

State and Religion in Central Asia

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The broad territory encompassing Central Asia and the Caucasus holds a place of particular importance in the Muslim world. The region played a pivotal role in the evolution of the Islamic religion, and was also the origination point of empires that dominated large areas of the Muslim world for centuries. However, it was subsequently colonized by Russia and incorporated into the Soviet Union, which curtailed its ties to the rest of the Muslim world. Following independence, the six Muslim-majority states of the region began to cautiously negotiate their return into the Muslim world, while also embracing secular statehood. This has given Central Asia a unique position in the Muslim world, particularly given the decline of secularism in contemporary Turkey under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Yet the relationship between the Central Asian states and the Islamic faith is more complicated than meets the eye. Today, these nations are balancing an ongoing commitment to secularism with an effort to aid the restoration of traditional religious ideas and institutions that were decimated by nearly a century of Soviet rule. Their successes, and their failures, hold important lessons for the rest of the Muslim world in its efforts to combat extremist interpretations of the religion and ensure its compatibility with the West.

THE EVOLUTION OF ISLAM AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

Greater Central Asia represents the intersection of the Turkic and Iranian cultures and traditions. When Islam spread across the region, it was a process that took centuries. Parts of southern Central Asia and Azerbaijan were Islamized within a century of Islam's birth, but it took close to another millennium before the nomadic peoples of northern Central Asia fully embraced the religion. Central Asia and the Caucasus remained borderlands, areas that saw considerable interaction with non-Muslim lands, including Europe, China and Russia. Everywhere, local folk traditions that predated Islam had a significant impact not only on Folk Islam but also on how Islam was formally codified.

Across Central Asia and extending into Turkey and the Balkans, the most strongly rooted form of Islam was the mystical, esoteric form of the Sufi orders. The orthodox official Islam that developed in the region thus had to accommodate itself to the inherently heterodox nature of popular Islam. This came to be reflected in the predominance across the region of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, which among is the more tolerant of the four Sunni schools. For, while not necessarily liberal by modern standards, in instances where original sources do not provide answers Hanafi tradition is more open to the independent reasoning of Islamic jurists (*ijtihad*), the consensus of jurists (*ijma*) and deductive analogy (*qiyas*).¹

Equally important but less well known is the theological approach that dominates Central Asia. Traditional Sunni Islam has two dominant schools of *Kalam* or theology, the Ash'ari and the Maturidi schools. (Salafism, it should be noted, rejects the exercise of *Kalam* entirely.) Both emerged as an Orthodox reaction to the rationalist Mut'azilite theology, heavily influenced by Hellenistic thought, which was prominent in the ninth century. Thus, they share many similarities. Yet they also have a crucial distinction: the Ash'ari school holds firmly that humans are incapable of telling right from wrong in the absence of divine revelation. As a result, where the Ash'ari interpretation of Islam is predominant, the latitude given to humans in terms of their control over their lives is very limited. By contrast, the Maturidi school places considerably stronger emphasis on human reason. It maintains that humans can determine right from wrong in the absence of divine revelation,² and seeks a middle ground between reason and revelation.³ In practice, this led even official Islam to a greater tolerance than is present in places where the stricter Shafi'i or Hanbali schools of jurisprudence and Ash'ari theology predominate.

The Hanafi *madhab* was codified in Central Asia, and *imam* al-Maturidi himself lies buried in a mausoleum in his hometown of Samarkand. The Hanafi-Maturidi tradition thus sought to integrate pre-Islamic behavior and thought and cloak it in an Islamic shroud, something that stricter interpretations rejected. In a sense, the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition had the effect of lessening the shock of the transformation that resulted from the arrival of Islam, and thereby facilitated the spread of the religion across the region.⁴ Also unlike the stricter schools, it tolerated the rise of Sufism, which is based on the notion of a mystical communion between Man and God. This was anathema to the stricter interpretations, particularly in the heavily anti-Sufi Hanbali *madhab*. Indeed, the largest Sufi orders originated in Central Asia and spread globally from there. These were highly diverse, and some—particularly the Naqshbandi order—edconformed more to the boundaries of Sunni orthodoxy.⁵

As a result, Central Asia has an indigenous Islamic tradition that is conducive to moderation and tolerance rather than radicalism and extremism. Yet in the late Soviet period, Central Asia saw the rise of seemingly homegrown Islamic extremism. A closer look, however, suggests that this phenomenon may not have been as homegrown as it appeared. While much research is needed before the full relationship of Soviet authorities to Islam can be properly explained, it is clear that there was another side to Soviet policy than simply the promotion of Communism and atheism. In fact, the Soviet leadership not only tolerated but actively encouraged inroads by Salafi ideology into the region.⁶

Arab scholars had brought Salafi thought to the region already in the 1910s,

and in the Soviet period, links were established between official Soviet religious authorities and Saudi Arabia, which housed an important Uzbek diaspora. Importantly, these official Soviet hierarchies themselves were influenced by Salafi thought, leading to considerable internal strife as this met with resistance from adherents of the region's traditional Hanafi-Maturidi tradition. Salafi ideas spread in underground religious communities in Uzbekistan's Ferghana valley and in Tajikistan,⁷ as well as in Dagestan in the North Caucasus, which traditionally followed the stricter Shafi'i *madhab*.⁸

The Soviet leadership may have facilitated the rise of Salafi thought because both shared a deep distrust for the secretive and esoteric Sufi orders, which they feared could form the nucleus of anti-government resistance in much the same way as they had in the North Caucasus in the nineteenth century. Just as Soviet authorities applied divide and rule tactics among ethnic groups, they appear to have used Salafism to split the Muslim community. This apparently continued into the 1980s; Russian scholar Vitaly Naumkin quotes a former Uzbek Communist official as saying, "we couldn't have imagined into what a monster this Wahhabi movement here would turn."⁹

By the late 1980s, a younger generation of Salafi *imams* and activists began to organize in Tajikistan and in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana valley, particularly the towns of Andijan, Namangan and Margilan.¹⁰ By this time, the Soviet war in Afghanistan had generated considerable interaction between that country and Soviet Central Asia, something that led many Uzbeks and Tajiks, in particular, to develop sympathies for their co-ethnics fighting the Soviet Union in the name of Islam.¹¹ Radical Islamists then rose to prominence in both Tajikistan and eastern Uzbekistan during the Soviet collapse. In 1991, Salafi-inspired radicals took over the functions of government in the Uzbek city of Namangan, and a diverse group of Islamists made a bid for power in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. And while this bid was repressed within a few months in Uzbekistan, it helped accelerate Tajikistan's slide into civil war.¹²

This experience was a formative one for Central Asian leaders. Acutely aware of the vulnerability of their newly independent states, they identified Islamic extremism as a potent force that could disrupt the fragile balance of societies that were reeling from seventy years of Soviet rule, developing their distinct independent identities, while state institutions were in the process of being built essentially from scratch. Uzbekistan's new leader, Islam Karimov, was particularly aware of this danger, having personally confronted the Islamists in Namangan during their uprising.¹³ Karimov's apprehension concerning radical Islam was exacerbated by the civil war in Tajikistan, where Uzbek militants exiled from the Ferghana valley emerged as an important actor. The war strengthened Karimov's conviction to fight extremism with any available means and maintain stability at all cost.

Following independence, Central Asia became an important destination for various religious groups seeking to proselytize in the fertile soil left by Soviet atheism. Paradoxically, because Soviet rule had weakened traditional religion, it left Muslims in Central Asia and the Caucasus more vulnerable to the influence of foreign religious groups. Religious knowledge was poor among the vast majority of the population, and those religious institutions that existed were largely discredited by their association with Soviet authorities. Foreign Islamic groups from the Islamic heartland, by contrast, claimed an authenticity that poorly trained

Central Asian clerics could not.

The influx of missionaries was by no means limited to Muslim groups, as Christian missionaries of various denominations also fanned out across the region, meeting some success particularly in Kyrgyzstan and parts of Kazakhstan. But the missionaries from the Muslim world dominated, and came in a wide variety of shades. The largest number came from Turkey, benefiting from close linguistic ties and from a more permissive approach by local governments. These included followers of the Fethullah Gülen movement, who opened schools across the region, as well as many Turkish Sufi networks, predominantly but not exclusively the Naqshbandi. Few of these groups have been associated with any form of extremism, although the motivations of the Gülen movement have come under growing scrutiny in recent years following its heavy politicization in Turkey and high-profile political conflict with President Erdoğan.

While the activity of Turkish groups was relatively open, the missionary activity of networks based in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf was less so. But this activism was ubiquitous, and backed by considerable financial resources. Gulf resources were behind much of the mosque construction spree across Central Asia, and, invariably, the *imam* of a newly constructed mosque would be trained in the Gulf country that sponsored its construction. Wealthy Gulf individuals and foundations welcomed and funded Central Asians to study at Salafi-inspired institutions, from which they returned home and contributed to the spread of Salafi ideology.

The same process appears to have taken place in Islamic educational institutions in Central Asia—including those under the auspices of the Uzbek government. At a 2000 conference on radical Islam in Central Asia, the Naqshbandi-Nazimi Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabani recalled his visit to the Islamic University in Tashkent, which had been created with the explicit objective of asserting control over the education of *imams* in the country. To the horror of his hosts, the Shaykh discovered prominently displayed Salafi literature gifted from Saudi Arabia in the University's library.¹⁴ This points to how the sheer ubiquity of the global Salafi movement's activities, and its financial resources, make its influence difficult to halt.

Another important influence in Central Asia has been the global Islamist movement *Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami* (HTI) which, while generally eschewing violence, aspires to build a Caliphate uniting all Muslims in which there would be no place for non-believers.¹⁵ HTI began to spread relatively rapidly in Central Asia in the late 1990s.¹⁶ By the mid-2000s, reports suggested that thousands of recruits had joined the group, primarily ethnic Uzbeks in both Uzbekistan itself and from Uzbek minorities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Yet in the past decade, the group has been much less prominent, for reasons that remain unclear; this could relate to successful government repression, or to a strategic decision by HTI to refocus its resources elsewhere. *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* also sired both violent and nonviolent splinter groups. *Akromiya*, named after its founder, Akram Yuldashev, split from HTI in the early 1990s. Concentrated in eastern Uzbekistan, *Akromiya* successfully ran a thriving Islamic community featuring prominent businesses and schools that were tolerated and even praised by the Uzbek government.¹⁷ But following a conflict with the new Governor of Andijan, the movement led a violent uprising in May 2005 that led to a shootout between hostage-taking Islamists and poorly trained interior ministry forces in which up to 200 people were killed.¹⁸

South Asian Islam has also influenced Central Asia, including the austere Deobandi influence visible through *Tablighi Jamaat*, a global movement that is avowedly non-violent, but rather opaque and secretive. Unlike *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, it rejects political aims and focuses exclusively on individual proselytizing.¹⁹ *Tablighi Jamaat* denounces Sufism as contrary to monotheism, but also rejects the political movements inspired by the fathers of Islamism such as Mawdudi and Qutb.²⁰ Still, the movement's creed is, as one scholar put it, "hardly distinguishable from the radical Wahhabi-Salafi *jihadist* ideology."²¹ Indeed, its membership has been a prime target of recruitment for violent groups.²² This ambiguous character has led to differing responses in Central Asia; Kyrgyzstan has viewed the group as an antidote to radicalism,²³ while Kazakhstan tolerated it until 2013, when the group was formally banned. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, meanwhile, have long outlawed it outright.²⁴

As this overview suggests, the rise of Islamic extremism in Central Asia has largely been an exogenous phenomenon. The region itself has little history of radicalism, but became a main target for proselytizing by radical groups following independence. The proximity to Afghanistan—and, in the case of western Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, the North Caucasus as well—has likewise been a factor facilitating this extremist influence in the region.

THE CONTEMPORARY THREAT OF ISLAMISM

The threat posed by Islamist extremism differs considerably across the Central Asian states. That said, it is noticeable that regional governments, which were long explicit about the threat of extremism, appear to have grown considerably more confident about their ability to manage the problem. Russian leaders and commentators continue to seek to sow alarm about radicalism in Central Asia and the threat of extremism from Afghanistan.²⁵ But while the practice is hardly new, Central Asians today treat such warnings much more skeptically than they did in the past.

Azerbaijan stands out because of its exposure to extremism in both its Shi'a and Sunni forms. Bordering the Islamic Republic of Iran and possessing both a Shi'a majority and a significant Sunni minority, the country has had to contend with both the government-sponsored nature of Shi'a extremism and the more diffuse challenge of Sunni extremism. The latter also comes in a variety of shades: in the heavily Sunni northern areas of Azerbaijan, the main source of extremism is the Russian North Caucasus, whereas among Sunni groups in the rest of the country, direct influences from the Gulf are more common. Near the capital, Baku, is the Islamist enclave of Nardaran, which has been an isolated hotbed of radicalism since the 1990s. The most threatening instances of Islamist terrorism have nevertheless been linked directly to Iran, particularly in the case of planned attacks against Israeli and Jewish interests in the country.²⁶

Kazakhstan for long appeared to have only limited exposure to Islamist extremism. For the first fifteen years of its independence, the country was more liberal than most of its neighbors, and tolerated the presence of a variety of foreign religious groups. But since 2011, Kazakhstan has been hit by a series of terrorist attacks, and authorities have reacted by adopting stricter laws regulating religious groups in the country. Research has shown that the rise of extremism in Kazakhstan

dates back to the early 2000s, and to the role of individual Kazakhstani citizens in *jihadi* groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Islamic Jihad Union, and offshoot of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), deliberately established itself in southern Kazakhstan in 2002, benefiting from the country's more permissive environment.²⁷ That said, Kazakhstan's Islamic extremism problem appears to be limited to relatively isolated terrorist cells, and seems strongly connected to the country's criminal underworld.²⁸ Indeed, few foreign fighters of Kazakh origin migrated to join the Syrian civil war in recent years—perhaps just 300 in all.²⁹ Overall, Kazakhstan's Muslims have proven themselves opposed to political manifestations of religion; the country has among the lowest levels of support of any Muslim country for *sharia* law—just 10 percent, the lowest level of any Muslim country except Azerbaijan.³⁰ Polls also indicate that Kazakhstan's Muslims appear to embrace a liberal interpretation of religious stipulations in private life.³¹

Like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan adopted a relatively liberal approach to religious groups in the first decade of its independence. Unlike Kazakhstan, however, the country has continued this liberal approach in more recent years. Also unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan has a much weaker government whose control over the country—particularly in the southern areas—remains relatively spotty.³² As such, Kyrgyzstan over time has developed a considerable problem with Islamist extremism. Despite its considerably smaller population, the country had a much higher number of extremists who joined the Syrian civil war: an estimated 600 fighters as of 2016.³³ Its southern provinces have also continued to see a strong presence of Islamist groups, including HTI and *Tablighi Jamaat*, as well as preachers and mosques supported by Gulf countries. As a result, whereas Kyrgyzstan is traditionally thought of as a highly secular society, it has the highest number of *sharia* supporters of any Central Asian state, at 29 percent.³⁴ This may reflect an urge for order in a rather unruly country, but is nevertheless a source of concern. It has also led the Kyrgyz government to adopt a stricter approach to religious proselytization and the dissemination of extremist literature in recent years.³⁵

Tajikistan occupies a prominent position in this discussion, as a country recovering from a civil war of which Islamist extremist groups were an important component. That war also allowed extremist ideologies to gain a foothold in parts of the country, and a power-sharing deal that ended the civil war ensconced several warlords with connections to extremist movements in government positions. The Islamic Renaissance Party was the only Islamist party allowed in Central Asia, and certainly the only one to be represented in a national parliament. Nevertheless, following President Imomali Rakhmon's consolidation of power in the 2000s, after the end of the civil war, he gradually purged all opposition forces from the government, Islamist groups among them. Still, the appeal of Islamist extremism was on display in 2015, when a commander of Tajikistan's interior forces defected to become a high-profile ISIS commander.³⁶ A recent World Bank research study details the shifting appeal of different Islamist groups in Tajikistan.³⁷ In particular, it showcases the role of HTI in the country's north, and a growing effort by Salafi extremist groups to proselytize in the country over the past half-decade. This wave of proselytism first targeted the capital, Dushanbe, but following government crackdowns appears to have intensified in areas of the country that border Afghanistan. Islamist mobilization is also a significant problem; Tajik government figures suggest that up to 2,000 citizens may have traveled to fight in Syria, Iraq

and Afghanistan, a figure that is higher than earlier estimates.³⁸

Turkmenistan is the least transparent state in Central Asia, and as such considerably less information is available regarding the threat of extremism in the country. However, no significant instance of terrorism is known to have occurred in the country, and in the past Turkmenistan did not appear affected by the problems of extremism impacting its eastern neighbors. In fact, while Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were highly alarmed by the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan in the mid- to late 1990s, Turkmenistan maintained informal and cordial relations with the Islamist group, not least as it sought to advance the possibility of a gas pipeline across Afghanistan to Pakistan. In the past several years, however, there has been increased fighting in the Afghan provinces bordering Turkmenistan: Herat, Badghis, Faryab and Jowzjan. Not only has the Taliban established a presence there, but in 2017 an Islamic State presence was also reported in Darzab district of Jowzjan province.³⁹ The same year, there were reports of Turkmen militants being apprehended crossing back into the country from Afghanistan, as well as of Turkey extraditing Turkmen citizens apprehended on their way to Syria. Reports speak of a total of around 150 Turkmen fighters in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁰

Uzbekistan had a serious problem with extremism in the 1990s, and was the Central Asian country most frequently subjected to terrorist attacks, including an attempt on the life of its president in 1999. These were attributed to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which retained pockets of support in the country even after shifting its base of operations first to Tajikistan in the early 1990s, then to Afghanistan following the 1997 Tajik peace accords, and after 2001 into the Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Yet, since 2004, Uzbekistan has not experienced any terrorist attack of note, in stark contrast to Kazakhstan, which had few problems in its two first decades of independence but has seen a spate of attacks from 2011 onward. Indeed, whereas Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley is often mentioned as a hotbed of extremism, there is no substantial evidence to back up the claim that it remains so nearly thirty years after the emergence of the IMU there. In fact, Uzbek officials appear confident that the problem of Islamist extremism is under control—so much so that since the transition of power to reformist president Shavkat Mirziyoyev the government has embarked on an effort to reform its policies in the field of religion, removing thousands of people from lists of suspected extremists and shifting from a defensive and restrictive approach toward a more positive agenda of combatting extremism through the dissemination of its concept of "Enlightened Islam."⁴¹

RULING ELITES AND THE PROBLEM OF FAITH AND THE STATE

The way in which government elites in Central Asia and Azerbaijan approach the issue of Islamist extremism differs from the bulk of the Muslim world in two key ways. First, because they conceive of their nations as secular states, Islamist extremism is in ideological terms a categorical counterpoint to the very definition of nationhood and statehood that elites across the region collectively embrace. Therefore, the region's elites reject not just the violent manifestations of Islamism, but the legitimacy of Islamist ideology as a whole. Second, and very importantly, their conception of the challenge posed by radical Islam is linked to the very process of defining national identity following the Soviet collapse.

Aside from Azerbaijan, where a nationalist popular front existed in the late Soviet period, there was no palpable organized movement for independence anywhere in Central Asia in the 1980s. Furthermore, while Azerbaijan had briefly held statehood in 1918-20, no Central Asian state had previously existed with the same name or approximate boundaries of the five Soviet republics created during the territorial delimitation of 1924-36. This means that, to a significant extent, the national identities of Central Asian states were in the process of being formed when the Soviet collapse catapulted them to an independence they were not prepared for. In the wake of Communism, the trajectory of the region's peoples and their identities was very much open to question. With no prior statehood to relate to, each regional state looked back to history to find reference points, finding heroes such as Ismail Somoni in the case of Tajikistan or Tamerlane in Uzbekistan. Nomadic peoples had fewer options, and Kyrgyzstan chose the thousand-year old legend of Manas while Kazakhstan emphasized the project of its new capital at Astana. In Turkmenistan, meanwhile, the personality of the first President became the symbol of the nation.⁴²

This quest for identity still continues today, almost thirty years after independence. What it means exactly to be a Kazakh or an Uzbek, and what the components of these identities are, is very much a work in progress. While this is true in every country and particularly in post-colonial countries, the particular impact of Communist ideology and Soviet rule in attempting to manipulate the identities of the population of Central Asia left an acute vacuum. Of course, this is the reason why religious groups from various parts of the world flocked to the region following the Soviet collapse, aware of the opportunity to capture souls in search of meaning and purpose.

For the secular elites of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, the work of nation-building was a purely secular endeavor. They accepted the role of Islam as a historical identity marker of their peoples. But they viewed religion as something that belongs to the private sphere, and which should have no bearing on matters of state. This attitude has often been dismissed as being a product of the atheist, communist upbringing of these elites. And indeed, the leaders building new nations and seeking to define their national identities were, in many cases, the exact same individuals that had spearheaded atheist campaigns during Soviet rule. But this argument should not be stretched too far, because even in the pre-Soviet period, the attempts made to develop distinct identities for the Turkic and Muslim people of the Russian empire had been largely secular and national endeavors. In the case of Azerbaijan, the process that led to the creation of the first republic of Azerbaijan in 1918 was an entirely secular one; this republic, the first in the Muslim world, offered full membership in the national community irrespective of gender, ethnicity, and religious identity. The Alash-Orda movement in Kazakhstan was similarly secular, and explicitly rejected a stronger role for religion in the state project Kazakh elites were contemplating.⁴³

Following independence, thus, each country defined the state as secular, and sought to safeguard the advances brought about by Soviet rule, such as near-universal literacy and the emancipation of women. But what did secularism mean, in the Central Asian context? This frequently misunderstood question is central to understanding the approaches to religious groups adopted by Central Asian states.

Elsewhere, this author has proposed a continuum defining five distinct models of interaction between the state and religion.⁴⁴ On one end of that continuum is "Fusion," a merger of political and spiritual realms, where the state tolerates only one religion, as is the case in Saudi Arabia. On the other is what can be called a "Hostile" model, in which the state actively opposes and suppresses religious observance, as the Soviet Union did. Between these extremes are at least three distinct points. Closest to the "Fusion" model is the model of "Dominant Religion," in which the state endorses one particular religion but tolerates minorities from other faiths. Western European monarchies have historically been an example of this model. Closer to the "Hostile" model is what could be termed a "Skeptical/Insulating" model, as in France's *laïcité*, which seeks to regulate and control religious influence on the state and society. Finally, in the very middle is the model most Americans associate with secularism: the "State Neutrality" model exemplified by the United States, which holds the state equidistant to all religions, and proposes that the state's role be to promote individual religious freedom.

Significantly, the American model's very purpose and *raison d'être* differs from that of France. In the U.S., the purpose was to ensure the neutrality of the state between a large number of individual religious congregations. In France, the purpose of *laïcité* was to protect the state (and society) from the command and authority of a dominant, highly political religious institution: Roman Catholicism and the papacy.

This is relevant to Central Asia, because the model of secularism adopted by the states of the region has very little in common with the American concept of state neutrality toward religion. To the contrary, Central Asian states found themselves in a situation very similar to that of France (and, more recently, Atatürk's Turkey): their aim was to rein in the role of Sunni Islam and to prevent its highly political interpretations from claiming an influence on their state or society. Yet at the same time, they understood that Soviet atheism was in the past, and that there is a legitimate role for religion in society that needed to be restored. The question was whether the state should be neutral toward it, or put its finger on the scale.

Indigenous, traditional religious institutions were heavily damaged by Soviet rule, and were challenged by foreign religious groups with a high level of self-confidence and ample financial resources. To regional elites, this was a disturbing and potentially destabilizing situation. Therefore, their perception was that a difference needed to be made between indigenous religious traditions and alien religious groups. The former needed to be assisted in restoring their proper and legitimate role in society, while the latter needed to be controlled and, to various degrees, restricted. Therefore, across Central Asia, the state implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) favors the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition, which is re-emerging as a dominant religious institution. But the state simultaneously retains control over religious institutions, in order to ensure that they do not play an autonomous political role—in a manner similar to that of Kemalist Turkey, which created a directorate of religious affairs in 1924 in order to supervise and control Sunni Islam.

Returning to the continuum outlined above, the region combines elements of the French model of secularism with elements of the dominant religion model. This implies that Islamist extremism raises red flags from two separate perspectives. First, its political ambitions trigger the state's *laïcist* reflexes of safeguarding its autonomy from religious institutions. Second, the diverging theological

perspective of political Islam triggers the state's reflexes to protect indigenous and traditional religion against alien newcomers. As a result, states in the region differ from both western and most Muslim countries, in that they draw the line of acceptable discourse differently.

Most Muslim countries tolerate or appease political Islam, and proscribe only those movements that are explicitly violent and target their home state – while often turning a blind eye to those that target foreign countries alone. Western states, by contrast, tend to draw the line at proscribing incitement to violence, while tolerating groups that espouse and extremist ideology but pledge to be non-violent. (Thus, from the western perspective, the ideology of a group is irrelevant: the crucial factor is whether that group incites to violence or not.) Central Asians, however, draw the line at political ideologies that inherently challenge their nationhood and secular constitution. In other words, the question is not whether groups are violent, but whether their ideology is compatible with the form of statehood adopted by Central Asian elites.

While those are the common denominators among the six states, however, there are naturally important differences among them. Most directly, Azerbaijan has the added challenge of managing the relationship between its Shi'a and Sunni communities—a challenge complicated by the country's proximity to the Islamic Republic of Iran, the hierarchical nature of Shi'a Islam, and the paramount role of Iranian clergy in Shi'ism. Over time, this has led to a more nuanced, generalized approach to the Islamic faith among Azerbaijani authorities. Yet it has also manifested itself in a broad threat of religious subversion that has at times been aided and abetted by the Iranian regime across the country's southern border.⁴⁵

The approaches of the region's governments have also diverged from one another over time. As already noted, Uzbekistan in the early years of its independence had perhaps the most restrictive policies in the field of religion, alongside Turkmenistan, while the countries of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan were initially more permissive of foreign religious activity. Gradually, however, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan both adopted increasingly restrictive policies, with Kyrgyzstan follow suit much later.

The region's states have also differed in the extent to which they have promoted a positive model of religion to their citizens, as contrasted with simply imposing policies that are focused mainly on what they oppose. For instance, in Uzbekistan, following the 2016 passing of the country's first President, Islam Karimov, his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, embarked on a spree of reforms in virtually every sphere of government activity—including in the religious field, where Uzbekistan has begun to promote a positive model of "Enlightened Islam."⁴⁶ Similarly, in Azerbaijan, the government of Ilham Aliyev reacted to growing sectarian strife in the Middle East in the 2010s by reinforcing secularism, but also by launching the notion of "Multiculturalism" as state policy.⁴⁷

POLICIES, PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

What, then, are the pillars of what could be called a Central Asian model of religious affairs? The following section will look specifically at five key aspects. The first is the secular foundation of Central Asian constitutions, education systems, and laws. The second is the effort to promote traditional religious institutions, and

to promote harmony among them. The third is the creation of state institutions to register, regulate and control independent religious groups. The fourth are the state security measures employed to enforce these regulations and suppress extremism. The fifth and final element are the positive measures deployed in the "war of ideas," such as Uzbekistan's initiative to promote "Enlightened Islam."

Secular State and Education

The basis for the relationship between state and religion in all six countries is the enshrinement of secular governance in their constitutions and laws. Typically, the Preamble or first article of the constitution defines the state as secular. Only Uzbekistan's does not do so explicitly, though several subsequent articles of Uzbekistan's constitution (as well as other national laws) refer to secular governance and education. The region's constitutions all enforce the separation of religious institutions from the state, and prohibit their interference in state affairs. Each country's constitution explicitly guarantees freedom of religion and, equally important, the right to profess no religion at all. Several constitutions, such as those of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, explicitly define the nation's educational system as secular. Religious political parties are explicitly prohibited everywhere but in Tajikistan, a legacy of the power-sharing agreement that ended that country's civil war; Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan further prohibit the involvement of "ministers of religion" in politics. Finally, all constitutions include language that allow the restriction and regulation of religious organizations that promote religious enmity, or that harm society's moral values. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, proselytizing itself is prohibited; Kazakhstan prohibits any activity that promotes the superiority of one religion over another, while Uzbekistan proscribes any effort at converting individuals from one religion to another. The intent to protect the religious *status quo* in society by regulating religious groups, in particular foreign ones, is clear in such legislation, and in Kazakhstan's case in the constitution itself. Similarly, all states define secular education as a cornerstone of their governmental policy.

A reading of the region's constitutions suggests that while all six states acknowledge individual religious freedom, they reflect an understanding of secularism that is primarily motivated by the urge to protect the state and society from religious dogma. This is particularly clear from subordinate legislation in all of these countries that regulates the work of religious groups. Across the region, the norm is for the government to require any religious organization to register with authorities, thus regulating the exercise of religion with the aim of ensuring that no unauthorized religious activity is taking place in the country.

State Institutions to Regulate Religion

The six states discussed above inherited the Soviet structure of religious institutions. However, this structure was not separate for each republic. Back in 1942, the USSR had created four Muslim Spiritual Administrations (*Musul'manskiye Dukhovnye Upravleniia*) in Baku, Makhachkala, Ufa and Tashkent, which were technically religious and clerical institutions rather than state administrative bodies. In reality, of course, everyone knew that the state security structures supervised these bodies. There was therefore a single organization for Central Asia, which proved unsuitable for post-independence realities. Instead, during the 1990s,

each state set up a national religious institution, typically headed by a *mufti*, with responsibility for managing that country's mosques and the training of Islamic clergy within its borders.

These organizations are theoretically independent, but in practice operate under close government supervision. Their respective governments, moreover, grant them a monopoly over Islamic life: they are the authorized representatives of the country's Muslims, a situation that automatically creates a rivalry with new, often foreign-based Islamic groups that do not recognize the *mufti's* authority and which seek to operate independently from it.

Each religious administration in the region, particularly because it is charged with the oversight and training of clergy, faces the challenge of defining the substance and content of religious teachings that are thereby promulgated. As noted previously, Azerbaijan stands out because of its need to manage the country's division into a Shi'a majority and a large Sunni minority. The state has taken considerable measures to bridge this divide. The *Caucasus Muslims Board* has a Shi'a Head, but a Sunni Deputy, and caters to the entirety of the country's Muslim population. In addition, the Board has actively endorsed the practice of religious services where Shi'a and Sunni Muslims pray jointly, a feature that is unique in the Muslim world.⁴⁸

In Central Asia, meanwhile, the region's governments have all embraced traditional Hanafi Sunni Islam as the substance of state-sanctioned religious life. Uzbek religious leaders have done so assertively, promoting the Hanafi interpretation as indigenous to the country at the expense of other interpretations deemed alien. Kazakhstan's religious administration similarly endorses only Hanafi Islam. However, Kazakhstan has taken the unusual step of partnering with Egypt's Al-Azhar University for the training of religious scholars.⁴⁹ Since Al-Azhar is under the strong influence of stricter interpretations of Sunni Islam, it remains to be seen whether this will lead over time to a lessening of the country's commitment to traditional Hanafism.

Simultaneously, the promotion of an official religious hierarchy across the region has obvious implications for the less formalized practice of Sufism, which poses an inherent challenge to the authority of formal religious hierarchies. Soviet-era hostility to Sufism is perpetuated by scholars trained at institutions like al-Azhar, and this implies that Central Asian states face a serious challenge maintaining their official support for both formal Hanafi institutions and traditional Sufi practices, as the inherent tensions between them will need to be managed.

Aside from their respective religious hierarchies, the region's states have all established state institutions to regulate religious life. Typically, this has taken the form of State Committees for religious affairs, which in the case of Kazakhstan was recently elevated to a government Ministry in its own right.⁵⁰ The Committees differ from the *Muftiates* in being secular and administrative, rather than religious, institutions, and by being the designated government institution tasked with managing religious organizations. Thus, they supervise all religious life, not just Islam; they are the bodies tasked with registering and approving religious organizations, as well as with monitoring the religious literature disseminated on their territory.

Because of the chaotic spread of religious groups in the 1990s, at a time when local government understanding of religion was quite limited, most regional states have since sought to assert control over religious life by requiring religious

groups to re-register with the government pursuant to new requirements levied over the past two decades. Each state allows its official committee to deny registration to religious groups that are deemed a threat to national security or societal peace. Several countries also impose requirements on the size of approved religious groupings, requiring a considerable presence that is not geographically limited to a particular area. The result of this approach has been that a considerable number of religious groups have failed to register with the state, making their continued operation essentially illegal. Not coincidentally, this has affected in particular non-traditional religious groups with foreign origins, including both Muslim groups and Christian denominations.

Local governments have also taken measures to regulate the importation of religious literature. In each of the six states discussed here, national administrative bodies responsible for religious affairs make the distribution of religious literature conditional on state examination and approval. This is enshrined in law in all of the above-mentioned countries, and their governments actively prosecute breaches of the ban on religious literature being disseminated without government approval, sentencing individuals to both fines and prison time for such activity. Of course, the advent of the internet has made it more difficult for government regulation in this sphere. However, regional governments have adapted and are now actively involved in the blocking and banning of websites deemed offensive or subversive.

State Security Measures to Control Extremism

Alongside legal requirements for registration and restrictions on religious organizations, a pillar of government policy in all these states is the deployment of law enforcement measures to counter extremism. This practice is ubiquitous in the region, and is, of course, commonly implemented in western countries as well. The key difference is that Central Asian states and Azerbaijan do not merely deploy state security structures to counter or prevent violent extremism; they do so also to enforce compliance with the regulations described above. As a result, religious activists involved in non-traditional religious groups that are not sanctioned by the government frequently experience government surveillance, arrest, and imprisonment. Notably, this practice affects both Muslim organizations and other denominations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptist congregations, and Krishna devotees. Such policies have led to considerable controversy between regional states on one hand and western governments and activist organizations on the other. Whereas regional governments deem the enforcement of such restrictions necessary to maintain public order, western governments and human rights organizations have made criticism of the regional governments' treatment of non-violent religious devotees a *cause célèbre*.

It should be noted that the restrictive nature of national legislation, and the considerable room for interpretation afforded to law enforcement bodies, has opened the door for a great deal of arbitrary behavior. Thus, while the aim of central legislation has seldom been to target small innocuous groups like Baptist communities, in practice the conversion of individuals to religions other than that of their birth is typically a highly sensitive and unpopular matter in the region. That in turn allows for local law enforcement to act, often on their own initiative, to curb such behavior. Yet overall, missionary Muslim movements have borne the brunt of the efforts of preregional state security services.

In this area, the trajectory of regional states has been quite divergent. In the 1990s, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan enforced the harshest restrictions and most zealously engaged in the prosecution of individuals and groups deemed extremist. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan took an intermediary position, while Kyrgyzstan developed a considerably more liberal environment for religious freedom than its neighbors. Tajikistan was a special case, because its civil war ended in a 1997 power-sharing agreement that gave the United Tajik Opposition, which included Islamist warlords, 30 percent of seats in government. For a number of years, therefore, Tajikistan not only had a legal Islamist party in parliament; it also had Islamist warlords in government.

Thus, conditions for proselytizing in the various countries of the region differed greatly. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were at first the most permissive environments for missionary activity, whereas it quickly became clear that any such activity in Uzbekistan carried with it considerable risk. Thousands of individuals were jailed there on charges of membership in illegal religious groups, an offense that could carry a fine of five years in prison and as much as 20 if the organization is deemed a terrorist one. Members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* were the subject of particular government targeting in the late 1990s in Uzbekistan, even as the organization was able to function relatively comfortably in areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, including areas with considerable ethnic Uzbek populations. Likewise, *Tablighi Jamaat* was allowed to operate freely in Kyrgyzstan, but was actively proscribed in Uzbekistan.

Over time, however, these patterns began to change. Whereas Uzbekistan has not experienced an act of religiously motivated violence since 2005, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan began to see an uptick in such instability, especially from the early 2010s onward. As a result, they all began to impose ever-growing restrictions on religious organizations, including the increased use of state security structures to surveil, supervise, infiltrate and prosecute groups viewed as a potential extremist threat. In recent years, the strengthening of restrictions has been the most palpable in Tajikistan, where the government has, among other steps, prohibited minors from attending religious services, and has been known to forcibly shave the beards of Muslim men and remove the headcoverings of women that are deemed nontraditional (and therefore Islamist). Kazakhstan has also adopted increasingly restrictive regulations for religious organizations. By contrast, as discussed in greater detail below, Uzbekistan has gone in the opposite direction in the framework of the reform agenda implemented by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and eased restrictions on religious life. This includes removing 16,000 of 17,000 individuals from extremist watchlists, planning the construction of roadside mosques, and inviting exiled religious scholars to return to the country.

Inter-Religious Harmony

A fourth pillar that regional countries share is a mutual emphasis on harmony between religious communities. It is a frequent occurrence across the region to see leaders of Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious communities appearing publicly side by side, expressing their support for religious harmony and tolerance. This happens both within each of the countries and abroad. Thus, Azerbaijan's *Shaykh-ul-Islam* has traveled to numerous international destinations accompanied by the Papal Nuncio, the Orthodox Patriarch, and the heads of two different Jewish congregations. Baku also hosts international religious meetings, including a

2016 conference on religious tolerance, and a summit of world religious leaders currently scheduled for November 2019. Kazakhstan has similarly focused since 2003 on its initiative of a "Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions." Six such Congresses have been held to date, bringing together Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Buddhist leaders, most recently in October 2018. Religious leaders of Uzbekistan also frequently appear at joint events, though mainly for a domestic audience.

Western activists have both criticized and ridiculed these displays of harmony, pointing to the alleged repression of both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. This, however, misses the point of the stark dichotomy that is drawn in the region between traditional and non-traditional religious groups. In fact, across Central Asia and Azerbaijan, the main religious tensions are not *between* religious denominations but *within* them. While conversions across religious boundaries do occur, it is mainly the case that foreign-based Muslim groups proselytize almost exclusively in the Muslim community, while foreign Christian denominations do so mainly but not exclusively among the region's Christians.

Against this backdrop, the leaders of traditional Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities have forged an implicit alliance to preserve—indeed, to restore—the predominant role of their traditional religious institutions over their respective flocks. In a sense, therefore, they band together and encourage state policies that provide them with official recognition while countering the influence of new, alien religious groupings. The inclusion of the word "traditional" in the title of Kazakhstan's main initiative in this sphere, the "Congress of World and Traditional Religions," is an excellent and explicit example of this.

While this may be easy to dismiss, it should be noted that the official promotion of religious harmony has a value in and of itself. The fact that citizens are continuously exposed to the message of religious leaders appearing together and expressing the same message—and seeming to enjoy each other's company—has an important value. It has a direct bearing on the fact that the states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan all have positive relations with Israel, and have among the Muslim world's lowest instances of anti-Semitic incidents. Indeed, Jewish leaders have stressed that they perceive in the region an "atmosphere of tolerance that we can't see even in most European countries."⁵¹

Similarly, global surveys of religious attitudes show that the region stands out for its religious tolerance. Support for *sharia* law among Muslims is the lowest of any region of the Muslim world, ranging from eight percent in Azerbaijan to 35 percent in Kyrgyzstan. Countries in the Middle East, by contrast, have figures closer to 80 percent.⁵² Likewise, the percentage of Muslims who believe converting others is a religious duty tops 80 percent in most countries of the Muslim world, and reaches over 90 percent in Afghanistan. Yet it is comparative low in Central Asia: only 15 percent of Kazakh Muslims agree, as do 36 percent of Kyrgyz and 42 percent of Azerbaijanis. (Tajikistan has a relatively higher figure at 69 percent.)⁵³ Compared to the median of the Muslim world, the region's Muslims are also more inclined to believe that one can be moral without believing in God, less inclined to think religious leaders should have political influence, and less inclined to think tensions between more and less religious Muslims are a problem in society.

From Defense to Offense in the “war of ideas”

As the discussion above makes clear, regional states have taken an approach to religious affairs that is inherently defensive in nature, focusing on preventing the influx of alien and radical religious ideas into their societies. As such, at least initially, there was more clarity regarding what the leaders of Central Asia and Azerbaijan opposed than what they supported. Although it was clear early on that they supported secular governance and inter-religious harmony, what they supported in terms of the evolution of Islamic practice was less so. In the past decade, however, this has begun to change. As regional states have consolidated their independence and overcome the most acute challenges of the early years, they have also been able to develop more concrete visions of their own.

Azerbaijan, for example, has made the notion of “multiculturalism” part of its official ideology. The term is used not in its conventional western meaning, but rather to define civic nationhood and secular governance. Indeed, the beginning of the country’s practice of “Unity Prayers” in 2016 coincided with the official year of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan, which aimed to underline the inclusive and tolerant nature of Azerbaijani society.⁵⁴ Azerbaijan’s decision to double down on its emphasis on secularism can be seen as the direct result of the growing sectarian divide in the Middle East, which made strengthened secularism the only viable option for a country split between Shi’a and Sunni communities.

In another initiative, Uzbek President Mirziyoyev has launched the notion of “Enlightened Islam,” which aims to counteract extremist ideology by emphasizing and promoting the tolerant Islamic tradition indigenous to Central Asia. In a 2018 speech to the United Nations, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov emphasized that the root causes of extremism lie in “the ideology of extremism and violence itself, which is based on ignorance and lack of tolerance.”⁵⁵ To counteract this, he argued, Uzbekistan’s Enlightened Islam relies on the region’s “centuries-old traditions of spiritual and moral enlightenment and upbringing,” which make it possible to develop “the truly humanistic essence of Islam, which call for kindness, peace and tolerance.”

For this purpose, Mirziyoyev has announced the creation of several new institutions. This includes an Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, as well as an Islamic Civilization Center designed to “fight religious ignorance and promote Islam’s true values.”⁵⁶ In addition, he announced the creation of the Imam Bukhari International Scientific Research Center, headquartered at the Imam Al-Bukhari Academy in Samarkand. That institution aims to focus equally on religious and secular knowledge, echoing the era of what the scholar Frederick Starr calls the “Lost Enlightenment” of Central Asia a millennium ago, when the region was the center of an effervescence of learning that was equally religious and secular in character.⁵⁷

While the initiative is new and has yet to be implemented, it reflects a growing confidence in Uzbekistan not only that the problem of extremism is under control, but that Central Asia’s Islamic heritage can be harnessed to counter the ideology of extremism both at home and in the Muslim world as a whole. In this sense, Uzbekistan joins countries like Jordan and Morocco, who similarly use their own Islamic legitimacy to counter extremist ideology.

PRESSING QUESTIONS

The Central Asian states and Azerbaijan have developed a regional model of state-religion interaction that, while differing among countries, displays considerable similarities. Several key questions arise from this rudimentary analysis of their characteristics. Is it a true model, and not a holdover from the Soviet past? Has it worked? Is it likely to survive? And does it have any relevance outside the former Communist world?

The question of whether this is indeed a positive model, and not simply a Soviet relic, is a relevant one. It would be foolish to deny that Soviet heritage has played a role in the approach to religion among regional elites, since the implementers of the model were all Soviet functionaries trained in Soviet schools. But, as mentioned previously, the secular approach to the nation across the region actually predates the Soviet Union, and it is by now clear that the Central Asian states—colored in part by Soviet experience but equally by other factors—have consciously adopted a model of secular statehood for nearly thirty years. And in fact, only some aspects of this model—particularly its strong reliance on state security approaches to manage religious organizations—can be directly traced to the Soviet experience. By contrast, much of it is reminiscent not of the Soviet approach to religion, but of the secularist model that predominated in Turkey before the advent of the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As discussed above, the model is not a static one; rather, it is in constant evolution, and differs in important aspects from one country to the next. And while it has been strongly defensive in its aims, this is now beginning to change into a more positive approach, as regional states come of age as members of the international system.

But has the Central Asian model worked? This is a crucial question, not least because of the dire predictions of Western academics and activists that the repression of religious freedom across the region—particularly in Uzbekistan—would exacerbate the problem of Islamist radicalization by alienating “pious Muslims” and pushing them into the arms of extremists.⁵⁸ Clearly, however, these warnings have not been borne out. In fact, the region’s trajectory has been shown the opposite; those states that employed the most aggressive measures to combat extremism—namely, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—have had comparably fewer problems with violent extremism in recent years. Meanwhile, those that adopted more liberal approaches, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, instead saw an increase in religiously-motivated violence. By the early 2010s, therefore, leaders in those countries appear to have deduced, to put it simply, that Tashkent had it right and the West had it wrong; and began to emulate the policies adopted by Uzbekistan. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Central Asian leaders have largely succeeded in the aim of preventing Islamist extremism from expanding its foothold in their societies. The price of this success is a legitimate question, but that does not change the fact that it appears to have worked.

The question of whether the secular model adopted by the states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan can survive is a more difficult one. After all, these Muslim-majority societies were isolated from the rest of the Muslim World for close to a century. The resulting differences they exhibit in popular values and beliefs may very well dissolve over time. In another thirty years, it is entirely possible that Central Asian societies would regress to the mean of the Muslim world, and espouse val-

ues and worldviews more comparable to those in Middle Eastern and South Asian societies. However, this is not destined to happen. For the time being, it appears clear that the model of state-religion interaction continues to command considerable popular support, and is in line with the values of the majority of the region's population. If anything, it is plausible that support for secularism and traditional Islam has increased rather than decreased as a result of the growth of sectarian warfare and religiously motivated turmoil in the Middle East, not least the rise and fall of the Islamic State.

Yet, given that the Central Asian model developed largely under conditions of authoritarian rule, can it survive a process of democratization? Elsewhere in the Muslim world, it is clear that political Islam has gained strength during periods of political liberalization, not least because Islamist networks like the Muslim Brotherhood or Turkish political Islamism based largely on the Naqshbandi movement have displayed a determination, a clarity of message, and an organizational capability that their secular rivals have simply not been able to match. While this question cannot be answered at present, the experience of Kyrgyzstan is instructive. Kyrgyzstan is by no means a consolidated democracy, but since 2010 the country has transformed into a parliamentary system of government with competitive elections. Its relatively liberal political environment also allowed a greater societal role for foreign-based religious groups than any other regional state. If political liberalization in Central Asia would automatically lead to a rise of political Islamism, this would have happened in Kyrgyzstan in the past decade. Quite the opposite has occurred, however; tellingly, Kyrgyzstan has developed its policies in the religious area to be more rather than less similar to its more authoritarian neighbors.

Rather, in the final analysis, the key question may be whether, in the long run, the Central Asian model can evolve to rely more on positive rather than defensive and restrictive elements—that is, whether the protection of secularism is possible in the absence of restrictive measures against political Islam. The experience of other parts of the Muslim world, most notably Turkey, is not encouraging in this regard.

The fourth and final question is whether the Central Asian model has any relevance outside the former Communist world. The answer is most probably a qualified “yes.” The qualification stems from the fact that the core areas of the Muslim world hardly view Central Asia as an area with considerable religious legitimacy. While that may change as the Central Asian states embrace and publicize the region's role in the emergence and development of Islam, it means that—at least for the time being—the propensity for adopting a Central Asian model in the Middle East may be limited.

However, the decline of secularism in Turkey has meant the elimination, in practice, of the most visible and successful model of a secular state in the Muslim world. To the extent that Turkey is an inspiration today, it is an inspiration not because of secular governance but because of its successful economy and Erdoğan's brand of Islamism. That, in turn, leaves a void that may gradually be filled by the states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. If they evolve into more positive rather than merely defensive models of secular governance, as they appear to be in the process of doing, it is by no means out of the question that they will become the subject of considerable interest elsewhere. This is likely to be the case not least

if the mixing of religion and politics in the Muslim World continues to have the disastrous consequences it has so far.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

These conclusions fly in the face of the assumptions that have long defined U.S. policy toward the Central Asian states. Here, several observations are in order. First, the fact that the region's states have adopted secular governance hardly ever figures as a positive factor in American policy toward the region as a whole, or toward its constituent parts individually. This is, in part, a function of the fact that the main act of U.S. legislation for the region, the *Freedom Support Act of 1992*, does not mention secular governance at all. By contrast, *The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998* ensures both that the State Department must deliver a yearly report on each country's freedom of religion, and that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom does the same, with reports that are often highly critical of these states. As a result, to the extent that these countries' secular policies figure in U.S. policy, they do so negatively—as factors that expose them to often harsh American criticism.

To a certain extent, this is because the principles of the secular state, secular systems of law, and secular education are so deeply embedded in the Western consciousness that they are simply taken for granted. Therefore, American foreign policy has not tended to reflect on the fact that these countries' embrace of a secular system of government, a secular system of law and secular courts, and a secular educational system is unique in the Muslim World and an important facet of their societies that make them naturally predisposed to positive relations with the West. Instead of acknowledging the positive aspects of what these states have accomplished, U.S. policy has narrowly fixed its attention on areas that have yet to be reformed. This, of course, is a serious act of omission as it fails to recognize how profoundly significant the features of these countries are when viewed in the context of neighboring Muslim societies.

This approach also derives from a very narrow understanding of secularism by American officials and activists. In fact, they equate secularism with the American model of state neutrality toward religion, and do not recognize the legitimacy of the *laïcist* model of secularism that France represents, and which endorses the restriction on religious life in the public space in order to maintain the freedom of citizens *from* religion.

That view causes considerable consternation, verging on disbelief, across the region. Regional leaders find it impossible to comprehend why some U.S. government agencies work closely with them on counterterrorism, while other branches of the same government expose them to harsh criticism for policies that not only make counterterrorist cooperation possible, but which should be in the interest of the United States. By failing to accept the legitimacy of the *laïcist* foundations of their model of secular statehood, U.S. critics have disqualified themselves in the eyes of regional officials, and have, as a consequence, become less influential. This has particularly been the case following the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, when Central Asians saw thousands of young Muslims from western countries joining the *jihad* in the Levant. While considerable numbers of Central Asians have fought in the Levant too, the majority appear to have been recruited in Russia and not in their

home countries. In any case, most European states have considerably higher rates of recruits in *per capita* terms relative to their Muslim populations. To Central Asian leaders, this indicated the fallacy of Western countries' arguments to allow the free circulation of religious ideas. Indeed, these events further undermined the credibility of western criticism of their policies, as regional states view their own policies to have been considerably more successful than the western *laissez-faire* approach in combating extremism.

Of course, the Central Asian model of state policy in the religious sphere is by no means perfect. If it was, the region's leaders would not feel the need to adjust their approach so frequently, or to make the major changes that Uzbekistan's leadership has carried out. The criticism that their policies have erred on the side of excessive restrictions at times is legitimate; yet, it is also patently clear that American criticism misses the mark by failing to accept the legitimacy of the Central Asian model of a secular state.

There is a considerable opportunity cost associated with this approach. First, it deprives the United States of influence with regional leaders. Second, it fails to harness a development that is inherently in the interest of the United States: the consolidation of secular statehood in an important part of the Muslim world.

There is therefore a need to revise U.S. policy toward these states. This does not mean the United States would have to abandon its principles in the area of human rights. Rather, it would mean adjusting current policy to accept the underlying premise and aim of the Central Asian model: namely, to maintain secular governance and thwart the spread of radical ideology. If, and only if, the United States makes it clear that it accepts and endorses these premises will it be possible to adopt a policy toward these states that works with their governments, rather than against them, and helps to enhance and improve the Central Asian model.

Endnotes

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