



INTRODUCTION

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, the relationship between religion and politics in the Muslim world has been a central theme in world affairs. Most Muslim-majority nations have experienced the growth of assertive and often aggressive demands to realign their political systems, laws, and education systems along religious lines. The rise of the ideology advocating for this – Islamism – has taken many shapes: In some countries, such demands have been voiced in the political realm and through civic activism. In many others, they have been associated with political violence that has profoundly destabilized a long list of countries. Almost everywhere, Islamists have put forces that resist the growing mixing of religion and politics on the defensive. Islamism established itself as the most powerful ideology in the Muslim world, a development that has had real implications for the lives of millions. The implications have not been limited to Muslim countries: hatred of the United States and, more broadly, Western civilization is a centerpiece of the Islamist ideology. From Afghanistan in the east to Libya in the West, America and its European allies have been forced to fight the most militant among Islamist groups. Where

Islamists have secured power, they have shifted the foreign policies of their nations in the direction of greater antagonism toward the United States and Europe.

The one part of the Muslim world that has firmly bucked this trend is Central Asia and Azerbaijan, a cluster of six countries that played an important historical role as an intellectual center of the Muslim world but which, from the eighteenth century onward, were subjected to Russian and subsequently Soviet rule. Throughout the three decades of their independence, these countries have maintained a staunch attachment to secular government, which also enjoys the support of a considerable majority of their population. While firmly rejecting the demands of Islamists, leaders of these countries have emphasized the importance of keeping religion out of politics and have countered the divisiveness of Islamist ideology by showcasing the harmonious relations among their Muslim, Christian, and Jewish citizens. They have also applied restrictive and often repressive measures to deal with Islamist challenges within their societies, frequently casting a vast net in doing so. In the foreign policy realm, they have welcomed a partnership with the United States and Europe and played important roles in supporting Western efforts in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Against this background, one could have imagined that the approaches of these states toward religion would have garnered Western interest and, perhaps, even qualified support. Curiously, the opposite has been the case. Western academia has yet to produce a substantial study of state approaches to religion in this region or even one of its component countries. By contrast, governmental and non-governmental advocacy groups, primarily based in the United States, have taken a harshly critical approach

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to their religious policies. Yearly reports of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, as well as publications of private groups such as Human Rights Watch, have invested considerable energy into detailing violations of individual religious freedoms in this region and in urging punitive action against them by Western governments.

Such violations have indeed occurred across the region, and advocacy groups cannot be faulted for calling attention to them. What is curious is that the United States and Europe have shown so little interest in what these states have been trying to achieve: the maintenance of a secular form of government with secular laws and secular education systems. What is even more puzzling is that Western advocacy groups (and Western governments) have frequently emerged in support of the efforts of Islamist forces to advocate *against* the very principles Americans and Europeans take for granted in their societies. This, in turn, has led to profound consternation in Central Asia and Azerbaijan. Leaders in these states have touted their secularism and opposition to Islamist ideology as a point of commonality with the West and anticipated that Westerners would support their endeavors. They are at a loss comprehending why Westerners oppose not just the methods by which they seek to maintain secularism but sometimes that very goal itself.

This cognitive dissonance inevitably leads to conspiracism, best expressed to this author by a retired Central Asian statesman during the ravages of the Islamic State in the Levant several years ago. As we rose to take leave following a lengthy conversation, the elderly statesman appeared to hesitate, then said: "Please do not do a Munich." He clarified: "Please do not sell us out to the Islamists in exchange for them leaving you alone." It dawned on

me that he was referring to the infamous 1938 Munich agreement and suspected what he considered the Western appeasement of Islamism to be part of some grand bargain in which his homeland might be a pawn to be traded.

This book takes its starting point in the complex relationship between the state and religion in the Muslim world. It is that context – and the growing dominance of Islamist ideology – that makes Central Asia and Azerbaijan an outlier. Therefore, Chapter one will set the scene by mapping the interrelationship of state and religion in the past century. Chapter two, by contrast, examines the models of interaction between the state and religion at a more conceptual level and proposes a typology for understanding how state approaches to religion can evolve.

Following these introductory chapters, the volume then turns to the region itself. Chapter three surveys the development of Islam in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, focusing on the region's relative openness to other religions, rationality, and secular ideas. Chapter four dives deeper into the religious question during the transition from Soviet rule. Chapter five explores in greater detail the state policies toward religion in each of the six countries.

On the basis of this analysis, the book then seeks to determine whether the approaches of these six states, in turn, constitute an identifiable model of state approaches to religion. In other words, are their approaches similar enough to one another, and distinct enough from other states to be considered a model?

Chapter six explores the internal consistency of the model by drawing out the main themes that emerge from the study of individual countries.

By contrast, Chapter seven looks outside the region to

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compare the Central Asian experience with other frequently touted models in the Muslim world.

Finally, the book seeks to look ahead. If this region indeed constitutes a model of secular statehood, there are two questions for the future. The first is whether it is sustainable. While the model is far from perfect, what improvements and adaptations would it need to be maintained in the longer term? The second question is whether it could hold any appeal to other parts of the Muslim world as they tire from the mixing of religion and politics. In other words, as the region's model of state approaches is improved and adapted, could it provide inspiration for those forces that seek to counter Islamist ideology elsewhere?

This book has been a long time in the making. It is the result of an initiative to study state approaches to religion in Central Asia and the Caucasus that began half a decade ago at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center. As we decided to take a closer look at the issue, we realized that there was virtually no scholarship that sought to investigate what those states' approaches were and what considerations lay behind them. We resolved to begin to fill this void at first with a series of case studies. From 2016 onward, we published case studies of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. In parallel, the idea emerged to produce a study of the region as a whole that situates it in the broader context of religion and politics in the Muslim world. This book is the result.

Many individuals have played roles in the several years of research that resulted in this book. First are the researchers that contributed to these case studies published in the past several years. These include Victoria Clement, Johan Engvall, Jacob Zenn,

Boris Ajeganov, Julian Tucker, as well as Johanna Popjanevski, who left this world too early.

Second, are the research assistants that helped procure materials and sources for this project. They include Diana Glebova, Braunny Ramirez, Jack Verser, and Kamilla Zakirova. Equally important are the scholars, diplomats, and friends whose ideas helped inspire this project during many animated conversations over the past two decades. Colleagues and friends that have been important interlocutors and sparring partners include Herman Pirchner, Ilan Berman, Brenda Shaffer, Elin Suleymanov, Gloria La Cava, Eldar Ismailov, Fariz Ismailzade, Eldor Aripov, Patrik Jotun, Ingrid Tersman and Åke Peterson. First and foremost among them, however, is S. Frederick Starr, the founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, who has been perhaps the greatest supporter of this initiative and this book.