

# Foreign Religious Education and the Central Asian Islamic Revival: Impact and Prospects for Stability

David M. Abramson

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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
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# Table of Contents

- Executive Summary ..... 5**
  - Key Findings ..... 8
- Setting the Scene.....10**
- Profiles..... 15**
  - Who is Studying Abroad? ..... 15
  - Destinations Chosen ..... 19
  - Publicity and Resources ..... 21
  - The Return ..... 22
- Country Studies .....25**
  - Kyrgyzstan ..... 25
  - Uzbekistan.....29
  - Tajikistan.....36
- Future Directions ..... 44**
- Appendix..... 47**
- Author Bio ..... 50**



## Executive Summary

Analyses of Islam in Central Asia tend to be based on surveys and anecdotal evidence of religious activity and statements about belief. This evidence is often marshaled for ranking Muslim populations in terms of religiosity and political activism or ranking governments in terms of their repressive policies toward religious behavior. This paper lends greater depth to those studies by providing a grounded assessment of the consequences of Central Asians' religious knowledge acquisition abroad. I analyze the results of interviews with current and former students, religious leaders, scholars of Islam, and government officials conducted during 2008–9. In particular, the paper examines who is going to which countries to study Islam, why, and how education acquired abroad influences returnees' attitudes about religion and Islamic practice. It also examines the strengths and weaknesses of state policies and religious activity in each of the three countries (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), especially concerning Islamic study abroad and the integration of this training into society.

A close examination of where students are going, what they are learning, and how they are using their religious knowledge gives us a more nuanced picture of the legitimacy of government concerns about religious extremism. The reasons for studying religion abroad in the two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union are linked to a wide range of political, economic, and social factors, and, therefore, are subject to shift over time. The Islamic revival is similarly driven and, therefore, is bigger than politics—i.e., it is not merely driven by domestic politics or transnational political Islam. Consequently, the heavily political responses of the Central Asian states are inadequate. Social and economic responses are also warranted. Furthermore, this research also provides excellent data for anticipating future trends: the knowledge and social networking patterns of the first post-Soviet generation; the knowledge base and religious orientation of the next generation of Islamic leaders; Central Asia's ties to the Muslim world, both official and

unofficial, political and economic; emergent migration destinations and patterns; and the receptivity of Central Asian Muslims to militant activity in neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Of course, study abroad does occasionally lead to contact with and membership in extremist groups and terrorist organizations. My research, however, indicates that the vast majority of Central Asians abroad are pursuing their studies for a wide range of non-violent and not particularly radical reasons. First, and as discussed below, this finding is supported by the interviews I conducted. Second, there is a substantial body of scholarly literature indicating that most terrorists do not come from institutions of Islamic education. Finally, the return of large numbers of students of religion to Central Asia from abroad has not resulted in an increase in terrorist activity.

While there is certainly some overlap, it is critical to distinguish between those who embrace and seek to effect political change via extremist ideologies and violence and those who promote change in religious practice and belief. The fact that changes in belief and practice resulting from a foreign religious education often play into the politically charged religious environment after students return home is a separate question.

Soviet socialism's atheistic ideology left a legacy of mistrust of religion among Central Asia's ruling elites. The region's governments' concerns about the need for the state to manage religion and religious ideology have been reinvigorated by occasional acts of terrorism, especially in Uzbekistan and along its border with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; the rise and persistence of terrorist and extremist movements in the region; and ongoing instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus, state officials often view students who travel abroad to study Islam with suspicion for several reasons. First, they assume that transnational Islamic ties frequently lead to participation in international extremist movements and even Islamic terrorist organizations. As several scholars have pointed out, post-9/11 reporting and analysis of Islamic education has exaggerated the numbers and role of extremist madrassas in producing radical behavior.<sup>1</sup> Second, state actors generally

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Evans, "Understanding Madrasahs," *Foreign Affairs*, January–February 2006, 85(1):9–16; Mumtaz Ahmad and Matthew J. Nelson, "Islamic Education in

regard the importation of foreign Islamic traditions and their local application as a threat to their government's tenuous management of the Islamic revival. Third, they fear that the emergence of new social networks with transnational ties and a global ideology will supplant or erode the social structures from which the current patronage-based political systems derive their power.

In the course of researching this project, I conducted interviews with current and former students of Islam from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan at home as well as in Turkey, Egypt, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. I also interviewed religious educators, clerics and Islamic functionaries, academics, and government officials. These interviews reveal that while all three of these countries' governments are struggling with religion in ways similar to their Soviet forebears, their paths are remarkably divergent.

The first part of this paper gives a brief overview of Central Asian Islam in history and politics, focusing on the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Section Two provides a general picture of Central Asian students who travel abroad to study Islam. It outlines why they choose to study abroad, how they get there, how that experience shapes their attitudes toward Islam, and the shared political and social environment from which they hail and to which most of them return. While there is no single profile of these students in terms of educational background, motivation, ideological orientation, or future occupation, problems with reintegration after the students return home are often shared. These problems include non-recognition of an overseas education, dearth of related employment opportunities, and disagreements over acceptable Islamic practices between returning students and religious leaders whose Islamic education is entirely local. Tensions and debates over "authentic" Islam play out in mosques, schools, family life, media, and on the street. The combined state effort to control Islam and the lack of societal consensus even on whether multiple approaches to Islam should be tolerated lead to the politicization of nearly everything associated with religion.

The third section looks at the distinctiveness of the political and social environment in each of the three countries—the historical setting since independence, state policies concerning religious organizations and Islamic education and practice, and the Islamic revival's potential to change society.

Many comparative studies of Central Asian states rank each government on a scale of religious repression or each society on a scale of extremist tendencies. This particular study is not a ranking exercise. Instead, I enumerate the strengths and weaknesses of each country's state policies and societal relations in dealing with the resurgent interest in Islam as religious knowledge and observance grows and diversifies. I address how foreign education has influenced religious networks and communities.

Section Four concludes the article with an assessment of the implications of the growth of different kinds of knowledge about Islam for Central Asian societies, with particular attention paid to the emergent post-Soviet generation's attitudinal changes concerning Islam. What assumptions about belief and religiosity do those who grew up after the demise of the Soviet Union bring to their social relations, the workplace, and politics? What is the future of secularism in these societies? What is the future of tolerance for plural manifestations of Islam?

## **Key Findings**

- Central Asians who return home after studying in formal Islamic institutions of higher learning abroad are not contributing significantly to Islamic extremism or terrorism in their home countries.
- Central Asians who choose to study Islam abroad generally do not embrace extremist ideologies. Numerous scholarly studies have concluded that those who study in Islamic schools and institutions of higher learning do not fit the profile of an Islamic militant or terrorist.
- Central Asian state policies tend to characterize students who study Islam abroad suspiciously and pejoratively as radicals or activists. This is due to several factors: the Soviet anti-religious reflex; fear that social

change will transform current power relations; and an unwillingness and inability to differentiate between radical ideologies and religiosity.

- The Central Asian governments are not making use of the expertise of returning students with religious training, but their policies are effectively alienating large numbers of them.
- Central Asian states' hyper-politicization of religious education undermines attempts at fruitful dialogue and efforts to improve religious education.
- Domestic religious education in Central Asia is weak and fails to equip graduates with the necessary tools for countering and minimizing extremist and intolerant forms of Islam.
- Muslims with extremist political or religious views are *not* drivers of radical change, but could easily be mobilized as a constituency if political instability emerges and endures due to other factors.
- Central Asians who have studied Islam in formal institutions abroad are not likely in the near term to welcome foreign militants in their countries in the same way as the Taliban have welcomed Al Qaeda and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan fighters in Afghanistan.

## Setting the Scene

—“*If you do not live abroad, you are not a Muslim*”<sup>2</sup>

Uzbek/Islamic proverb

Central Asia is barely a generation away from its Soviet past. Soviet policies promoted an anti-religious ideology, redefined Islam in narrowly dogmatic and impracticable terms, and characterized the most enduring religious practices as national cultural traditions. These policies succeeded in destroying several generations of Islamic elites as well as legal, economic, and educational institutions that helped to sustain the intellectual side of Islamic knowledge. This strategy of stifling religion left a legacy of widespread ignorance about the history of Islam at home, and around the world, and led to an impoverished grasp of models for the role of religion in society.

Soviet policies failed, on the other hand, to turn the majority of Central Asians fully away from religion, which was merely driven underground. Twenty years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the first post-Soviet generation is much more religiously observant than the previous generation. The result of this shift is that there are now insufficient numbers of religious leaders and educators who have the training to both meet the spiritual needs of the population they serve and effectively carry out state directives to counter extremist ideologies. Consequently, thousands have studied Islam abroad to satisfy their desire for a formal or more thorough religious education than what they can find at home.

The opening up of once tightly controlled Soviet borders and the pursuit of foreign investment to shore up the Central Asian governments’ weak

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<sup>2</sup> “*Musofir bo’lmagungacha musulmon bo’lmaisan.*” This proverb refers to the long history of pilgrimage, migration, and travel for other purposes—a key element of Islamic piety and the religious imagination. For example, see *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, edited by Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

economies have enabled Muslims to travel to a wider range of countries than ever before, exchange views with co-religionists abroad, and acquire a depth of knowledge about Islamic theology, political movements, and diverse religious observance that is unattainable at home.

Travel for a range of religious purposes, especially pilgrimage (*hajj*, *ziyaret*), migration (*hijra*), and knowledge (*rihla*), has been a tradition in Islam since the time of the Prophet. For centuries, Central Asia was a popular destination for Muslims seeking religious and spiritual enlightenment in cities such as Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan and Turkistan in present-day Kazakhstan. Previously, regional and imperial politics often interrupted religious travel for periods of time. Soviet rule in Central Asia, however, tightly controlled, and effectively blocked, Muslims from traveling abroad for religious purposes to an unprecedented degree.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union left behind a religious vacuum in Central Asia. During the Soviet period Islamic institutions had been mostly destroyed and legitimate spiritual leaders driven underground. Even after the Soviet government established the Central Asian Spiritual Administration of Muslims (SADUM) in 1943 to oversee and guide Islamic activity, those imams who had survived the Stalin repression of the 1930s and were allowed to preach functioned only under close KGB surveillance and control.

Today, imams, mullahs, and guardians of sacred sites generally lack sufficient education and competence to meet the needs of increasingly observant or spiritually needy populations seeking guidance. The Soviet imposition of the teaching of scientific atheism in public schools meant that there were virtually no educators who were familiar with secular, social scientific curricula and teaching methodologies pertaining to religion. The lack of pedagogical tools for teaching social scientific approaches to religion led to the widespread view that religion can or should be understood only in doctrinal terms. The enthusiasm with which many Muslims are embracing Islam and self-consciously seeking to live by the “true” principles has reinforced this view, possibly at the expense of tolerance of religious diversity. Not surprisingly, critical and comparative approaches to the study of religion, still in a nascent stage of development, have not found much of a following. A small minority of Central Asian scholars of Islam and clerics

are aware of the potential dangers of an overly narrow religious education and regularly express these concerns.

The governments of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have made some efforts to limit what they perceive to be the negative effects of religious education at home. They have sought to address declining tolerance by developing plans to standardize religious curricula. Since Central Asian governments cannot control religious curricula in other countries, they instead try to monitor who studies where, for how long, and what they learn. The results have been mixed. This is largely due to the fact that the vast majority of those studying abroad do so illegally, or at least outside of official government channels.

The Soviet policy of limiting the public debate and display of religion, and its continuation to some degree in post-Soviet society, has inflated the value of some religious knowledge and practices (e.g., the hajj pilgrimage, religious education). In certain situations, those who acquire an above-average Islamic education can secure a following, and the threshold is fairly low. At the same time, because the level of knowledge about Islam as practiced elsewhere in the world is low, the religious information that returning Central Asians are bringing home from a wide range of Muslim countries is diversifying Islam in both practice and belief.

The diversification of Islam is creating both challenges to and opportunities for state control of Islam. On the one hand, state actors are often at a loss about how to interpret new manifestations of religious practices and tend to react with suspicion and hostility. Government decrees banning the wearing of certain kinds of Islamic headscarves for women in universities and public discouragement of travel to countries like Pakistan for Islamic education are just two examples. On the other hand, governments see in diversification opportunities to exploit differences with the goal of fragmenting religious constituencies or political parties that criticize the state. For example, in 2008, the Tajik government temporarily tolerated a campaign by “Salafist” groups to discredit prominent Muslim clerics and activists.

Central Asian states’ insistence on Hanafism as the only appropriate form of Islam for the region while simultaneously reminding citizens to uphold their constitution’s principle of separation of religion and state (i.e., a peculiar

form of “secularism”) creates locally specific tensions. This paradoxical situation effectively establishes a state religion against which dissenting Muslims define themselves. Salafism, a more orthodox and fundamentalist approach to Islam, is the most available brand of anti-establishment Islam globally. Salafism appeals to many young Central Asians because they do not trust the authority of a religion whose practice and thought have been molded by decades of Soviet and post-Soviet policies. Consequently, they seek models external to their own political systems and societies. The absence of a flourishing intellectual dimension to Central Asia’s current Islamic revival, however, presents a serious challenge to those who seek to check the spread of intolerant versions of Islam.

The intensity of the Islamic revival is by no means uniform across Central Asia or even across regions within a given country. In all of the larger capital cities, for example, there continue to be sizable populations, especially among the urban, educated national elite, who have little interest in religion. The existence of nominally Muslim communities that are either indifferent to religion is more common in Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. Increasingly, however, interest in Islam is spreading through kin and professional networks, probably faster in urban areas than in rural ones.

Islamic trends in each of the three countries have developed in different ways, as have state efforts to control Islam. Each state’s distinct approach to religion has weaknesses in its ability to counter the spread of extremist ideologies and in trying to keep up with Islamization. For example, the Uzbek government has advanced farther than its neighbors in developing institutions of Islamic education and scholarship that focus separately on secular and theological approaches to Islam. Madrassas are required to teach some secular topics, while secular public schools are only beginning to teach about world religions. Meanwhile, the Uzbek state’s means of control over clergy and religious activity has a chilling effect on nearly all public dialogue on religion and scholarly creativity. For example, scholarship on aspects of Central Asian Islam, past or present, which lies outside of current policy trends is interpreted as advocacy and therefore is seen as a challenge to the state. Consequently, otherwise creative scholarship and the debates that tend to accompany it are often suppressed.

Tajikistan, on the other hand, tolerates Islamic-secular dialogue, doubtless a civil war legacy, but its government inconsistently restricts public displays of religiosity and religious symbols. At the same time, with the help of outside aid, the government is constructing what might be Central Asia's largest mosque, located in the center of Dushanbe next to the new presidential palace. This state of affairs sends mixed messages that weaken the benefits of public dialogue.

Kyrgyzstan is seeking to capitalize on its positive and liberal ties with Turkey and other majority Muslim countries while trying to standardize religious education in a way that balances secular and religious curricula in Islamic schools. The Kyrgyz government's recent standardization efforts, however, come at the expense of meeting popular demands for religious education for children under the age of 16 and diluting the training that exists for those 16 and older with a quasi-secular curriculum and increasingly strict institutional registration requirements. These limits to religious education are common to all three countries.

## Profiles

### Who is Studying Abroad?

Who are these people from Central Asia that are seizing religious educational opportunities abroad? How do they choose where to go, given a suspicious political environment at home and in the absence of well-trodden paths? How do they get there, given limited financial resources? The dearth of scholarship on the religious backgrounds and motivations of these students has left too much to our imagination, which is heavily informed by media and academic accounts of disgruntled young Central Asians traveling abroad and joining global jihadist movements.

The majority of the current and former students I interviewed come from modest socio-economic backgrounds. A small minority come from families with a long history of religious education dating back to pre-Soviet days, whose parents send them abroad to receive a more comprehensive religious education. During the 1990s, many of the Tajik civil war refugees who had fled to Afghanistan sent their children to free or inexpensive religious schools in Pakistan.

In general, even many families with a tradition of preserving Islamic knowledge acknowledge that the level of education available at home is limited compared to what can be learned at universities abroad. In some cases, parents with a strong enough grounding have taken steps to communicate to their children that some of the instruction they may receive abroad is neither compatible with the Hanafi mazhab<sup>3</sup> nor consistent with their society's experience with Islam.

Many students are from families that are not very religiously observant or knowledgeable and, in some cases, are suspicious of religious behavior in general. Students studying at Ankara University in Turkey acknowledged

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<sup>3</sup> The Hanafi mazhab is one of the four main Sunni schools of jurisprudence and is predominant in Central Asia.

they had little conception of theology prior to enrolling at Osh State University's theology program, but were drawn initially to the opportunity to spend time in Turkey. There are almost no students with parents who had studied Islam outside the former Soviet Union, although this will probably change in a few years once the children of those who studied abroad in the early 1990s come of age. In very few cases, children of Soviet era communist elites had spent time abroad with their families, but obviously not in a religious capacity.

Not all interviewees had gone abroad with the encouragement or even the permission of their parents. Some made the decision themselves and had to convince their parents that they were not going to be converted to "Wahhabism."<sup>4</sup> While many fear that study abroad will lead to an extremist education, respect for Islamic education continues to grow.

It is difficult to estimate the number of students from Central Asian countries who have studied religion abroad during the post-Soviet period. One reason is that while hundreds of Central Asians currently are enrolled in formal educational programs at madrassas, institutes, and universities throughout the world, only a very small minority are enrolled with official permission or sponsorship from a home institution or their government. Possibly hundreds more are studying abroad outside of foreign official institutions of higher education, such as in informal study circles or under the tutelage of a religious scholar or shaykh.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 (see appendix) provides very rough estimates of the number of students from three countries currently studying religion at educational institutions in primary destination countries.<sup>6</sup>

Numbers themselves do not tell the whole story. This is because the reasons why Central Asians study abroad are numerous and the content and impact

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<sup>4</sup> In the Central Asia context, Wahhabi is a pejorative catchall term for an extremist who supports a strict Salafist or fundamentalist, but not necessarily Saudi, interpretation of Islam.

<sup>5</sup> My field research focused on students who participated in formal, institutional study. I did not interview any individuals who had studied informally abroad.

<sup>6</sup> Figures in Table 1 are based on interviews and on official figures provided by Al Azhar University. Azhar's figures are listed separately in Table 2 and do not include the many more students in language, secondary, and preparatory levels, which are prerequisites to enrolment in the university.

of their education is highly variable. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that some of the reasons why students went abroad to study Islam in the first years after independence are different from what motivates students to go abroad today, due to changing political, economic, and social conditions. Tajikistan experienced a civil war for much of its first decade of independence. Uzbekistan was more open to foreign study in general, until it was faced with the rise of extremist movements and terrorist attacks beginning in the mid to late 1990s. Kyrgyzstan initially was flooded with the construction of foreign-funded mosques and madrassas in the 1990s and only later began to regulate and limit them.

Some of the students I interviewed did not travel initially to study Islam, but after living abroad wanted to learn more about their religion. Some merely seized the opportunity to spend time abroad, travel in another country, or escape economic or political hardship in their home country. Some did not enroll in classes upon arriving and many of those who did matriculate did not complete their studies (i.e., did not receive a diploma).<sup>7</sup> Others went abroad specifically to learn languages such as Arabic, Turkish, or English, although some of these began religious study after they arrived. In other cases, students were called back home, either by their own government for political reasons or by their family for personal reasons. This latter reason is common, given that Central Asian family ties are close-knit and many students enroll in foreign institutions for ten or more years. For example, only two out of 13 students from Kyrgyzstan who went to Al Azhar in 1995 completed their baccalaureate and received a diploma. The rest left for personal reasons, including one serious student who returned to care for an aging parent.<sup>8</sup> Several former students reported that in 1995 the government of Uzbekistan recalled all students it had sent on officially sponsored programs to Egypt, likely due to concerns of the growing threat of Islamic extremism in Uzbekistan.

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<sup>7</sup> In her study of Kazakh students at Al Azhar, Bissenova notes that many of them curtailed their programs for a range of reasons, including the difficulty of learning Arabic or studying other topics in Arabic, disenchantment with life in Cairo and the quality of instruction, and loss of motivation to commit to a long program abroad.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, May 29, 2009.

Corruption and deterioration in the quality of instruction at all levels of the education system also drives many students abroad. The bribes demanded for entrance to universities and passing exams can be more expensive (as much as \$7000–\$10,000) than the cost of an education abroad. Moreover, at elementary school levels, poor instruction, facilities, and corruption lead parents to send their children to private religious schools at home where there is an emphasis on teaching morality, even if other important subjects are overlooked.

Many students who go abroad to study secular subjects also develop an interest in Islam and acquire religious knowledge on an informal basis—self-instruction, from friends, at a mosque, or through courses on religion in the country they are visiting. This applies on a smaller scale to those who study in Western countries with Muslim minority populations as it does to those in the Middle East, South, and Southeast Asia.

Based on my interviews, the number of students who were highly committed to obtaining a solid Islamic education was under 20 percent and probably much closer to 10 percent. They were motivated either by the desire to seek a career in religion or by a personal drive to learn more about their religion, regardless of the professional possibilities. More serious students spend as many as 10 or more years studying abroad, especially at Al Azhar University in Cairo, which requires several years of Arabic language study and basic religious education for those without much formal education or knowledge of Islam before they can enroll in the university itself for a bachelor's level degree. Since nearly all Central Asians come to Azhar without proficient Arabic and with only a very basic knowledge of Islam, most must progress through three pre-university levels first. Graduate level study requires additional years, so the number of Central Asians who proceed to even the university level is small. One Azhar graduate informed me he was the first student from Tajikistan to complete a Master's program, after spending 11 years in Egypt.

Female students also go abroad for Islamic study. For them, as for women who study at madrassas in their home countries, official employment in the religious sphere does not exist. The only relevant work opportunities available for women are positions teaching in women's madrassas or

privately (and illegally) as *otinchas* (Islamic women tutors) at home. Because of the normative expectation that a woman must marry young and have children, many women from traditional families drop out of school before completing their coursework. Among those studying abroad, most accompany their spouses, although some study independently.

### Destinations Chosen

Whether or not they devote themselves to religious education, nearly all students from Central Asia have to contend with the issues of studying abroad for so many years without earning money to send home to their financially struggling families. Partly for this reason, many ranked Saudi Arabia, in particular Medina University, as highly desirable because of the well-paid scholarships and good living conditions provided. Medina is known for its rigorous study program and the spiritual significance of its location is also a draw factor. Al Azhar is popular because of its prestige as the oldest and preeminent Islamic university in the world. The education at Medina and Al Azhar is free, due to the many scholarships that are available from the host governments and charitable foundations in the host country or in third countries.

At the beginning of its 2008–9 academic year, Al Azhar University introduced a new policy requiring new students to register with their embassies before being allowed to enroll. This requirement ensures that students from Central Asia cannot attend the university inconspicuously, that is, without their government's knowledge. During 1993–2007, students were permitted to enroll at Al Azhar unbeknownst to their own governments. This meant that a student could leave Uzbekistan and travel to Egypt on a tourist visa, then stay and enroll at a university.

In May 2009, Egyptian security services raided dormitories at Al Azhar University and detained scores of students from Central Asia and Russia, allegedly because of visa violations. Ultimately, most were released, but at least 20 were deported to their home countries, including Russia and Tajikistan. The fact that the raids took place just a few days before U.S. President Obama's June 4 Cairo speech suggests this was a security-related

sweep randomly targeting locations with large numbers of vulnerable foreigners from certain Muslim countries.

Al Azhar's new registration requirement and the occasional crackdown on foreign students no doubt contribute to the university's popularity with Central Asian governments struggling to monitor their citizens abroad. It also illustrates the precariousness of those Central Asians studying abroad with an unofficial or even illegal status.

While Syria is not a top destination for religious study, partly for political reasons, I was told that Central Asians who study at Abu Nur University choose it because Damascus is a relatively inexpensive place to live.<sup>9</sup> Turkey is a major destination for students from Kyrgyzstan, mainly due to a three-way agreement between Ankara University's Ilohiyat Faculty (Department of Theology), the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), and Kyrgyzstan's Osh State University Theology Department to host students from Kyrgyzstan in Ankara for one year out of their five-year bachelor program. Because Uzbek-Turkish relations are strained and the government of Uzbekistan cut educational ties to Turkey in the late 1990s, there are few students from Uzbekistan who study there. There are not many students of religion from Tajikistan either.

Pakistan and Iran are also popular destinations, but again for political reasons the numbers of students studying Islam there are especially difficult to ascertain and financial assistance is not always as readily available as it is for study in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Islamic education in Pakistan varies, but in general it emphasizes *dawa* (proselytism) in the style of Salafis or members of the religious movement Tablighi Jamaat. Pakistan was especially popular in the early years following independence, both as an inexpensive destination for Muslims and as a refuge for Tajiks fleeing the 1992–97 civil war that tore apart their country. Tajikistan's relations with Iran are economically close but politically cautious, so Dushanbe does not encourage religious ties of any kind between the two countries. Nevertheless, the number of students from Tajikistan unofficially studying religion in Iran is reportedly high and can be

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<sup>9</sup> Relations between Uzbekistan and Syria are strained and I was told that the Uzbek government watches closely students who return from Syria. I received this as second-hand information and was unable to interview any students who had studied there.

divided into two categories—those studying in Shi'a educational institutions like the University of Qom in the north and those in the Sunni-dominated region surrounding Zahedan in Iran's southeastern province of Baluchistan.

There are also a few students studying Islam in India, Malaysia, and Yemen. While Kazan, Tatarstan, in Russia was once a popular destination, no doubt due to familiarity, proximity, and shared language, the number of Central Asian students there reportedly has declined.

### **Publicity and Resources**

The most common way students learned about foreign study opportunities is by word of mouth, whether from family members who had already “blazed a trail,” a local religious figure, or occasionally through more formal channels such as the Muftiate, a faculty at an educational institution, or through the Internet.

There are four sources of funding that support students' study abroad: personal or community, the sending country's government or educational institution, the host government or host country institution, and private foundations, often based in a third country. Most families do not have the resources to pay for travel, tuition, and living expenses associated with foreign study. In some cases, families or extended families pool their resources to send one student abroad. In very rare cases, students finance their own travel and study. In many more cases, local wealthy businessmen will donate money either through a mosque or religious leader, or directly to the student himself.

A second source of funding, even less common, is that of the sending government or state institution. Central Asian governments usually are unwilling or unable to spend scarce resources on religious study, especially abroad, although they do often play a purely bureaucratic role in facilitating or regulating foreign study. Although it's very rare, sometimes a government agency sends students abroad for training in a particular language and courses on Islam to develop proficiency in interpreting extremist texts.

Perhaps the single largest educational kind of funding source is private or semi-private foundations in third countries, such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Kuwaiti Sheikh Al-Babtain established a foundation that provides

scholarships to “the descendants of Imam Bukhari,” mostly students from Central Asia. Al-Babtain visited the region in the early 1990s and publicized his organization’s work. The Al-Babtain Foundation built three large dormitories in Cairo’s Madinat Nasr (Nasr City) for Azhar students. Each no-strings-attached scholarship covers airfare, tuition, and housing expenses, and provides a stipend. Kuwaiti charitable foundation Bait Al Zakat also provides financial assistance.

Most of the students who receive scholarships or other forms of financial aid are able to get by, if frugally, and study without having to earn extra money through employment. However, many students, especially those who bring families with them or start families abroad, seek other sources of income, such as providing translation services or traveling to Russia or other countries to work during vacation breaks.

### **The Return**

Returnees who embrace Islam can be divided into two categories—those who reintegrate into their families and communities, and those who strive to communicate their newfound Islamic education to society more broadly. Those in the first category tend to appreciate the fact that religious beliefs and practices in Central Asia are in many ways distinct from other parts of the Muslim world and believe that their home society gradually will find its own path to Islam.

Those in the second category actively proselytize what they learned about Islam abroad by parlaying the social capital accrued from studying abroad at prominent Islamic universities into an authoritative status. These individuals either form social networks of former students who share a similar educational background or attract disciples who have not studied abroad but who wish to learn from someone who has received much deeper Islamic training. One prominent imam at a mosque in Tajikistan’s second largest city, Khojand, observed that many of the students who study abroad had no religious background. Foreign Islamic universities such as Medina and Al Azhar do not tailor their curriculum to students from former Soviet countries except by requiring them to enroll in catch-up courses. Consequently, Central Asians who excel in their studies abroad know very

little about Islam in their own country, which differs significantly in its political and religious historical context from other predominantly Muslim societies. This paradox intensifies disparities in knowledge and the potential for conflict between those who studied Islam exclusively at home and those who studied it abroad.

Locally trained imams are hard-pressed to engage and provide reintegration courses taught at mosques for returning students. In some cases, returnees believe they would not benefit from these imams because of the imam's local education. Just as often, imams who take the initiative to propose such programs based on their understanding of students' needs find it difficult to obtain the required administrative and financial support from local authorities. Often, state or Muftiate-initiated programs, where they exist, are not adequately tailored to particular local circumstances.

Bissenova's (2005) singular study on Kazakhs at Al Azhar University paints a picture of a young generation of students embracing their Muslim identity abroad against the background of the religious revival taking place in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. These students from Kazakhstan make decisions about how to be Muslim, rationalizing their choices in the context of Egyptian, Arab, and international Islam surrounding them. The students do not simply imitate the beliefs and practices of Egyptian or other Muslims with whom they come into contact, but are much more selective, often isolating themselves from or rejecting foreign co-religionists. I found this also to be the case among students from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan who studied at Al Azhar.

For example, some emphasize correctness in the mechanics of Islamic practice, such as how to pray or focus on appearances, such as beard length and clothing. Most returning students of Islam condemn the common Central Asian practice of visiting and praying at sacred sites such as shrines of saints as contrary to true Islam. The more activist among them seek to dissuade Muslims from visiting these shrines and, in some cases, even vandalize them.

The claim that a number of popular Islamic traditions indigenous to Central Asia are un-Islamic is not solely an imported stance. Returnees tend overwhelmingly to accept these claims. Spiritual administrations, or state-

supported ulema, throughout Central Asia also discourage some traditional practices, although they rarely enforce Islamically appropriate behavior. While this shared view might be partly a political response by official clerics to outflank growing Salafist influences upon the religious revival, it has deeper roots in Soviet efforts to redefine “authentic Islam.”

Nearly all returning students are concerned with how to spread Islam’s moral teachings in their society or apply it in their own lives. Regardless of how they choose to apply their education, returning students with “Islamic knowledge” are reconstituting old communities (through establishing home schools and expending social capital accrued from having studied Islam and lived in more “authentically” Muslim societies), and forming some new communities (e.g., Salafis, Tablighis, Gulenists, and Nurcis, to list some of those few that have labels). The conditions and activities of returning students specific to each of the three countries examined in this paper are explored in the next section.

## Country Studies

### Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is facing a crisis of religious expertise. Too many qualified clerics and scholars of Islam cannot find jobs and too many of those who occupy jobs in education, religious leadership, and religious oversight are inadequately trained to keep up with changing spiritual needs and the growing knowledge of their constituents. This crisis is due to several factors, including the Ministry of Education's refusal to recognize diplomas in religious education received overseas. For example, a student who returns from Egypt's Al Azhar University with 10 or more years of study behind him is technically not allowed to take a full-time teaching position at a school or university, unless he also has fulfilled the degree requirements in Kyrgyzstan. He can teach in a madrassa or work for the State Agency on Religious Affairs (SARA), the Muftiate, as an advisor to the President, or as an imam in a mosque (see appendix, Table 5). Some students return and offer courses on Islam outside of state institutions, that is, illegally.

Currently, there are a number of institutions where Kyrgyzstani citizens can legally receive an Islamic education. These include the Islamic University in Bishkek, six Islamic institutes, the theology departments of four universities, and 30–40 functioning madrassas (see appendix, Table 4). New legislation signed into law in January 2009 requires that the Muftiate approve all instructors of Islam and forbids all private lessons. This means that there are now no legal avenues to receiving Islamic instruction prior to the age of 14. Some organizations and individual instructors have found ways to circumvent this by offering courses to children on morality, ethics, civics, etc., but technically they cannot teach religion. Although the Muftiate offers direction on religious study abroad, it does not have the financial resources to provide scholarships. Consequently, the vast majority of students from Kyrgyzstan who study abroad go through non-state channels, such as those mentioned in Section II.

Most clerics had only limited training in the Soviet period. In 2006, SARA, the Muftiate, and Osh State's Theology Department initiated a collaborative project to provide curriculum and methodology training workshops for Kyrgyzstani imams of all ages. Having conducted a religious education survey, they found that 90 percent of imams had little or no training in *tafsir*, *hadith*, and study of the Koran, while the remaining 10 percent had received some formal education, all in the former Soviet Union. According to the organizers, 240 or nearly 10 percent of the country's imams participated in the training (based on the estimate that one imam serves each of Kyrgyzstan's 2500 functioning mosques).

The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, or Muftiate, which is technically an independent body from the state, has staff who have studied in Pakistan, Kuwait, Egypt, and Turkey. The Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan was established in 1993, a few years after independence and the dissolution of the position of Mufti of Central Asia based in Tashkent. The institution's primary responsibilities include overseeing a network of religious leaders in the country's regions and cities, supporting religious education and knowledge acquisition, and supervising Kyrgyzstan's approximately 4500 annual Hajj pilgrims.

Similarly, some of those working for SARA have also studied abroad, including at Al Azhar in Egypt. SARA is responsible for overseeing the application of laws on religion, including the registration of religious organizations. One official told me that he has found the education and orientation of students returning from most countries, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, to be generally acceptable, although he added that no institutions are currently directing anyone to study in Pakistan. Those who do go to Pakistan tend to travel on tourist visas and then stay to study. SARA believes that there is a need to develop a formal evaluation of Islamic education to check problems of extremism and aggressive proselytism. Consequently, the agency has proposed that the government institute a mandatory world religions and cultures course for grades 9–11 in all schools.

Returning students who find jobs in the government do not necessarily have, and are not required to have, secular views. One student, who returned from

three years at Al Azhar, initially went abroad through his university program to improve his Arabic skills, but became more religious during his course of study. The Kyrgyz government does not prevent hiring of even very religious individuals who are active in promoting Islamic knowledge such as through non-governmental organizations offering courses. As in all cases, one needs the right connections to secure a job.

The largest institutional and official channel for Kyrgyzstani students to study abroad is Osh State University's Theology Department, located in Kyrgyzstan's second largest city, in the south, and its affiliate in Arashan, outside of Bishkek.<sup>10</sup> By a three-way agreement between Osh, Ankara University's Theology Department (Ilohiyat Facultesi) in Turkey, and the Diyanet Foundation of the Republic of Turkey, Osh State theology undergraduate students spend their first year at Ankara University in Turkey followed by four years at Osh. According to Osh's Theology Department Dean, the university has sent more than 300 of its own students to Ankara University since the program's founding in 1993. The program initially entailed a three year course of study at Ankara University, but was later reduced to two years abroad and then one. Currently there are about 60 Kyrgyzstani students (40 male and 20 female) studying at Ankara. Upon finishing the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree, visiting students can opt to pursue graduate degrees, and some choose to do so at Ankara. Several students have completed PhDs with specializations in *tafsir*, *hadith*, and Islamic law, and have found teaching positions in the Theology Department at Osh.

Osh has plans to lengthen its course of study to six years to accommodate a program on morality (*adep savoghi*). The goal of this added program is to prepare graduates to introduce religious studies classes into schools throughout the Kyrgyz Republic, provided a new law on religious education passes. According to the department's dean, Osh's Theology Department would like to take the lead in providing trained teachers to the schools and finding jobs for its graduates. Presently, only a small percentage of the department's graduates in theology find jobs in this field, but the fact that

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<sup>10</sup> Arashan, which operates under a different agreement, sends its theology students to Marmara University in Istanbul, but students must find their own funding.

their program is accredited means that they are better positioned to get jobs than are graduates of foreign universities.

Interviews with those currently studying at Ankara revealed that the first generation of students knew virtually nothing about Islam and many even had a negative attitude about religion, since they had received their school education in the Soviet period and many of their families did not practice Islam at home. Despite their limited religious background and acknowledgement by several students that they were unfamiliar with the term “theology,” students were drawn to the Osh-Ankara program because it offered them an opportunity to travel to Turkey. One interviewee claimed that Ankara University is most interested in having students who know the least about Islam because it is easier to teach them the fundamentals of the religions, according to the Turkish understanding. With the passage of time and interest in Islam growing in Kyrgyzstan, the level of knowledge about the religion is becoming more profound. In addition to the Osh State and Arashan programs, Kyrgyzstani universities offer limited theology programs at Arabaev Kyrgyz State University, Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University, and Kyrgyz Turkish Manas University.

The percentage of returning students who find jobs in related work is rather small and those with degrees from Turkish universities have the best chance. There are some exceptions, however, such as the kazy of Issyk Kul province (oblast), who studied at Al Azhar University.<sup>11</sup> Most of the country’s kazys received their religious education in Kyrgyzstan. There are roughly 1000 students at Kyrgyzstan’s 35–40 functioning madrassas, 350 at six Islamic institutes, and 350 at the Islamic University (150 male and 200 female students). Roughly 50 percent of Islamic University students do not graduate and a similar percentage do not finish at the madrassas and institutes, no doubt largely due to the fact that the Ministry of Education does not recognize their diplomas. Reportedly, only about two percent (or about 30 graduates) find jobs related to Islam.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In contemporary Kyrgyzstan a kazy serves as a municipal or provincial spiritual administrator within the Muftiate structure.

<sup>12</sup> These figures are not precise and are based on a range of sources, including the Muftiate, Islamic University, madrassas, and Islamic education NGOs and experts.

The majority, however, must turn to unrelated occupations for their livelihood, usually in the private sector, including using foreign contacts or compatriots abroad to engage in trade and other forms of business. A few entrepreneurial former students set up NGOs that provide foreign language instruction in Arabic and Koranic courses. The Bishkek-based NGO Adep Bashati (“source of morality”) is one such organization, founded by a former Al Azhar student of ten years. Adep Bashati’s goal is to promote the true understanding of Islam, based on the idea that science and morality are products of faith. The organization’s director believes that Kyrgyzstan needs Central Asian-style Muslims and that there is a strong need for organizations like his to provide educational opportunities that draw on the country’s classical and ancestral heritage. Financed entirely by local sponsors, the organization offers Islamic seminars and lessons for university-level students and adults. The NGO also operates a nursery school that emphasizes morality and civics, but not religious instruction. Adep Bashati has several branch offices and programs in other cities and regions in Kyrgyzstan.

There are other organizations in Kyrgyzstan that strive to fill some of the educational niches that are otherwise neglected. Iman Bakyt, an NGO with affiliates around the country, offers courses to women on the Koran and Islamic morals. Bishkek-based Ashar sends 10 students from among its staff each year to Al Azhar. Mutaqalim is a human rights NGO that has advocated for the right of women to wear the hijab in official photographs such as in passports and at school. The focus of these organizations is on religious education and religious rights rather than political transformation. While the vast majority of returning students from abroad desire that Kyrgyzstan be a more Islamic society, there is little consensus about what such a society in Kyrgyzstan should look like or about the relationship between Islam and the state.

## **Uzbekistan**

According to the Muftiate and other sources, by the mid-1990s, there were roughly 5000 functioning mosques of various sizes throughout Uzbekistan,

although an unknown number of these were mahalla, or neighborhood mosques, which did not offer the more highly attended Friday prayers. This number has shrunk to around 2000 registered mosques.<sup>13</sup>

Currently, there are 11 institutions of Islamic learning in Uzbekistan—the Imam Bukhari Higher Islamic Institute with about 200 students and 10 madrassas, which collectively enroll about 1250 students annually. Students from across the country may enroll in one of the eight madrassas for male students and two for female, beginning at the age of 15. Upon completion of four years at a madrassa, students may continue study at the Islamic Institute. According to one source, there is a program that annually selects five to six students from the top male madrassa students for study at Al Azhar University. This may be the only Uzbek government-sponsored program that supports religious study abroad. Reportedly, students also travel abroad through programs at the Islamic University, Tashkent State University's Oriental Studies Institute, and the Egyptian Cultural Center in Tashkent, although none of these institutions support religious study, but rather Arabic language training such as at Al Shams and Cairo universities in Egypt (see appendix, Table 3).

The government of Uzbekistan does not recognize diplomas earned for Islamic study at foreign institutions and does not encourage such study. Nevertheless, each year Uzbekistanis find opportunities to travel abroad for religious study. Increasingly, students feel obliged to apply for permission (an exit visa) to study abroad and this is often granted, although the process entails a certain amount of vetting of the applicant for extremist or anti-state tendencies before approval is given.

In the early to mid-1990s, Uzbekistan was an attractive underground study destination for Muslims from neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan seeking religious instruction. A relatively large and active community sprang up which was offered an unofficial education by popular Muslim preachers. If those wishing to learn more about Islam could not actually take instruction from the teachers themselves, they could listen to the growing number of

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<sup>13</sup> Gaziev, Azizullah. 2004. Islamic Education in Southern Kazakhstan, Southern Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Unpublished paper for the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), cited here with the author's permission.

sermons and lectures on tapes, videocassettes, and DVDs that were in wide circulation. Weddings, funerals, and other lifecycle events have also become platforms for unofficial sermonizing and popular preachers will draw large crowds of uninvited visitors.

One ethnic Uzbek student from southern Kyrgyzstan boarded at a madrassa (probably *hujra*, or unofficial religious school) in Andijon in 1995. Even though his family was very religious—his grandfather had been executed during Soviet times for religious activity—his father took him out of the school when the son began “dressing like a wahhabi.” Later, the son went to Osh State University and continued in a doctoral program at Ankara University. By the end of the 1990s, however, a number of prominent religious teachers had been arrested, had disappeared, or fled Uzbekistan, with the situation becoming too dangerous for them to stay. In a kind of reversal, Uzbekistanis from the Fergana Valley have pursued Islamic knowledge just across the border in southern Kyrgyzstan, where there is a large ethnic Uzbek population. From there, it is easier for citizens of Uzbekistan to travel to other countries without the hassles of state scrutiny.

The short history of students from Uzbekistan traveling abroad to study Islam in the post-Soviet period has reflected more closely than elsewhere extreme shifts in state policy, both foreign and domestic. These shifts have occurred largely in response to the rise of radical Islamic movements in the 1990s, several terrorist attacks, including against President Islom Karimov in 1999, and growing religiosity among the country’s populace. President Karimov’s continued hold on power since independence has afforded his government opportunities to develop and shape national Islamic institutions of higher education in its evolving interest. This contrasts with Kyrgyzstan, where President Kurmanbek Bakiev assumed the presidency only in 2005, and Tajikistan, which underwent a civil war throughout most of the 1990s before President Emomali Rahmon was able to make progress in consolidating power and turn his attention to affairs of peacetime religion and religious politics.

Karimov sporadically has used religious symbolism throughout his tenure by making the pilgrimage to Mecca during Uzbekistan’s first year of independence, restoring Islamic heritage sites that had been desecrated

during the Soviet years, establishing a limited network of Islamic educational institutions, etc. More often than not, these initiatives occurred during brief periods of political security. The emergence of extremist movements (1991 and again in the late 1990s) and terrorist attacks (1999 and 2004), on the other hand, have tended to produce repressive measures such as widespread interrogations and arrests, mosque closures, and recalls of students studying abroad. In this way, fluctuations in political stability have influenced study abroad.

On January 16–17, 1992, students at Tashkent State University protested that they were not receiving adequate stipends to cover rising food prices. The government responded with violence and temporarily closed the university. Within weeks, the government sent students who were non-residents of Tashkent to study at institutions in their home regions. This policy of dispersing this potentially destabilizing constituency involved transforming provincial pedagogical and other institutes into provincial versions of universities in Tashkent, thereby reducing the need for students from other regions to study in Tashkent. Students were also encouraged to continue their studies in a range of other countries with which the newly independent Uzbekistan was establishing relations. The government of Uzbekistan did not have the financial resources to offer scholarships at that early stage, but it was receptive to students accepting scholarships to study in countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

In February of that year, with the financial help of an Arab sponsor, 40 Uzbekistani students headed off to Karachi, Pakistan, ostensibly to study computer science and commerce. When they arrived, they found themselves attending classes on Islam in a non-descript three-storey building. About ten of the students had some background in Islam and regarded the instruction they were receiving as overly rigid and intolerant. They contacted their government and asked for assistance in returning home, although it took five months for the fledgling government to fly them back to Tashkent. Around the same time, 28 other students were sent to the University of Medina, and despite rumors that they were embracing “Wahhabism,” it took much longer for Tashkent to bring them home. Several stayed in Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup> These

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<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, April 15, 2009.

two examples of how study of Islam abroad took off in the early years of independent Uzbekistan illustrate how relatively lax the government was in allowing educational sponsorship for programs it considers extremist. Receiving the Uzbek government's approval to participate in such programs today is unthinkable.

Over time the government of Uzbekistan became savvier about controlling study abroad programs and the growing interest in Islam throughout society. Consequently, incidents when the government has failed to investigate a program before approving student participation are virtually unheard of today. The government of Uzbekistan is much more cautious about sending students anywhere and has developed the wherewithal to pressure students to return home should relations with a destination country turn sour. Following a long-lived rift in Uzbek-Turkish relations, in 1997 the Uzbek government recalled 2000 students from Turkey. In 2000, Tashkent closed all Turkish schools in Uzbekistan, most of which followed the principles of Turkish theologian and philosopher Fethullah Gülen. The rift in relations occurred as the result of Tashkent's anger at Turkey for harboring opposition candidate and harsh critic of the Karimov regime Mohammed Solih, and was not due to state concerns about Turkish schools fostering Islamic extremism.

Despite continuing to be popular and thriving elsewhere in Central Asia, the Turkish schools never reopened. More recently, in September 2008, the Uzbek government arrested a group of native Uzbek "Gülenist" (aka Nurcu) alumni for promoting an extremist ideology. These strange arrests more than ten years after the schools' closure were likely also due to Uzbek-Turkish politics since there is no history of activism among alumni. Tashkent continues to be wary of Ankara's efforts to extend its influence into Central Asia, sometimes under the rubric of pan-Turkism.<sup>15</sup>

Relations between the two countries never returned to their pre-1996 level. While the Turkish schools did not offer religious instruction and were based

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<sup>15</sup> Effective as of August 2007, Turkey abolished its visa requirement for citizens of Uzbekistan. The Uzbek leadership may regard this as an example of further meddling in Tashkent's efforts to control the relationship, including its ability to identify how many and which citizens travel to Turkey. See Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Central Asia: Turkey Lifts Visa Requirement for Post-Soviet States," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 31, 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1077906.html>

in Uzbekistan (not abroad), they functioned as a stepping stone for Uzbekistani students interested in further study in Turkey, including the study of Islam. Their closure terminated this particular path to foreign study and consequently has reduced the number of Uzbekistanis studying in Turkey in general.<sup>16</sup>

Tashkent's concern about the spread of Islamic extremism on its territory affected students of Islam in other countries as well. For example, in 1996, Tashkent sent a plane to Egypt to bring home those studying at Al Azhar University. One Uzbek student from Namangan had been studying at Al Azhar for three years before being recalled. He was one of 31 students from Uzbekistan who had received a Bibtain scholarship to study in Turkey in 1994. Typical of many Central Asian students abroad at that time, he had gone to Egypt to learn Arabic and, prior to arriving in Cairo, was not aware that Islam was taught there, let alone that he was heading to the world's preeminent institution for the study of Islam.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the impact of Uzbekistan's policy shifts on religious study abroad, three trends have remained somewhat consistent since 1991. The first is the growing religiosity of the population. The second is the continuing stream of students heading abroad for religious study. The third is the steadily growing involvement of the state in religious affairs and, by extension, the involvement of religious affairs in the state. This last point is one of the great ironies of Uzbekistan's current Islamic revival. The constitutionally established and self-proclaimed secular state's increasing role in religious affairs and its attempts to control the Islamic revival is actually serving to accelerate the latter.

The state's engagement with Islam via restrictive laws and decrees, on the one hand, and celebrations of Islamic history and heritage and construction of sites to commemorate that heritage on the other, is contributing to the

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<sup>16</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, "The Trifurcated Islam of Central Asia: A Turkish Perspective," pp. 109-144, in *Asian Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by John Esposito, John Voll, and Osman Bakar (Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Iveta Silova, "Reclaiming the Empire: Turkish Education Initiatives in Central Asia and Azerbaijan," Pp. 173-191, in *South-South Cooperation in Education and Development*, edited by Linda Chisholm and Gita Steiner-Khamsi (New York: Teachers College Press).

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication, March 25, 2009.

Islamization of state and society. A vast amount of the state's resources are linked to projects dealing with religion, whether security personnel, the bureaucracy, or academia. Local state and national organs have wrested control of financing for the restoration of Islamic shrines and monuments from local businessmen. The Muftiate, which is unofficially controlled by the government, censors Islamic literature and has propagated rules governing the proper way to worship at sacred sites. Muslim clerics are monitored by the Uzbek State National Security Service, especially during Friday prayer when they have their largest audiences. Finally, the government has replaced many of the older imams with locally trained younger clerics whom it hopes will be more loyal to the government and adhere closely to government approved sermons. Few of these clerics have studied abroad.

Despite the limits of official or self-censored public dialogue on Islam, the Uzbek state does not have the resources to reverse the direction of the current trend toward Islamization. Instead, and for now, the state has cut a deal with Uzbekistan's clerics. The clerics will be allowed to make money by officiating at ritual events provided they do not criticize the state in their sermons. This very temporary social contract, however, has already shown signs of shredding. As the religious trend continues to grow, the most popular imams are those who will find more genuine and creative paths to addressing their audiences' spiritual needs, irrespective of state restrictions. Those who have studied abroad will raise popular expectations of sermon quality. More practically, however, the political elite will likely fear the growth of a prosperous "priestly class" in a patron-client state where prosperity and power go hand in hand. The July assault on and near-assassination of one of Tashkent's leading imams, Anvar-kori Tursunov, allegedly for his financial dealings, may be the best example of this shaky balancing act.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Uzbekistan: 'Wanted' Posters All Over Tashkent," September 22, 2009, <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2574>

## Tajikistan

While all three of the countries included in this study are distinct from one another in terms of the state's approach to Islam, youth motivation for going abroad to study Islam, and student experiences upon their return home, Tajikistan may be the most complex. Five plus years of a civil war and its aftermath; a short-term power-sharing agreement between the government and the United Tajik Opposition, which included prominent Muslim religious leaders; Central Asia's only religious political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT); and close linguistic and cultural ties to Shiite Iran—all are factors that have contributed to a relatively healthy (for the region) public debate concerning the role of Islam in state and society. Tajiks enjoy greater openness and a willingness to discuss Islamic-secular tensions (something which Uzbekistan's climate of fear stifles) and the country possess a more active and internationally-connected Muslim clergy than exists in Kyrgyzstan.

Close ties to Iran contribute to Tajikistan's political and religious complexity. Tajiks, Iranians, and a large minority of Afghans share a mutually comprehensible language. Whereas Iranians are predominantly Shi'ite Muslims, most Tajiks follow Sunni Islam which they share in common with their Central Asian Turkic neighbors to the west and north. Tajikistan's 10 percent Shi'ite minority are Ismaili Shi'a and do not identify with Iran's mainstream Twelver, or Imami, Shiites. Nevertheless, Tajiks are studying in both Iran's center of Shi'ite learning in Qom and in the predominantly Sunni city of Zahedon, Baluchistan. For now, these differences have manifested themselves primarily only as factions within the narrow sphere of the internal politics of the IRPT. Given the decades-long absence of religious education during Soviet rule, however, Sunni and Shi'a differences could play out as identity politics in local communities or on the national political stage should large numbers of students continue to study in Iran and then return to Tajikistan.

The government of Tajikistan is only beginning to develop a national plan for religious education. Currently, religious education in Tajikistan consists of about 18 madrassas located throughout the country. All madrassas must be registered with the government. The nominally independent but

government-appointed Council of Ulema functions, as muftiates do, in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Each of the madrassas reportedly admits male and female students, although classes are gender-segregated. The Imam Azam Abu Hanafi Islamic Institute, established in 2007, now has over 900 students, 10 percent of whom are women. The Institute is striving to regain its university status in the next few years, once it reaches its targeted capacity of 1500 students spread over the five-year program. Also, in May 2009 the government officially opened the “secular-religious” Imam Abu Hanifa high school, partly funded, until 2010, by the government of Switzerland. This unique school, which began operating in fall 2008, had 20 students studying Islamic subjects as well as languages, literature, and science. State-run university philosophy departments teach religious studies, history of Islamic philosophy, and political science that includes political Islam. Religious studies once existed as a separate discipline, but around 1999 it was abolished and related courses were incorporated into philosophy departments.

In addition to these limited official options, many students attend classes at local mosques or receive private instruction. Private lessons are illegal, but widespread, although religion instructors with a deep knowledge of Islam are few and even some of the best educated admit that what they can offer in Tajikistan cannot compare with an education at Al Azhar or Medina universities. Older religious leaders, who were able to obtain a religious education during the Soviet period by studying with widely respected “underground” teachers and who even supplemented their knowledge with additional education abroad, continue to command authority in Tajikistan. Their knowledge of Islamic sources and their interpretation may not be as deep as that of students who have studied at prestigious universities abroad, but their relationships to the individuals and families that constitute the roots of Central Asia’s Islamic scholarship pre-dating the Soviet period still matters.

Given Tajikistan’s economic dependence on vast numbers of its citizens traveling abroad to work and remit money home,<sup>19</sup> the government is unable

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<sup>19</sup> Different sources estimate that between 350,000 and 1.5 million Tajik citizens out of a total population of 7.3 million are working abroad, seasonally or on a longer term basis.

and unwilling to exercise control over Tajikistanis' foreign travel in general.<sup>20</sup> There are more students of Islam from Tajikistan abroad than from any other country in Central Asia. Al Azhar reported 156 Tajikistani students enrolled in its university degree level program alone, and some estimates range as high as 1000 Tajiks overall at religious institutions in Egypt. The numbers of Tajikistanis in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran far surpass estimates of the number of students from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>21</sup> In 2000, after the political situation in Tajikistan had stabilized, the Pakistani government expelled 700 Tajiks, many from religious schools.<sup>22</sup> According to the press, a 2005 Pakistani Ministry of Interior report on madrassas cited 22 students from Kyrgyzstan and seven from Tajikistan studying in Pakistani madrassas. However, in 2009 there were an estimated 300 Tajik students in Pakistan, and as of August, the Tajik government was working to reduce that number.<sup>23</sup>

In August 2009, Iran deported for visa violations at least 20 Tajik citizens, possibly at the request of Tajikistan.<sup>24</sup> The government in Dushanbe is concerned that these students were subject to extremist influences. At least half of these were studying in the Makki medrassa in Zahedon.<sup>25</sup> Sources indicate that there are still hundreds of Tajiks in Iran, although the vast majority studies in secular fields.

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Different sources assessed that overseas migrant labor remittances to Tajikistan in 2008 constituted between 35 and 50% of GDP.

<sup>20</sup> The government has begun discussing efforts to control Islamic study abroad, possibly through bilateral agreements about education, but this is only in a nascent stage. See "Tajikistan Readies Plan to Control Islamic Studies Abroad," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, [January 14, 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajikistan\\_Readies\\_Plan\\_To\\_Control\\_Islamic\\_Studies\\_Abroad/1929588.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajikistan_Readies_Plan_To_Control_Islamic_Studies_Abroad/1929588.html)

<sup>21</sup> See Table 1.

<sup>22</sup> Anora Sarkorova, "Why Iran deported Tajik religious students," January 9, 2009, [BBCRussian.com \(www.inosmi.ru\)](http://www.inosmi.ru)

<sup>23</sup> "Tajiks See No Political Motives Behind Iran Deportations," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 1, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajiks\\_See\\_No\\_Political\\_Motives\\_Behind\\_Iran\\_Deportations/1812586.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajiks_See_No_Political_Motives_Behind_Iran_Deportations/1812586.html); see also "Tajik Ambassador Says Youth Should Not Study Islam in Pakistan," August 20, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik\\_Ambassador\\_Says\\_Youth\\_Should\\_Not\\_Study\\_Islam\\_In\\_Pakistan/1804265.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Ambassador_Says_Youth_Should_Not_Study_Islam_In_Pakistan/1804265.html)

<sup>24</sup> Anora Sarkorova, "Why Iran deported Tajik religious students."

<sup>25</sup> Zahedon's Makki madrassa is reputed to have ties to members of terrorist organizations such as the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and Islamic Union of Uzbekistan (IMU).

Given these high numbers, especially in proportion to the overall population, the question of what kind of impact these students will have on Tajikistan is potentially significant. One can assume that the large number of Tajiks studying Islam abroad is mostly a reflection of the current economic conditions in Tajikistan today; that is, slowing economic growth (2.5% in 2009 down from 8% in 2008), high unemployment, rampant corruption, and low foreign investment. Many Tajiks are looking for ways to leave the country, and study abroad is one option. Most Tajiks who seek educational opportunities abroad are not flocking to Islamic programs in particular. However, the numbers are high across the board, and a higher proportion of those who study religion abroad return home, compared to their countrymen in secular programs.

During the civil war, thousands of Tajik refugees fled across the border to Afghanistan. Many traveled further to Pakistan or else remained in Afghanistan and enrolled their children in schools in Pakistan. Pakistan's madrassas often provide free room, board, and tuition to students from families who cannot afford to send their children to state-run schools and feed them at home. By 2000, the political situation in Tajikistan had stabilized and the Pakistani government was no longer interested in harboring so many refugees.

In 2008, President Rahmon went to Egypt as part of a larger series of tours to Arab countries to build deeper economic ties and attract investment. During his visit, he spoke to an audience that included hundreds of Tajik students enrolled at Al Azhar and in affiliated programs. Rahmon, reportedly surprised to learn how many Tajiks were studying at a university renowned for its Islamic education, told the Tajiks in his audience that they should not expect their government to build a mosque for each one of them. One brave and outspoken student responded by saying that not all the students are studying Islam to become an imam, implying that they just want to be educated in their religion. A Tajik scholar offered a different perspective on the Rahmon trip, suggesting that Rahmon returned home from this trip with the understanding that Tajik students of religion in Egypt could not be equated with radicals, but nevertheless called for an expansion of educational agreements with Egypt in all fields, especially secular ones.

The fact that many of the Tajiks who study religion abroad do so for economic as well as religious reasons means that their residency status is less secure and they are more vulnerable to deportation for visa violations (e.g., Egypt, Iran, Pakistan) or the imposition of immigration quotas during economic slowdowns (e.g., Russia, Ukraine). This puts the Tajik government in the position of seeking more destinations whither to export labor. Most of the governments to which Dushanbe has reached out in recent years have been in Muslim-majority countries. Consequently, as the Tajik government creates more options for its citizens to travel abroad, including for an Islamic education, and as more people take advantage of these opportunities, the number of those returning home with an Islamic education that they cannot put to use also increases. Some returnees leave Tajikistan for employment abroad when they see there are no prospects for them at home, but this option decreased significantly in 2008 due to the global economic crisis.<sup>26</sup>

The job opportunities for returning students are very limited and the government has shut numerous unregistered mosques, mosque schools, and madrassas over the last few years. The government does not recognize foreign diplomas in religious studies. The Committee on Religious Affairs used to send students to Al Azhar, but stopped in 2004 because the Tajik government believes the students need a secular dimension to their religious studies. Since then there have been no official programs sponsoring students in religious education abroad. Some returning students find jobs in mosques and madrassas or informally offer private religion lessons.

Most returnees turn to business as an occupation, either by joining their family business or starting their own. For example, a string of currency exchange booths along Dushanbe's main Rudaki Street are run by religiously observant men who have adopted Pakistani garb, sporting long beards and Islamic skullcaps. Referred to as "salafists," at least by outsiders, these businessmen combine Islam and international ties to establish successful businesses through social networking.

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<sup>26</sup> Remittances in 2009 were reportedly down by about 30% compared with 2008 and several sources reported that mosques, normally empty during the spring-fall labor migration season, were full.

Not all returnees are as successful in using new social networks based on foreign experiences to build a business. One student raised the money to pay his own way to get to Egypt in the mid-1990s at the age of 14 to escape the civil war. After three years of studying Arabic, he spent another five years at Al Azhar studying Islamic and international law. He explained that he had little knowledge of Islam when he left Tajikistan and returned home very observant. Still unemployed several years after his return, he is considering starting his own mining business based on family ties in the mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region. Another former student, who spent over 11 years in Egypt and one of a very small number to receive his Master's degree in Islamic law and secular law, has worked in local and international NGOs on projects related to Islam since returning to Dushanbe. While the process for receiving credit for a foreign degree is not straightforward, he is hoping that his Azhar degree will be recognized once he takes a special state accreditation exam.

As in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the ways in which a religious education abroad shapes Islamic practices and attitudes can lead to tensions and even conflict. A large number of the hundreds of young Tajiks who returned from studying Islam in Pakistan during the civil war in the 1990s created their own socio-religious network. After living in Afghanistan or Pakistan for much of their youth, they spoke Tajik, but did not know Cyrillic, the Russian script in which the Tajik language is written. They had embraced Pakistani modes of dress and prayer, which differentiates them in public from those who grew up in Tajikistan. Tajiks who had never left the country, whether or not they are religious, view these alien practices as politically provocative and often accuse their co-religionists of "Salafism," or religious extremism. Moreover, those who learned about their religion abroad had been taught that a number of practices common throughout Central Asia, especially the rituals widely observed at saints' shrines and other sacred sites, are un-Islamic.<sup>27</sup> These social boundaries have contributed to growing social rifts within the post-Soviet generation of Tajik youth.

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<sup>27</sup> David M. Abramson and Elyor E. Karimov, "Sacred Sites, Profane Ideologies: Religious Pilgrimage and the Uzbek State," in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, edited by Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

The resulting alienation of the Salafists united them into a movement that challenged the older generation of established religious leaders who still command religious authority in Tajikistan. Having helped lead the opposition during the civil war, the influential Turajonzoda family is a perfect example of the older generation of religious leaders. They still have a remarkable degree of autonomy and a large and loyal following.<sup>28</sup> The government found the newly mobilized Salafists to be a willing instrument in its efforts to diminish the authority of both the Turajonzoda family and the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan. While the government stood quietly by, Salafists launched a media campaign to discredit the IRPT and leading cleric Eshon Nuriddin Turajonzoda on theological grounds. The Salafists' power play and the government's divide and conquer strategy backfired when Eshon Nuriddin accused the government of fostering Salafism, which in the local political context is equivalent to calling it Wahhabist or extremist. After a series of public recriminations and counter recriminations, the government backed off and, on January 8, 2009, Tajikistan's Supreme Court banned "the Salafi religious movement's activities."<sup>29</sup>

The Salafism issue may be under control now that the government has ceased playing that particular political game. Some analyses of this set of events point to the Tajik government's tenuous power in controlling religious movements. These events, however, suggest a more complicated explanation in which the government played an active role in a political arena in which there were multiple interests. The speed with which the Salafist campaign was organized suggests that they had assistance, likely from the government. At the very least, the government did not act to stop them until well after their campaign had gotten underway. Meanwhile, since the beginning of 2009, Tajik security services have increased actions against

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<sup>28</sup> Thousands of worshippers attend Eshon Nuriddin Turajonzoda's weekly sermon at the family's compound in Turkobod, just 12 miles to the east of Dushanbe. Dushanbe has sought to undermine the Turajonzodas' authority, but it is clear that the government is loath to go too far, lest its actions provoke unmanageable unrest.

<sup>29</sup> Farangis Najibullah, "Salafi Ban Reflects Tajik Officials' Growing Fear," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 9, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Salafi\\_Ban\\_Reflects\\_Tajik\\_Officials\\_Growing\\_Fear/1368347.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Salafi_Ban_Reflects_Tajik_Officials_Growing_Fear/1368347.html)

other transnational religious groups like Tablighi Jamaat and political organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir by arresting dozens of members.

For the next few years at least, Tajikistan's unofficial religious elites will continue to occupy a position of respect within Tajik society. It is likely that the government will continue to develop Islamic educational institutions under its control whose graduates it hopes will serve the state by teaching newly established mandatory high school level "Knowledge of Islam" courses.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, the number of students returning from abroad with more sophisticated training in Islam, combined with growing popular demand for religious education starting from childhood, will continue to challenge the government to offer its increasingly religious population more opportunities to learn about and practice Islam. If the government does not meet these challenges adequately, it will have to contend with a growing movement of underground religious education, likely taught by those educated abroad.

Eventually, unless Dushanbe provides ways to integrate returning students successfully, one should expect to see an ever-growing gap within the post-Soviet generation of religious leaders and teachers between those trained unofficially abroad and those who graduate from official institutions in Tajikistan. As the older generation of religious leaders ages and passes on, it cannot be assumed that they will easily pass the mantle of authority to those newly trained in Tajikistan, exacerbating an already emergent crisis of Islamic authority that the state is ill-prepared to address.

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<sup>30</sup> Farangis Najibullah, "Islam Becomes Mandatory in Secular Tajik Schools," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 31, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Islam\\_Becomes\\_Mandatory\\_Study\\_in\\_Secular\\_Tajik\\_Schools/1811693.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Islam_Becomes_Mandatory_Study_in_Secular_Tajik_Schools/1811693.html)

## Future Directions

One can in the future expect to see more students studying Islam abroad, which is a likely, but unintended, consequence of Central Asian governments' current trend toward building closer ties with the Middle East. The global recession and Central Asia's Islamic revival will likely augment this process. Thus far, government efforts to provide Islamic education are insufficient to "catch up" with growing demand and to control Islamic knowledge. If corruption in the public school system and universities is as rampant as numerous sources suggest, then why should state-run institutions of religious education be any different? Students will continue to seek religious education where they can, but it is widely acknowledged that what the governments provide is substandard, both in spirit and substance. Moreover, if religious education is not integrated into public educational institutions or if supplementary religious education for youths under the age of 13 or 14 continues to be unavailable, private and illegal religious training as well as foreign religious education will fill the gap. Students returning with considerable religious training behind them and no job prospects ahead will be likely candidates to meet this need.

Over the next 20 years, as a post-Soviet generation of leaders succeeds the current ones, a cultural shift already underway will become more apparent. Twenty or even 10 years ago a Muslim identity was equated with national or ethnic identity. Today, however, belief in God and some demonstration of piety is taken for granted. As the first post-Soviet generation enters positions of national leadership, we will witness a change in attitude and policy toward Islam. Even if the region's future political leaders themselves will not be more religiously observant, they probably will be savvier about policies concerning religion. This should entail making better use of returning students' theological expertise and international awareness while ensuring freedom to believe or not to believe, practice or not to practice. It might also involve making available religious education that complements, rather than

competes with, a secular education in terms of ideology and the time spent in the classroom. Third, the incorporation of overseas Islamic training into domestic programs would help standardize and enrich religious education while allowing governments to monitor systematically foreign programs for extremist content.

Generally, those who return with a foreign education, whether in religious or secular subjects, will doubtless have a broader grasp of Islam than when they left. As Bissenova (cited above) observed, identity, culture, and politics all influence how students abroad view what they are learning and what they bring home with them. The political and social conditions they encounter upon returning home influence their ideological orientation as much as what they learn abroad. In other words, the notion that the study of Islam abroad *per se* poses a threat to political stability—i.e., that returnees will “import” dangerous “foreign” ideas willy-nilly to Central Asia—is misconceived. The practice of Islam is changing in Central Asia because the Soviet Union and its socialist ideology collapsed. Those who have a foreign Islamic education will play a role in redefining the relationship between Islam and the state and between Islam and society. What role they play depends in a large part on state policies.

Those who have both a solid grounding in local Islam and possess a more in-depth and international understanding of Islam will be best equipped to counter extremist threats to political stability. While it sounds trite to say that Central Asia is at a crossroads, the cultural shift in popular religious attitudes embodied by the first post-Soviet generation is forcing leaders in the region to reconcile their societies’ increasing engagement with global trends and their own insular understanding of Islam. How quickly and effectively they adapt to these trends will help determine the growth and sustainability of political Islam in their countries.

To whom will Central Asian leaders turn for the required expertise? Will they seek out the counsel of their own religious universities and madrassas, Azhar graduates, or a mix of well-vetted loyalists, regardless of where they received their training? As this process develops, however, even “loyalists” priorities will change, and one should not expect them to refrain from participating in religious politics and the politics of religion. This process

will no doubt have a profound effect on state policies as they are shaped increasingly by the assumptions and priorities of the first post-Soviet generation.

## Appendix

**Table 1. 2009 Estimates of Central Asians Studying Islam abroad**

	Egypt	Saudi Arabia	Turkey	Iran	Pakistan
Kyrgyzstan	100–200	100–150	100–200	unknown	20+
Tajikistan	500–1000	350–700	insignificant	200+	300
Uzbekistan	100–600	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown

**Table 2. 2008–9 Al Azhar University Enrollment Figures for Central Asians**

	Al Azhar University-level students
Kazakhstan	93
Kyrgyzstan	38
Tajikistan	156
Turkmenistan	33
Uzbekistan	43

**Table 3. Sources of Islamic Education in Central Asia**

	Madrassas	Institutions of Higher Learning	Alternative Schools (legal)	Private Schools/Hujras (illegal)
Kyrgyzstan	About 40 independent madrassas and one official madrassa	1 Islamic university, 6 Islamic institutes	Several NGOs	Many
Tajikistan	18–20 mixed gender	1 Islamic Institute	Mosque Schools	Many
Uzbekistan	8 for men and 2 for women	1 Islamic Institute	None	Many

**Table 4. Official Institutions for Secular Study of Islam in Central Asia**

	Public School Curriculum	College Degree	Graduate Degree
Kyrgyzstan	Draft law will introduce 9–10 <sup>th</sup> grade world religions course	Theology and other disciplines	Theology and other disciplines
Tajikistan	Knowledge of Islam in 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Philosophy departments	Philosophy departments
Uzbekistan	World religions courses	Islamic University and Oriental Studies Institute	Islamic University and Oriental Studies Institute

**Table 5. Accreditation of Islamic Education and Employment Opportunities in Central Asia**

	Domestic Religious Education Accredited?	Foreign Religious Education Accredited?	Employment Opportunities for Domestic Religious Training	Employment Opportunities for Foreign Religious Training
Kyrgyzstan	No	Osh State University- Ankara University theology program only	Government Agency on Religious Affairs, Muftiate, Islamic University, Islamic institutes, madrassas, mosques	Government Agency on Religious Affairs, Muftiate, Islamic University, Islamic institutes, madrassas, mosques
Tajikistan	No	No	Islamic Institute, madrassas, mosques	Islamic Institute, madrassas, mosques
Uzbekistan	No	No	State Committee on Religious Affairs, Muftiate, Islamic Institute, madrassas	State Committee on Religious Affairs, Muftiate, Islamic Institute, madrassas

**Author Bio**

Dr. David Abramson is an analyst who writes on Central Asia and Islam. He recently completed one year as a Woodrow Wilson Public Policy Scholar working on transnational trends in Islamic education and their impact on the future of Islam in Central Asia. Abramson received his Ph.D in Cultural Anthropology from Indiana University and has lectured and written on Islamic-secular tensions, foreign aid to Central Asia, and religion in U.S. foreign policy. He is co-author, with Elyor Karimov, of “Sacred Sites, Profane Ideologies: Religious Pilgrimage and the Uzbek State” in the 2007 Indiana University Press volume *Everyday Life in Central Asia*, edited by Jeff Sahadeo and Russel Zanca.