, and how secular institutions accommodate religious traditions without losing their public and academic character.

In Muslim-majority secular states, the relationship between Islamic studies and higher education is usually shaped by a delicate negotiation. Secularism does not always mean the exclusion of religion. It may also mean the regulation of religion, the separation of religious authority from political authority, or the framing of religion as culture rather than as law. This is why Islamic studies in secular Muslim-majority contexts often develops through compromise. It is allowed to exist, but usually within institutional boundaries. It may be encouraged as a source of moral education and cultural identity, while at the same time being restricted when it is associated with political Islam, foreign ideological influence, or sectarian contestation. This pattern can be seen quite clearly in Azerbaijan, but it is not unique to Azerbaijan.

Smagulov et al. (2018) show that Kazakhstan has attempted to institutionalize Islamic education within a secular society by combining state oversight, national values, and religious learning. Nadirova et al. (2016) similarly explain that religious education in Kazakhstan reflects an ongoing search for balance between secular governance and Islamic revival. These studies suggest that Islamic education in post-Soviet Muslim-majority contexts is not simply a return to pre-Soviet tradition. It is a reconstruction. It is shaped by state policy, public anxiety over religious extremism, institutional modernization, and the desire to build national identity after Soviet collapse.

In this broader framework, Azerbaijan presents a distinctive case because Islamic studies is not fully marginalized, but neither is it strongly institutionalized as an autonomous academic discipline. Aliyeva (2023) argues that the study of Islam and Islamic culture in Azerbaijan has become significant for cultural and educational life, yet its development remains closely connected with national identity and secular policy. This means that Islamic studies in Azerbaijan is frequently valued as heritage, but treated carefully as theology. Perhaps this is one of the central tensions in the field. Islamic studies is needed because Islam is part of Azerbaijani history, but it is also managed because religion is considered politically sensitive.

Therefore, the literature on Islamic studies in Muslim-majority secular contexts helps us understand Azerbaijan not as an anomaly, but as an intensified example of a wider problem. How can Islamic knowledge be studied academically in a secular institution? How can religious heritage be preserved without turning the university into a confessional institution? And how can secular governance avoid reducing Islamic studies to a merely decorative element of national culture? These questions remain open, and they make the Azerbaijani case especially relevant for comparative scholarship on Islamic higher education.

Post-Soviet Secularism and the Transformation of Religious Knowledge

The post-Soviet context adds a specific historical layer to the study of Islamic education and religious knowledge. Soviet secularism was not limited to legal separation between state and religion. It was an ideological project that sought to reorganize knowledge, public life, institutions, and identity through Marxist-Leninist categories. Religious education was not simply ignored. It was marginalized, supervised, and frequently delegitimized. As a result, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not automatically restore religious knowledge as a stable

academic field. Instead, post-Soviet societies inherited weakened religious institutions, fragmented scholarly traditions, and state structures accustomed to controlling religion.

Veliyeva (2020) demonstrates that the Soviet and post-Soviet experience in Azerbaijan affected religious life not only through formal policy, but also through language, bilingualism, and patterns of cultural transmission. This is important because the transformation of religious knowledge is never only institutional. It is also linguistic and social. When a tradition loses continuity in its educational institutions, its vocabulary, methods, and scholarly authority also become unstable. In Azerbaijan, the long interruption of Islamic learning under Soviet rule made the post-independence revival of Islamic studies complicated. It could not simply resume from where it had stopped. It had to be reconstructed within universities that were already secular, bureaucratic, and increasingly oriented toward Western models of higher education.

Kemper et al. (2009), in their broader study of Islamic education in the Soviet Union and its successor states, show that Muslim communities across the post-Soviet space faced similar problems after independence. They had to revive religious education while also responding to state suspicion, limited institutional capacity, and the influence of external Islamic actors. Karagiannis (2010) also suggests that political Islam in the former Soviet Union developed differently across national contexts, depending on local histories, political regimes, and security concerns. This explains why Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, for example, cannot be placed into one simple category, even though both share Soviet legacies.

In Azerbaijan, post-Soviet secularism has been shaped by both memory and anxiety. Sattarov (2009) describes Islamic revival and activism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan as a process marked by renewed religious interest, but also by political caution. Balci (2004) points to the tension between Sunnism and Shiism in Azerbaijan and shows that Islamic identity in the country cannot be understood apart from sectarian plurality and regional influence. These studies suggest that the transformation of religious knowledge in Azerbaijan is not only about curriculum. It is also about the state's concern over unity, external influence, and social stability.

Ismayilov (2018b) offers a useful conceptual lens by describing post-Soviet modernity in Azerbaijan as a dialectical process in which secular structures coexist with a gradual resacralization of public space. This is a subtle but important point. Azerbaijan has not abandoned secularism, yet religion has returned to public visibility in new forms. Islamic studies, therefore, emerges in a space that is neither fully secular in the Soviet sense nor fully religious in a traditional sense. It is a hybrid field. It carries traces of rupture, revival, regulation, and cultural longing. Admittedly, this hybridity can make the field unstable. But it also makes it intellectually rich.

The literature on post-Soviet secularism therefore shows that Islamic studies in Azerbaijan should not be judged only by the number of programs, courses, or institutions. It should also be examined through the deeper transformation of religious knowledge after decades of ideological secularization. The key issue is not simply whether Islam is taught, but how Islam becomes thinkable again within academic space.

Traditional Islam" and State Management of Religion in Azerbaijan

The concept of "Traditional Islam" is central to understanding the state management of religion in Azerbaijan. It refers to an officially favored representation of Islam that is local, historically rooted, culturally moderate, loyal to the nation, and disconnected from political opposition. At first glance, this concept may appear to be merely a cultural label. Yet the literature shows that it has a much more significant political and educational function. It defines which forms of Islam are acceptable in public life and which forms are treated as foreign, radical, politicized, or socially disruptive.

Bedford et al. (2021) argue that "Traditional Islam" in Azerbaijan functions as a strategy for protecting the nation, the state, and the government. Through this discourse, religion is not completely excluded from public identity. Instead, it is incorporated into national ideology under state supervision. This is a very particular form of secular governance. The state does not erase Islam. It interprets it. It encourages Islam as heritage, morality, and national belonging, while discouraging Islam as political mobilization or independent authority. In higher education, this creates a narrow but meaningful opening for Islamic studies. Islamic culture can be studied, but critical theological plurality may remain constrained.

Gasimov (2020) strengthens this argument by showing how Islam in Azerbaijan has been bureaucratized through state institutions. The state becomes the principal regulator and interpreter of religion, and this affects religious actors, public discourse, and educational boundaries. In such a context, Islamic studies is not simply an academic discipline that grows according to scholarly interest. It is shaped by the logic of governance. This does not mean that scholarship is impossible. But it means that scholarship develops under visible and invisible limits. One may reasonably ask whether a field can become genuinely critical if its acceptable conclusions are already politically anticipated.

The state's management of religion is also tied to external influence. Jödicke (2017) shows that trans-boundary Shi'i religious ties, especially Iranian influence, have affected Azerbaijani religious policy. Battalov et al. (2021) also discuss how Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey shape emerging religious identities in Azerbaijan. These studies help explain why the Azerbaijani state is cautious. It does not regulate religion only because of secular ideology, but also because religion is connected to geopolitics. The fear is not merely theological disagreement. The fear is that religious networks may become channels of foreign influence, ideological competition, or political instability.

Khalilzada (2024) captures this duality by describing religion in authoritarian regimes as both a threat and an instrument. In Azerbaijan, Islam may be perceived as a threat when linked to politicized movements, external religious actors, or alternative sources of authority. Yet it also becomes an instrument when used to support national identity, multicultural diplomacy, and social cohesion. This dual function has direct implications for Islamic studies. The field may receive recognition when it supports cultural literacy and national heritage, but it may face limits when it addresses controversial issues such as political Islam, sectarian contestation, religious freedom, or state control itself.

The politics of religious symbols also reflects this broader pattern. Bashirov (2020) shows that debates over the hijab in post-Soviet Azerbaijan reveal how secularism is enacted through the regulation of visible religious expression. Although such debates often occur in school or public policy settings, they influence the wider climate in which Islamic studies develops. When religion is treated as something that must be carefully managed, academic inquiry into religion also becomes cautious.

For Islamic studies, the discourse of "Traditional Islam" therefore presents both opportunity and limitation. It creates a legitimate space for discussing Islamic heritage, local religious history, and national spiritual values. At the same time, it may reduce Islamic studies to a state-approved narrative. This is where the academic challenge becomes serious. A mature field of Islamic studies needs room for historical complexity, doctrinal diversity, social critique, and comparative analysis. Without such room, Islamic studies risks becoming an extension of cultural policy rather than a critical scholarly field.

Higher Education Reform and Internationalization in Azerbaijan

The development of Islamic studies in Azerbaijan must also be situated within broader higher education reform. Since independence, Azerbaijan has attempted to transform its universities through institutional diversification, internationalization, quality assurance,

digital modernization, and alignment with European higher education frameworks. These reforms are not secondary to the study of Islam. They shape the very conditions under which Islamic studies can be organized, taught, researched, and evaluated.

Isakhanli and Pashayeva (2018) explain that higher education transformation in Azerbaijan involves changes in institutional typology, governance, and academic orientation. Post-Soviet universities had to respond to new national priorities while also adapting to global higher education norms. This produced a complex academic environment. On one side, universities were expected to modernize according to international standards. On the other side, they remained embedded in national politics, cultural reconstruction, and post-Soviet institutional habits. Islamic studies enters this environment as a field that must justify itself not only religiously or culturally, but also academically.

The Bologna Process and related reforms have encouraged Azerbaijani higher education to adopt degree structures, quality assurance mechanisms, and international comparability. Although these reforms are often discussed in technical terms, their deeper effect is epistemological. They influence how disciplines are classified, how curricula are evaluated, and how academic credibility is measured. For Islamic studies, this may create new opportunities. The field can be reframed through interdisciplinary research, comparative religion, history, ethics, sociology, education, and cultural studies. Yet it may also face pressure if university modernization is interpreted narrowly as Westernization, leaving little space for indigenous or Islamic intellectual traditions.

Mammadova (2024) discusses the implementation of English-medium instruction policies in Azerbaijani higher education, and this development is relevant to Islamic studies in at least two ways. First, internationalization may allow Azerbaijani scholars to participate more actively in global debates on Islam, secularism, and post-Soviet transformation. Second, it may create linguistic and conceptual distance from local Islamic traditions, especially when English becomes the primary language of academic legitimacy. This is not necessarily negative. But it does require careful balance. A field like Islamic studies needs access to international scholarship while remaining attentive to Arabic, Persian, Azerbaijani, Russian, and local intellectual archives.

Digital innovation is another important dimension. Bayramova and Aliyev (2019) show that Moodle and other learning management systems have become part of innovation in Azerbaijani universities, while Huseynova et al. (2022) provide evidence of lecture uploading and learning management practices in higher educational institutions. These developments indicate that higher education modernization is not limited to institutional policy. It also changes pedagogy. For Islamic studies, digital platforms may expand access to materials, support blended learning, and encourage more flexible engagement with texts, history, and comparative resources. Still, technology alone cannot solve the deeper question of academic autonomy. A digitized curriculum is not automatically a critical curriculum.

The literature also points to the connection between Islamic heritage, higher education, and economic or cultural development. Aliyev (2021) discusses halal tourism as a type of tourism needed in Azerbaijan, while Khusainova et al. (2024) link sustainable tourism development in Karabakh with broader questions of cultural and regional development. Abbasli (2024) also highlights domestic tourism development perspectives in Azerbaijan. These studies may seem distant from Islamic studies at first. Yet they suggest a new direction. Islamic studies can contribute to interdisciplinary fields such as heritage studies, tourism, ethics, sustainability, and regional development. In other words, Islamic studies need not remain confined to theology. It can become part of a wider academic conversation on culture, economy, memory, and society.

Taken together, the literature on higher education reform shows that Islamic studies in Azerbaijan faces a double task. It must negotiate secular state regulation, but it must also respond to the demands of academic modernization. This is not easy. Yet it creates a

productive possibility. Islamic studies can develop as a modern, interdisciplinary, historically grounded, and internationally connected field, provided that it is not reduced either to state ideology or to inherited academic marginality.

Method

This article employs a qualitative library-based research design to examine the position of Islamic studies within the transformation of higher education in secular Azerbaijan. The study does not rely on field interviews, survey data, or institutional observation. Instead, it develops an interpretive synthesis of scholarly literature related to Islamic studies, secularism, state-religion relations, post-Soviet transformation, and higher education reform. This approach is appropriate because the main purpose of the article is not to measure institutional performance, but to understand how Islamic studies has been historically shaped, politically regulated, and academically repositioned within Azerbaijan's secular university environment. Isakhanli and Pashayeva (2018) provide an important foundation for understanding higher education transformation in Azerbaijan, while Bedford et al. (2021) and Gasimov (2020) help clarify the state's role in defining and regulating acceptable forms of Islamic discourse.

The data for this study were collected from academic books, journal articles, book chapters, and scholarly studies that discuss Azerbaijan's higher education, Islamic culture, religious policy, secular governance, and post-Soviet religious change. The selected literature also includes comparative studies on Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet Muslim-majority societies, because Azerbaijan's experience becomes clearer when placed within a wider regional context. Smagulov et al. (2018) and Nadirova et al. (2016), for example, are used to illuminate how Islamic education has been institutionalized differently in Kazakhstan. This comparative dimension is not intended to produce a full regional comparison. Rather, it is used to sharpen the analytical understanding of Azerbaijan's distinct model, especially its stronger state control, its secular political identity, and its cautious integration of Islamic heritage into academic and public life.

The analysis was conducted through thematic interpretation. In this context, thematic interpretation refers to the process of identifying recurring issues, concepts, and patterns across the literature, then organizing them into coherent analytical categories. The main themes include historical legacy, Soviet secularism, post-independence reform, state management of religion, "Traditional Islam", academic freedom, Islamic heritage, higher education modernization, digital pedagogy, and comparative post-Soviet development. Veliyeva (2020) and Ismayilov (2018b) are particularly useful for tracing the continuity between Soviet secular structures and the post-Soviet reconfiguration of religious knowledge. Meanwhile, Aliyeva (2023) and Yakubovych (2022) support the analysis of Islamic culture as a component of Azerbaijani intellectual and national heritage.

The study also applies a historical and policy-oriented reading. A historical reading is needed because Islamic studies in Azerbaijan cannot be understood outside the long trajectory of Islamic civilization, Tsarist rule, Soviet atheism, and post-1991 nation-building. A policy-oriented reading is equally necessary because Islamic studies in Azerbaijan is shaped not only by academic debates, but also by state policy, security concerns, and the official promotion of "Traditional Islam". Khalilzada (2024) shows that religion in Azerbaijan is often positioned both as a perceived threat and as an instrument of governance, and this insight helps explain why Islamic studies is simultaneously recognized, regulated, and limited. This dual character is one of the methodological concerns of the article, because the analysis must avoid two simple conclusions. It should not portray Azerbaijan as merely anti-religious, but it should also not ignore the limits placed on religious plurality and scholarly autonomy.

The article further uses an interdisciplinary perspective. Islamic studies is examined not only as a theological field, but also as a cultural, educational, political, and institutional phenomenon. This interdisciplinary stance allows the study to connect Islamic heritage with higher education reform, multicultural policy, digital learning, tourism, and national identity. Bayramova and Aliyev (2019) and Huseynova et al. (2022), for instance, help illuminate the modernization of university pedagogy through digital learning systems, while Aliyev (2021), Abbasli (2024), and Khusainova et al. (2024) suggest that Islamic heritage may also be linked to halal tourism, cultural preservation, and sustainable development. Admittedly, these themes are not identical, but they point to a wider possibility. Islamic studies in Azerbaijan may move beyond a narrow religious education model toward a broader interdisciplinary academic field.

The limitation of this methodology must also be acknowledged. Since the article is based on library research, it cannot directly represent the lived experiences of lecturers, students, policymakers, or religious education administrators in Azerbaijan. It also cannot assess classroom practices or curriculum implementation in a fully empirical manner. Nevertheless, the strength of this method lies in its ability to map the conceptual, historical, and policy-related landscape of the field. The article therefore offers an analytical foundation for future empirical research on Islamic studies, academic freedom, curriculum design, and higher education transformation in Azerbaijan.

Results and Discussion

Historical Legacies, Islamic Heritage, Soviet Secularism, and Post-Independence Reorientation

The development of Islamic studies in Azerbaijan cannot be separated from the long historical layers that shaped the country's intellectual and educational landscape. Azerbaijan inherited an Islamic cultural memory that predates the modern republic, but it also inherited a Soviet institutional order that pushed religion to the margins of formal education. This historical tension is not merely a background issue. It actively shapes how Islamic studies is understood, legitimized, and limited in contemporary higher education. Aliyeva (2023) suggests that the study of Islam and Islamic culture in Azerbaijan has become important precisely because Islam remains part of the country's cultural and historical identity, even though its academic development was interrupted by Soviet secularization.

Before the Soviet period, Islamic knowledge in Azerbaijan was embedded in broader patterns of scholarship, social life, urban culture, and religious practice. Tural (2020) shows that Islamic architectural and public religious structures formed an important part of medieval Azerbaijani culture, while Dostiyev (2025) demonstrates that medieval urbanization in Azerbaijan from the ninth to the seventeenth centuries was connected with wider civilizational development. These studies remind us that Islam in Azerbaijan was not only a matter of ritual practice. It was also visible in cities, institutions, intellectual production, aesthetics, and public memory. This point is important because contemporary Islamic studies often relies on precisely this cultural archive to justify its place in a secular republic.

The Soviet era radically changed the institutional status of Islam. Veliyeva (2020) explains that Soviet secularism affected religious life through language, cultural transmission, and public policy. It did not simply reduce the number of religious institutions. It weakened the educational mechanisms through which Islamic knowledge could be reproduced. F. B. Aliyev (2004) also shows that perceptions of Islam and Islamic revival in post-Soviet countries were framed by the legacy of ideological control and suspicion toward religion. As a result, Islamic studies after independence did not emerge from an uninterrupted scholarly tradition. It had to be reconstructed under conditions of institutional fragility, limited expertise, and political caution.

The founding and development of modern Azerbaijani higher education also reflected this tension between national aspiration and secular modernization. Isakhanli and Pashayeva (2018) describe Azerbaijan's higher education transformation as part of a broader process of institutional diversification and reform. The early republican and later Soviet educational models emphasized modern state-building and secular academic structures, while Islamic heritage remained mostly outside the central framework of university knowledge. It is therefore unsurprising that the post-independence reorientation of higher education did not immediately produce a strong institutional revival of Islamic studies. The field had to find its place within universities already shaped by secular disciplines, Western reform language, and Soviet administrative habits.

After 1991, Azerbaijan faced the difficult task of reconstructing national identity while maintaining a secular constitutional order. Ismayilov (2018b) characterizes this period as marked by a dialectic between post-Soviet modernity and the resacralization of public space. This means that religion became more visible, but not necessarily more autonomous. Islamic symbols, narratives, and memories re-entered public life, yet they did so under conditions of state supervision and national framing. For Islamic studies, this created a limited but meaningful opening. Islam could be studied as history, culture, ethics, and heritage, but its theological and political dimensions remained more sensitive.

The historical legacy of Azerbaijan thus produced a higher education environment in which Islamic studies carries both symbolic value and institutional uncertainty. It is valued because it connects Azerbaijan to its Islamic past, its regional identity, and its cultural continuity. Yet it is treated with caution because religion was long positioned by Soviet ideology as a problem for modern governance, and by post-Soviet security discourse as a possible channel of external influence. According to this interpretation, the post-independence reorientation of Islamic studies is neither a full revival nor a simple continuation of secular suppression. It is a selective reconstruction of Islamic knowledge within a secular national project. This is perhaps the most distinctive historical finding of the article.

Secular Governance and the State Regulation of Islamic Studies

The secular governance of Islamic studies in Azerbaijan is shaped by an important paradox. The state recognizes Islam as part of national heritage, but it also regulates Islam as a potential political and ideological force. This dual approach affects the position of Islamic studies in higher education. It allows Islamic culture to be discussed, preserved, and sometimes celebrated, but it also narrows the space for independent theological inquiry, critical religious debate, and plural interpretations of Islam. Bedford et al. (2021) describe this model through the state's promotion of "Traditional Islam", a concept that protects the nation and government by defining which forms of Islam are considered legitimate, local, and non-political.

Secularism in Azerbaijan does not operate simply as the absence of religion from public life. It works more as a system of state supervision over religious authority. Gasimov (2020) argues that Islam in Azerbaijan has been bureaucratized, with the state functioning as the main regulator and interpreter of religion. This bureaucratization has implications for higher education because the academic study of Islam does not develop in a neutral space. It develops within a political environment where religious discourse is monitored, classified, and sometimes securitized. In practical terms, this means that Islamic studies can be encouraged when it supports cultural identity, but it may become sensitive when it examines political Islam, sectarian diversity, transnational religious movements, or state-religion relations too critically.

The regulation of religious expression also helps explain the cautious position of Islamic studies. Bashirov (2020) shows that the politics of the hijab in post-Soviet Azerbaijan

reflects broader anxieties about visibility, secularism, and state authority. Although the hijab debate is not identical to higher education policy, it reveals how the state manages religious symbols as public signs of identity and potential contestation. In such a climate, Islamic studies cannot be treated merely as an academic subject. It is linked to questions of social order, gender politics, public morality, and the boundaries of secular citizenship. One may say that the classroom is never entirely separate from the political atmosphere outside it.

External influence is another major reason for state regulation. Jödicke (2017) shows that Shi'i groups and Iranian religious influence have shaped Azerbaijan's national religious policy. Battalov et al. (2021) further indicate that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have all contributed to the formation of emerging religious identities in Azerbaijan. These regional pressures make the state particularly cautious toward religious education. From the perspective of government, Islamic studies is not only about studying Islam. It is also about preventing foreign ideological penetration, managing sectarian sensitivities, and protecting national sovereignty. Whether one agrees with this logic or not, it has become one of the central conditions under which Islamic studies operates.

The state's discourse of "Traditional Islam" therefore functions as both permission and control. It permits Islam to be present in public culture, but it controls the way Islam is represented. Bedford et al. (2021) make clear that this discourse privileges a national, moderate, and politically loyal form of Islam. In the context of higher education, such a framework may encourage courses on Islamic culture, Azerbaijani religious heritage, or national spiritual values. Yet it may also discourage more critical engagement with contested Islamic movements, alternative religious authorities, or comparative theological debates. This is where the academic problem becomes visible. A university should not only preserve heritage. It should also examine complexity.

Khalilzada (2024) describes religion in post-Soviet Azerbaijan as both a threat and an instrument in authoritarian state-religion relations. This formulation helps explain why Islamic studies occupies an ambivalent place. It is an instrument when used to strengthen national identity, multicultural diplomacy, and cultural continuity. It becomes a threat when connected to political mobilization, independent religious networks, or external influence. In higher education, this ambivalence produces a field that is legitimate but constrained. The field exists, yet its boundaries are not defined by academic criteria alone.

This does not mean that Islamic studies in Azerbaijan has no future. Rather, it means that its future depends on how the country negotiates secular governance and academic autonomy. A secular republic can support Islamic studies without becoming a religious state. At the same time, Islamic studies can respect secular constitutional principles without being reduced to state-approved cultural narrative. The challenge is to create an academic space in which Islam can be studied historically, textually, sociologically, philosophically, and ethically, without being immediately absorbed into security discourse. That balance is difficult, but it is not impossible.

Islamic Studies, National Identity, and the Politics of Cultural Heritage

One of the most important findings of this article is that Islamic studies in Azerbaijan is often legitimized through the language of heritage rather than through the language of theology. Islam is presented as part of Azerbaijani history, culture, architecture, literature, moral values, and national identity. This framing makes Islamic studies more acceptable within a secular republic because it treats Islam as a civilizational resource rather than as a competing political authority. Aliyeva (2023) shows that studying Islam and Islamic culture in Azerbaijan contributes to the understanding of national identity, and this argument helps explain why the field remains relevant despite secular constraints.

Islamic heritage in Azerbaijan is not an abstract claim. It is visible in historical texts, religious architecture, social customs, and intellectual traditions. Yakubovych (2022)

demonstrates that early twentieth-century Azerbaijani Qur'anic commentaries represent a significant vernacular Islamic intellectual legacy in the Caucasus. This is particularly important because it shows that Islamic knowledge in Azerbaijan was not merely imported from external centers. It was interpreted, translated, and localized through Azerbaijani cultural forms. Aliyeva and Latifova (2025), in their discussion of women and Islam in medieval Azerbaijan, also broaden the historical understanding of Islamic society by showing that gender, social life, and religious culture intersected in complex ways. These works support a richer conception of Islamic studies as a field that includes history, gender, language, interpretation, and culture.

The politics of cultural heritage also intersects with Azerbaijan's official discourse of multiculturalism. Allahverdiyeva (2025) argues that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan has become a key theme in the era of globalization, while Madatli (2024) emphasizes the interrelation between eternal values and national spiritual values in Azerbaijani experience. These studies indicate that Islam is not presented in isolation. It is placed within a broader state narrative of tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and national harmony. In this framing, Islamic studies can contribute to cultural literacy and interreligious understanding. However, there is also a risk. When multiculturalism becomes too closely aligned with state ideology, it may celebrate diversity without allowing enough room for critical reflection on power, inequality, and religious freedom.

The heritage framing has clear advantages. It allows Islamic studies to enter secular higher education without provoking the fear that universities are becoming confessional institutions. It also enables scholars to connect Islam with history, art, language, ethics, architecture, and social memory. Tural (2020) and Dostiyev (2025) are useful here because their works show that Islamic civilization in Azerbaijan is inseparable from material culture and urban development. This opens an interdisciplinary pathway for Islamic studies. The field can work with archaeology, history, cultural studies, tourism, architecture, religious studies, and education. This is a productive direction, and it should not be underestimated.

Yet the heritage model also has limitations. If Islam is recognized only as heritage, then Islamic studies may be prevented from addressing Islam as a living intellectual, ethical, and theological tradition. It may become museum-like, respected but domesticated. This is a subtle problem. A tradition can be honored in public discourse while being limited in academic depth. For example, Qur'anic commentaries may be studied as cultural artifacts, but their interpretive methods, theological debates, and contemporary ethical implications may receive less attention. According to this perspective, the challenge is not whether Islamic heritage is recognized. The deeper issue is how it is studied.

In Azerbaijan, national identity formation after independence has required a careful balance between Islamic memory and secular modernity. Ismayilov (2018a) explains that the changing landscape of Islam in Azerbaijan reflects contextual pressures and future uncertainties. Islam contributes to identity, but it is also managed to prevent alternative political meanings. This creates a situation in which Islamic studies may support national cohesion, but it must also remain cautious about topics that could unsettle official narratives. Again, the field is valuable because it strengthens belonging, but vulnerable because its academic independence is not guaranteed.

A more mature approach would treat Islamic studies neither as a threat to secularism nor as a decorative symbol of heritage. It would recognize Islam as a historical force, a cultural tradition, a moral vocabulary, and an intellectual field that deserves serious academic inquiry. Such an approach would also allow Azerbaijani higher education to move beyond the simple opposition between secularism and religion. The real issue is not whether Islam belongs to Azerbaijan's identity. Clearly, it does. The more difficult question is whether Islamic studies can examine that identity with enough scholarly freedom, historical nuance, and methodological diversity.

Higher Education Transformation and the Modernization of Islamic Studies

The modernization of Islamic studies in Azerbaijan must be understood within the broader transformation of higher education. Since independence, Azerbaijani universities have faced pressure to reform governance, diversify institutions, internationalize curricula, adopt quality assurance systems, and align with global academic standards. Isakhanli and Pashayeva (2018) show that higher education transformation in Azerbaijan involves institutional diversity and new typologies of higher education institutions. This process affects all fields of study, including Islamic studies. The question is whether Islamic studies can become part of this transformation or whether it remains marginal, symbolic, and administratively cautious.

The adoption of international higher education frameworks has created both opportunity and pressure. On the opportunity side, Islamic studies can be developed as an interdisciplinary field aligned with global academic standards. It can draw on religious studies, history, philosophy, anthropology, political science, ethics, education, and cultural studies. On the pressure side, internationalization may privilege Western models of knowledge production and reduce local Islamic traditions to secondary status. Mammadova (2024) shows that English-medium instruction policies are becoming significant in Azerbaijani higher education. This may help Azerbaijani scholars engage international debates, but it may also create distance from local languages, Arabic sources, Persianate intellectual traditions, and Russian-language scholarship that shaped the region.

The modernization of pedagogy is another relevant dimension. Bayramova and Aliyev (2019) discuss the use of Moodle in Azerbaijani universities as part of higher education innovation, while Huseynova et al. (2022) provide evidence on lecture uploading to learning management systems in higher educational institutions. These developments indicate that university teaching in Azerbaijan is increasingly shaped by digital infrastructure. For Islamic studies, this matters because digital platforms can expand access to texts, lectures, archives, visual materials, and comparative resources. Students can encounter Islamic manuscripts, historical maps, digital Qur'anic resources, and scholarly debates beyond the limits of a traditional classroom. That is a real possibility.

However, digitalization should not be confused with intellectual renewal. A course may use Moodle and still remain pedagogically passive. A lecture may be uploaded online and still reproduce a narrow narrative. The modernization of Islamic studies requires more than technology. It requires curriculum design that encourages historical inquiry, textual analysis, ethical reasoning, and comparative thinking. It also requires teachers who are able to connect Islamic heritage with contemporary questions without reducing either side. In this sense, digital learning tools are useful, but they are not the essence of reform.

Azerbaijan's higher education reform also raises the issue of disciplinary legitimacy. Islamic studies must demonstrate that it is academically rigorous, not merely devotional or ideological. This can be done by developing clear methodological foundations. For instance, Islamic studies can combine textual analysis of Qur'anic commentaries, historical study of Islamic institutions, sociological examination of religious movements, policy analysis of secular governance, and educational research on curriculum. Yakubovych (2022) offers one example of how a specific Islamic intellectual tradition can be studied through serious historical and textual scholarship. Such work shows that Islamic studies can meet international academic expectations while remaining grounded in local heritage.

The modernization of Islamic studies may also benefit from links with social and economic development. Aliyev (2021) discusses halal tourism as a field needed in Azerbaijan, while Abbasli (2024) examines the development perspectives of domestic tourism in the country. Khusainova et al. (2024) connect sustainable tourism development in Karabakh with wider questions of regional reconstruction and sustainability. These studies suggest that Islamic heritage can be connected with applied academic fields such as tourism studies,

cultural preservation, sustainability, heritage management, and regional development. This does not mean that Islamic studies should become an economic tool. Rather, it means that the field can contribute to practical and interdisciplinary knowledge.

The transformation of higher education therefore opens a new horizon for Islamic studies in Azerbaijan. The field can move beyond a narrow model of religious instruction and become a modern academic discipline that speaks to history, identity, ethics, culture, technology, and development. Yet this requires institutional support, academic freedom, and methodological openness. Without these, modernization may remain superficial. According to our reading, the most promising direction is not simply to add more Islamic content to university curricula, but to build Islamic studies as a serious interdisciplinary field within the modern university.

Institutional and Ideological Challenges Facing Islamic Studies

Despite its potential, Islamic studies in Azerbaijan faces significant institutional and ideological challenges. These challenges are not isolated. They are connected to Soviet legacies, secular governance, state control of religion, limited academic infrastructure, geopolitical pressure, and the unresolved status of Islamic knowledge in modern higher education. Veliyeva (2020) and F. B. Aliyev (2004) help explain why the Soviet legacy remains important. The problem is not only that religious education was marginalized in the past. The deeper problem is that the institutional memory, scholarly networks, and pedagogical traditions needed for Islamic studies were weakened over several decades.

One major challenge is institutional marginalization. Islamic studies does not appear to occupy the same central place as other modern academic fields in Azerbaijan's higher education transformation. Isakhanli and Pashayeva (2018) show that Azerbaijani higher education has moved toward institutional diversification and international reform, but Islamic studies remains only indirectly positioned within this transformation. This suggests that the field may be present through cultural studies, history, religious education, or heritage discourse, but not necessarily through strong departments, research centers, graduate programs, or internationally visible scholarly communities. Without institutional depth, Islamic studies risks remaining dependent on individual scholars or state-approved cultural agendas.

Another challenge concerns academic freedom. Bedford et al. (2021) and Gasimov (2020) show that the state's regulation of Islam creates boundaries around acceptable religious discourse. These boundaries may be justified by the state as necessary for security, national unity, and protection against radicalism. Yet from an academic perspective, they can limit critical inquiry. A serious field of Islamic studies needs to examine theological plurality, political Islam, sectarian history, gender debates, religious authority, secularism, and state power. If these themes are treated as too sensitive, the field may become descriptively rich but analytically weak.

The tension between local religious traditions and transnational Islamic movements adds another layer of difficulty. F. Aliyev (2020) analyzes Salafi Islam in Azerbaijan and shows that Salafi movements must be situated within local and transnational contexts. Wilhelmsen (2009) also asks how potent Islamism is in Azerbaijan, indicating that the relationship between religion and political mobilization has long been a concern in scholarship and policy. These studies are important because they show that Islamic studies cannot avoid difficult topics. If it studies only heritage and avoids contemporary Islamic movements, it becomes incomplete. Yet if it studies such movements critically, it may enter politically sensitive territory. This is the uneasy space in which the field operates.

Resource constraints also matter. Mammadova (2024), while focusing on English-medium instruction, points indirectly to the broader challenge of implementing ambitious reform policies in Azerbaijani higher education. Islamic studies faces similar questions of

capacity. Are there enough trained scholars with expertise in Islamic texts, Azerbaijani history, Arabic, Persian, Russian, and modern social science methods? Are there sufficient research funds, archives, journals, and academic networks? These questions are practical, but they shape intellectual possibilities. A field cannot flourish only through symbolic recognition. It needs institutions, libraries, training, and scholarly exchange.

Ideologically, Islamic studies also faces the challenge of being positioned between Western academic dominance and local epistemic recovery. Bayramova and Aliyev (2019) show that Azerbaijani universities are modernizing through global educational technologies, while Mammadova (2024) shows that English-medium instruction is gaining importance. These trends may help internationalization, but they may also privilege external frameworks of knowledge. Islamic studies must therefore avoid two extremes. It should not reject international academic standards in the name of authenticity. But it should also not surrender its local intellectual archives to imported categories without critique. This balance is delicate, and perhaps a little uncomfortable, but it is necessary.

The ideological challenge is also visible in how secularism is understood. If secularism means the exclusion of serious religious inquiry from public universities, Islamic studies will remain marginal. If secularism means the neutral and critical study of religion without state favoritism, then Islamic studies can develop more freely. Azerbaijan's current model seems to stand between these two possibilities. Khalilzada (2024) shows that religion is treated both as threat and instrument, and this duality affects the academic climate. Islamic studies is welcome when it strengthens official narratives, but it may be constrained when it complicates them.

These challenges do not invalidate the development of Islamic studies in Azerbaijan. They show that the field is still in formation. It has cultural legitimacy, but it needs stronger academic legitimacy. It has historical depth, but it needs institutional depth. It has national relevance, but it needs intellectual autonomy. The way forward requires careful reform, not confrontation. Islamic studies can contribute to Azerbaijani higher education if it is supported as a disciplined, critical, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive field. Without such support, it may remain trapped between heritage celebration and political regulation.

Comparative Perspective, Azerbaijan and Other Post-Soviet Muslim-Majority States

A comparative perspective helps clarify what is distinctive about Azerbaijan. Many post-Soviet Muslim-majority states inherited the legacy of Soviet atheism, weak religious institutions, and state suspicion toward political Islam. Yet they did not all respond in the same way. Karagiannis (2010) shows that political Islam in the former Soviet Union developed differently in Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, while Kemper et al. (2009) demonstrate that Islamic education across Soviet successor states has followed varied trajectories. This means that Azerbaijan should not be treated as a generic post-Soviet Muslim society. Its model has specific historical, sectarian, political, and geopolitical features.

Kazakhstan offers a useful comparison. Smagulov et al. (2018) explain that Islamic education in Kazakhstan has been institutionalized within a secular society through state regulation and educational development. Nadirova et al. (2016) also show that Kazakhstan has searched for a balance between secular governance and religious education. More recent studies by Beisenbayev and Almukhametov (2024) and Beisenbayev et al. (2024) indicate that Islamic education in Kazakhstan continues to evolve through institutional improvement, curriculum development, and changing religious dynamics. Compared with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan seems to provide a more visibly institutionalized model of Islamic education, although it also remains under state oversight.

Azerbaijan differs partly because of its sectarian and geopolitical context. Balci (2004) explains that Islam in post-Soviet Azerbaijan is shaped by the tension between Sunnism and Shiism, while Sattarov (2009) links Islamic revival and activism to broader political and social

dynamics. The country's Shi'i-majority background, proximity to Iran, close ties with Turkey, relationship with Russia, and strategic connection with Israel all shape how religion is perceived. Cohen and Lev (2023) discuss Azerbaijan's state-building power in relation to Israel-Iran hostility, and this helps illuminate why religious policy is never separate from foreign policy. Alieva (2024), through her analysis of post-Soviet Azerbaijani foreign policy institutions and orientations, also shows that national strategy is deeply shaped by regional positioning. These geopolitical pressures make the Azerbaijani state especially careful in managing Islamic discourse.

The comparison with Kazakhstan also reveals differences in curriculum and pedagogy. Tashmatov et al. (2025) discuss pedagogical technologies and gender aspects in religious education in higher education institutions, showing that Islamic educational traditions in the broader region are being reworked through modern pedagogical concerns. In Kazakhstan, Beisenbayev and Almukhametov (2024) suggest that Islamic education is being improved through institutional and curricular mechanisms. Azerbaijan, by contrast, appears to integrate Islamic studies more cautiously, often through cultural heritage, history, and national identity rather than through an expansive religious education infrastructure. The difference is not absolute, but it is significant.

Other post-Soviet Muslim contexts further complicate the picture. Sivertseva (1999), in discussing Dagestan's quest for national identity, shows that Islamic identity in the post-Soviet space is often entangled with ethnicity, regional politics, and state formation. Gahkhusina (2015), through the case of the Muslim community in Tatarstan, points to the economic and institutional foundations of Muslim communal life. These studies suggest that Islamic education and Islamic studies are shaped by local histories as much as by religious doctrine. The post-Soviet space is therefore not a single model, but a field of multiple secularisms and multiple Islamic revivals.

What makes Azerbaijan distinctive is the combination of strong secular governance, controlled recognition of Islamic heritage, geopolitical sensitivity, and cautious higher education reform. The state does not deny Islam's cultural significance, but it also resists the development of religious authority outside state supervision. This differs from contexts where Islamic education is more institutionally visible, even if still regulated. It also differs from contexts where religious revival becomes more openly oppositional or socially mobilizing. Azerbaijan's model is one of controlled integration. It includes Islam as heritage, manages Islam as discourse, and limits Islam as independent authority.

The comparative perspective therefore strengthens the central argument of this article. Islamic studies in Azerbaijan is not simply underdeveloped because of neglect. It is shaped by a deliberate model of secular management. This model reflects Soviet inheritance, national identity politics, Shi'i-Sunni dynamics, geopolitical anxieties, and international higher education reform. It may appear restrictive when compared with Kazakhstan, but it is also more complex than straightforward repression. It represents a particular post-Soviet strategy for making Islam visible, useful, and governable within a secular republic.

New Directions for Islamic Studies in Azerbaijani Higher Education

The future of Islamic studies in Azerbaijani higher education depends on whether the field can move beyond its current position as a cautiously recognized component of cultural heritage. At present, Islamic studies is meaningful because it connects Azerbaijan with its Islamic past, national identity, and broader Muslim civilizational memory. Yet that is not enough. A modern university field must also produce critical knowledge, train researchers, develop methods, engage international debates, and respond to contemporary social questions. The new direction, therefore, should not be limited to adding more Islamic content to existing curricula. It should involve building Islamic studies as an interdisciplinary, academically credible, and socially relevant field.

The first direction is methodological renewal. Islamic studies in Azerbaijan should be developed through multiple methods rather than through a single heritage-based approach. Yakubovych (2022) shows that Azerbaijani Qur'anic commentaries can be studied through textual, historical, and linguistic analysis. Aliyeva and Latifova (2025) show that medieval Azerbaijani Islamic society can be examined through gender and social history. Tural (2020) and Dostiyev (2025) show that Islamic material culture and urbanization can be connected with architecture and archaeology. These studies point toward a richer academic model. Islamic studies can include Qur'anic studies, Islamic history, religious anthropology, ethics, gender studies, heritage studies, and education. It does not have to remain narrow.

The second direction is the development of a secular but academically open framework for studying Islam. This may sound difficult, but it is essential. A secular university does not need to become a religious institution in order to study Islam seriously. It only needs to recognize that religion is a legitimate object of academic inquiry. Gasimov (2020) and Bedford et al. (2021) show that state regulation currently plays a major role in shaping religious discourse. The next stage should involve clearer distinction between political control of religion and scholarly study of religion. Islamic studies can respect constitutional secularism while still examining theological diversity, religious authority, political Islam, sectarian history, and state-religion relations with academic honesty.

The third direction is curriculum integration. Islamic studies should not be isolated from broader university transformation. Isakhanli and Pashayeva (2018) show that Azerbaijani higher education is undergoing institutional reform, while Mammadova (2024) highlights internationalization through English-medium instruction. Islamic studies can benefit from these reforms if its curriculum is designed for both local relevance and international visibility. Courses may include Islam in the Caucasus, Qur'anic interpretation in Azerbaijani intellectual history, Islam and secularism, religion and state in post-Soviet societies, Islamic ethics and education, Islamic heritage and sustainable development, and comparative Islamic education. Such courses would allow students to understand Islam not only as belief, but also as history, culture, knowledge, and social force.

The fourth direction concerns digital pedagogy. Bayramova and Aliyev (2019) and Huseynova et al. (2022) indicate that digital learning systems are becoming part of Azerbaijani higher education. Islamic studies can use these tools to create digital archives, online modules, annotated texts, virtual exhibitions of Islamic architecture, and comparative learning resources. Digital platforms can also help connect Azerbaijani students with international scholarship. However, technology must serve intellectual depth. A digital Islamic studies program should not merely upload lectures. It should encourage students to analyze texts, compare interpretations, engage primary sources, and reflect on contemporary ethical questions.

The fifth direction is interdisciplinary engagement with cultural and economic development. Aliyev (2021) argues that halal tourism is a needed field in Azerbaijan, while Khusainova et al. (2024) connect sustainable tourism development in Karabakh with cultural and regional reconstruction. Abbasli (2024) also highlights the development potential of domestic tourism. These works suggest that Islamic studies can contribute to heritage-based development, halal tourism, cultural preservation, and ethical sustainability. This direction must be handled carefully. Islamic studies should not be reduced to tourism promotion. Yet scholars of Islamic studies can help ensure that heritage development is historically accurate, ethically sensitive, and culturally respectful.

The sixth direction is comparative research. Azerbaijan should be studied alongside Kazakhstan, Turkey, Tatarstan, Dagestan, Uzbekistan, and other Muslim-majority or post-Soviet contexts. Smagulov et al. (2018), Nadirova et al. (2016), and Beisenbayev et al. (2024) show that Kazakhstan offers an important comparison in the institutionalization of Islamic education. Kemper et al. (2009) and Karagiannis (2010) show that the wider post-Soviet space

contains multiple patterns of Islamic revival and state control. Comparative research would help Azerbaijani Islamic studies avoid intellectual isolation. It would also allow scholars to identify what is unique in Azerbaijan and what is shared across the region.

The seventh direction concerns academic capacity. Islamic studies needs trained scholars, multilingual competence, research funding, archival access, publication platforms, and international collaboration. This is a practical matter, but it is also intellectual. Without scholars who can work across Azerbaijani, Arabic, Persian, Russian, Turkish, and English materials, the field will remain limited. Without research centers and graduate training, Islamic studies will struggle to become more than an occasional topic. According to our view, this is one of the most urgent needs. Azerbaijan has rich Islamic heritage, but heritage alone does not produce scholarship. Institutions do.

Finally, Islamic studies in Azerbaijan should be reframed as a contribution to civic and ethical education. It can help students understand the moral vocabularies, historical memories, and religious traditions that shape their society. It can also encourage critical thinking about secularism, identity, pluralism, authority, and globalization. Madatli (2024) and Allahverdiyeva (2025) show that national spiritual values and multiculturalism are important in Azerbaijan's public discourse. Islamic studies can strengthen these values if it is allowed to be reflective rather than merely celebratory. The future of the field depends on this shift. Islamic studies should not be feared as a threat to secularism, nor used only as an instrument of national ideology. It should be cultivated as a serious academic field that helps Azerbaijan understand its past, interpret its present, and imagine a more intellectually confident future.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Islamic studies in Azerbaijan should be understood as part of the broader transformation of higher education in a secular, post-Soviet, Muslim-majority republic. The Azerbaijani case shows that Islamic studies is not merely a matter of religious curriculum or the revival of Islamic learning after Soviet collapse. It is shaped by historical memory, secular governance, national identity, geopolitical concern, and the modernization of universities. Islam is not excluded from national life. It is recognized as part of Azerbaijani cultural heritage, historical continuity, and spiritual identity. Yet this recognition takes place within a secular state framework that supervises religious authority and defines acceptable forms of public Islam. As a result, Islamic studies occupies an ambivalent position. It has cultural legitimacy, but it does not yet enjoy full academic autonomy. It is valued as heritage, but it remains cautious as theology, critical inquiry, and independent religious scholarship.

The main contribution of this article lies in reframing Islamic studies in Azerbaijan as a negotiated academic field rather than a simple extension of either religious revival or secular state policy. Azerbaijan offers a distinctive model in which Islamic heritage is selectively integrated into higher education while remaining subject to state regulation, national identity discourse, and geopolitical calculation. This model differs from more visibly institutionalized forms of Islamic education in some other post-Soviet Muslim-majority contexts. Looking forward, the development of Islamic studies in Azerbaijani higher education requires more than symbolic recognition of Islamic culture. It needs stronger interdisciplinary curricula, multilingual scholarship, digital pedagogy, archival research, institutional support, and a more open academic space for studying Islam historically, ethically, socially, and intellectually. Future research may involve lecturers, students, policymakers, religious institutions, and curriculum designers, as well as comparative studies with Turkey, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Muslim-majority secular or semi-secular countries.

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Ethical Considerations

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