Islam and Politics in Central Asia: Implications for Regional Security
中亚的伊斯兰教与政治：对地区安全的影响

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Abstract
The paper of Dr. Sergey Markedonov is focused on the Islamic factor in the political life of Central Asian countries. For newly independent states of Central Asia their religious composition is extremely important for any assessment of changing identities of those countries since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, their future political stability, and its developing role in the international arena.

The author examines the historical legacy of Islam for those countries as well as Islamic landscape which is extremely diverse. He pays a special attention to relationship between the official structures and various

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Islamic organizations in Central Asia demonstrating commonalities and differences in the state approaches of the countries. He prepares some case studies of the five states of the region. The author especially analyses the influence of radical Islamism and the global Islamist and jihadist revolutionary movements that are part and parcel of the pre-revolutionary or revolutionary situation extant in much of the Muslim world.

The Author discusses the regional security agenda and desire of key external and domestic actors for the keeping of their particular role in Central Asian geopolitics and economics resolving issues of stability and prevention of Islamist and Jihadist scenarios.

【中文摘要】

谢尔盖·马尔科多诺夫博士在本文中集中讨论了中亚国家政治生活中的伊斯兰因素。对新独立的中亚国家而言，宗教构成对这些国家自 1991 年苏联解体以来的身份变化、未来政治稳定、在国际舞台中的角色演变等评估都极其重要。

作者在文章中考察了中亚国家的伊斯兰遗产以及多样化的伊斯兰面貌，重点探讨了中亚国家官方机构与多样化的伊斯兰组织之间的关系，展示了中亚国家处理伊斯兰事务的共性与差异。文章在讨论中使用了中亚五国的大量案例。作者还着重分析了激进伊斯兰主义、伊斯兰圣战运动等对中亚国家的影响，认为中亚国家的伊斯兰圣战运动是穆斯林世界很多地方出现的变革运动和变革前运动的一部分。

作者还讨论了中亚地区安全议题，以及地区内外的关键行为体在中亚地缘政治和经济中发挥特定作用以保持地区稳定、遏制伊斯兰极端分子和圣战运动。
I. Introduction

The fast evolving crisis in Ukraine causing concerns of the USA, EU countries and Russia has overshadowed the situation in Central Asia. Although possible growing tensions and Ukraine’s hypothetical breakup are just topics for discussion, Central Asia even now can be viewed as the most important region in the former Soviet Union.

Central Asia, comprising of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and the energy-rich Caspian Sea, owes its significance to its vast economic potential and its geo-strategic location. With a total population of about 92 million people, near universal literacy and abundant energy resources, Central Asia is an attractive destination for investment and trade. It has a strategic location at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and the Far East.

The geostrategic worth of Central Asia is harder to underestimate. It borders two of the permanent members of the UN Security Council in Russia and China. The implications of sharing a land border with two of nations pretending to play a decisive role in the international arena are manifold.

Central Asian region borders Afghanistan. After thirteen years of fighting the war on terrorism in the country, the United States and its NATO allies considerably cut down their military presence. The vacuum left by the withdrawal will pose a challenge to the security environment in both Afghanistan and the surrounding region, including the three neighboring Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Afghanistan’s very weak state institutions and the prospect of political chaos represent a major security threat, Washington’s oft-repeated remarks celebrating the successes of democratization notwithstanding.
However despite of decrease of the military presence the United States still keeps a closer check on its rivals in Central Asia. Gaining control in the region thus, is crucial for all three of these great powers. China can couple its rampant economic growth and use it as a tool to gain a strong political backing by taking control of one of the most vital regions of the world, and dealing a blow to the US which is keen to expand its means of control further in the region, having significant presence their already. Similarly, Russia having lost this power bloc in 1991 needs to recover its control in the region so that it may continue to benefit by proxy.

Central Asia has some particularities for Moscow. It is less perceived as a highly competitive area with the US. The countries in the region have no clear aspirations to NATO or EU membership and their balancing between Moscow and Washington has been most frequently determined by their own bilateral disputes and the dynamics of regional competition, especially between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan. Moreover, the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan since 2001 has brought Russian and US interests ever closer together despite numerous disputes on other issue. Even after the Ukrainian crisis the decision-makers on both sides should consider limited cooperation in areas of mutual interest at best or those representing immediate threat to one’s national security at least. One issue that clearly stands out and has been on the radar screen in both capitals is the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) covering Central Asia.

Nevertheless Russia is concerned about the strengthening of mutual relationship between Washington and Central Asian countries, considering them as a challenge for its privileged role.

Unlike the South Caucasus and Ukraine, Central Asia looks like an arena of trilateral cooperation and competition. Moscow sees Beijing as a counterweight to US
aspirations. China and Russia are engaged jointly in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Beijing also has a particular concern about the threat of radical Islam and nationalism in the region, given the majority Muslim population in Xinjiang – the vast eastern province that borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. At the same time, however, China is very effective at promoting its economic interests in the region, absent any altruistic motives – an arena in which Moscow is a competitor. It should also be pointed out that the China factor weakens any direct U.S.-Russian competition, since it represents a third key player in the region – especially in the economic sphere.

Apart from the geopolitical factor, the Central Asian countries are confronted with a broad spectrum of political and security challenges, many of which derive from their dysfunctional power structures. Political power in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan is so highly personalized that any dramatic shift at the top could unleash serious internal turmoil. Additionally, all three countries are almost certain to soon face leadership changes: Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan, recently celebrated his 77th birthday; President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev is 75; and even though the president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, is 62, he has been in power since November 1994.

In contrast, Kyrgyzstan’s political woes are reflected in its lack of effective government, particularly a considerable power vacuum and significant regional divisions between the north and the south.

Throughout the region, Central Asia’s authoritarian model of government has all but eliminated any meaningful secular opposition. As a result, citizens protesting against the government are classified as radical Islamists even when they are secular, because this serves the governments’ political agendas.
All aforementioned factors require the comprehensive analysis of the development of Islam in Central Asian countries composing the majority of the dissolved Soviet Union population. This factor is extremely important for any assessment of changing identities of those countries since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, their future political stability, and its developing role in the international arena. For Russia and China as the closest neighbors of the region the implications of the Islamic development are especially important. Both countries have solid portions of Muslims and at the same time they specially care on preserving of their ethnic and religious diversity as a manifestation of their own distinctiveness.

II. Central Asian Muslim Landscape Today

Although Muslims in Central Asia tend to speak of the unity of Islam, it is not a monolithic religion, and their options on it as well as politics, international agenda, national and local traditions are diverse. Islam was unlikely to be a unifying or stabilizing force in post-Soviet countries. As before, Islamic communities remained divided by varying Islamic traditions and did not comprise a homogeneous geographical, ethno-linguistic or cultural space. The pockets of Muslim communities in Central Asian countries vary in terms of their particular historical legacies and evolutions, ethnic make-up, level of Islamization, relations with foreign cultures and the secular state, institutional and organizational structure and the extent of exposure to external Islamic influences. Their everyday life often consists of an amalgam of Soviet secular, pre-Islamic and Islamic religious norms alongside local ethnic traditions and customs.

A large majority of post-Soviet Muslims in Central Asia are followers of the Hanafi madhhhab (juridical school of Sunni Islam). In Kazakhstan for example other Islamic groups that account for less than 1 percent of the population include Shafi’i Sunni,
Shia, Sufi, and Ahmadi. The Hanafi School is considered to be more tolerant of local custom and variations in Islamic practice than the Shafi’i. It is the most liberal in its accommodation of tradition and promotion of a tolerant relationship between the religious community and the state, with political leaders not challenged for supremacy in the political realm by theological elites.

Shia Islam is less widespread among ex-Soviet Muslims. Approximately 4 percent of Muslims in Tajikistan are Ismaili Shia, the majority of whom resides in the remote Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous region. They are followers of the Aga Khan\(^1\). Approximately 1 percent of Uzbekistan’s Muslim is Shia, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. There are also roughly 1,000 members of Shia groups in Kyrgyzstan. Shiism, at least at the everyday level, is also widespread among the Turkmen\(^2\).

However, these traditional distinctions do not capture the full range of Muslim belief and practice in Central Asia. Central Asia – particularly Uzbekistan and parts of Tajikistan – was historically closely connected with Sufism, mystical Islam. The Naqshbandiyya tariqat (Sufi brotherhood), founded in 14\(^{\text{th}}\) century in Bukhara (today it is territory of Uzbek state), plays the most significant role in Uzbekistan. A member of the Naqshbandiyya order in Uzbekistan suggested that there are 10,000 Sufis, while a Qadiriyya Sufi in Tajikistan contended that 30 per cent of the population belongs to the Naqshbandiyya order. These figures based on the International Crisis Group observation are not very reliable though they are useful in terms of perception on the regional Sufi devotees\(^3\). Sufis have strong positions in the South of Kazakhstan. The founder of the Sufi order (Yasawiya) – Khoja Akhmet Yassawy (1103-1166/67) is

\(^{1}\) Aga Khan is a name used by the Imam of the Nizari Ismailis since 1818.
\(^{2}\) Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union. Ed.by Yemelianova G. Routledge. 2010
considered by the Turkic Muslims to be the sacred leader and the city of Turkestan (currently Southern part of Kazakhstan) where he preached – minor Mecca. His well known work "Hikmet" ("Knowledge") written in Turkic (Chagatai) language belongs to the common spiritual inheritance of all Turkic nations. In 1996 the text was published in Kazakh.

After the Soviet collapse, religious liberalization brought the penetration and growing influence of external Islamic, Salafist, Islamist and jihadist movements of different origins—Arabic, Turkish and South Asian—as well as non-traditional domestic groups. Radical and non-official Islam in Russia and Central Asia is also a heterogeneous and multi-dimensional phenomenon. Those who consider themselves defenders of “real Islam” or “pure Islam” do not constitute as homogenous a group as one might expect. Attempts to generalize face significant methodological difficulties. Those problems are compounded not only by the ambiguities inherent in the terms “Islamism” or “radical Muslims”. For the purposes of this report the term "Islamism" or “radical Islam” refers to the ideology and practice that aims to create an environment in which the problems and contradictions of a society, in which a particular Muslim community exists, are to be solved exclusively through the application of the Islamic norms prescribed through the Shariah system of regulations derived directly from the Quran and Sunnah. Adherents of radical Islamism claim that their interpretation of Islam is the only correct religion and seek the establishment of a Shariah law-based state.¹ Not all of these unofficial groups are violent, but to a one they reject the authority of the existing official clergy, which they view as illegitimate on account of its subordination to the secular state. We will refer to violent groups with same goal of a Shariah law-based state as jihadist.

In Central Asian mass-media, political discourse, and even the expert community, these radical Islamists are frequently labeled “Wahhabis”. The concept of Wahhabism is generally interpreted as a nontraditional movement of Islam related to foreign influence, from Saudi Arabia in particular, and religious radicalism. Non-official and radical Islam in Central Asia and even within the Russian framework exhibits a different character. In addition to the Salafis, the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami party (HTI). Salafis are neither in approach nor ideology the same as members of HTI or supporters of Tablighi Jamaat (TJ). In the post-Soviet space, however, Islamist activists on the ground often ignore these general contradictions, choosing instead to promote an ideology and religious identity that is a mixture of the approaches of the Salafis and HTI.

In these cases it is necessary to understand that Central Asia, stand on the remote periphery of large, well-known, Islamist trends. On the ground, the dynamics of these regions manifest themselves differently. Moreover, the degree of extremism and radicalism demonstrated by different Islamic movements, including Salafi groups, HTI, TJ, “Nurcu” and “Hizmet” movements of Turkish origin or Quranits is also heavy disputed. It is inherently difficult to produce any estimation of the exact number of non-official Muslims in Central Asia due to the secrecy that surrounds their networks and activities; these populations are usually overestimated or underestimated as a result of the angle of assessment or biases inherent in the figure. Occasionally observers and human rights activists argue that Islamist groups and associated activists are falsely accused of connections to broader local and international groups. All of these movements can be united under one term.

\[^{①}\] Unlike HT, Salafis reject the party principle (stating that Islam itself is more important than any parties). Generally HT is blamed by Salafis for their engagement with the West. Although not all Salafis are violent their extremely radical adherents actively criticize the HT rhetoric which addresses and advocates for peaceful methods.
“nonofficial Muslims,” due to the fact that they are not subordinated to Central Asian officially recognized Muslim structures, most of them are not officially registered, and, according to national legislations considered extremist organizations.

Thus the post-Soviet Islam of Central Asia looks like patchworks of different ideas and practices. It represents different degrees of radicalism and loyalties. Moreover each country of the region demonstrates its uniqueness in terms of state-confessional relationship, legislation and collisions between the religious revival and secularism.

III. Kazakhstan: Islam in a country-mediator

Islam is the largest religion practiced in Kazakhstan. From its Geography, Kazakhstan is the northernmost Muslim-majority country in the world.

Aware of the potential for investment from the Muslim countries of the Middle East, President Nursultan Nazarbayev visited Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia; at the same time, however, he preferred to cast Kazakhstan as a bridge between the Muslim East and the predominantly Christian West (in 2010 Kazakhstan became the first OSCE Chair among former Soviet Union republics). The president's first trip to the Muslim holy city of Mecca, which did not occur until 1994, was part of an itinerary that also included a visit to Pope John Paul II in the Vatican.

In newly independent Kazakhstan Islam has become an important factor of the nation-state building. Historically the religion did not play any important role in the political life of the Kazakh society. It had the form of moderate "household" Islam. It was important in everyday life of the people. Local clergy served the common needs of the Kazakhs. In the Soviet time the popular Islam remained as means of self-identification of the Muslims and an important element of the mode of life of the people.
After the dissolution of the USSR the situation in Kazakhstan from the religious point of view is exemplified not only by the revival of the religious traditions for Kazakhstan, namely Islam and Christianity, but by the appearance of other numerous religious trends and the state faced the necessity to adapt them to the goal of the building of new nation. The nation-building process has been realized in parallel with the engagement of the young state with the global Islamic world.

The state actively promoted religiosity in order to strengthen new national identity. The years of independence were marked by the large scale construction of mosques and orthodox churches. Quran was published in Kazakh and Russian translations, the Bible (Injil) became available in Kazakh language. Special shops selling religious literature and calendars opened. Religious periodicals were published. Since 1997 the monthly "Islam Elemi" ("Islam World") has been published. However in parallel with the state activity growing public (grass-root) religiosity has become an important social reality.

The current complexity of the religious situation is characterized not only by the problematic of the growing religiosity of the population or the conflicts between traditional Islam and the fundamental radical trends. The crucial question concerns the growing contradiction between traditional practices of the Kazakh people and the current process of Islamization or between the general canons of Islam and particular Kazakh traditions.

At the moment, one can witness the increase in growth of the process of Islamization and rapid increase of religious feeling in the population of Kazakhstan. The current religious situation becomes more acute due to the activity of foreign missionaries and preachers and the influence of religion on the consciousness of the young. One can
also notice the expansion in the field of activities of Islam and the complication of the religious factor within the Islamic structures. This matter, however, concerns not only the threat of religious fundamentalism and extremism. The infiltration and proliferation of radical religious trends and the increase in armed incidents and actions constitute the reality of life in today’s Kazakhstan which experienced its first suicide bombings in 2011. Kazakhstan was even mentioned by the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC)\(^1\) in terms of potential security threats: “Although Kazakhstan remains perhaps the safest and most stable of the Central Asian republics, it does appear that the security situation, particularly in Western Kazakhstan, is changing, particularly when compared to the virtual absence of data before 2010. Since then, there have been approximately 10 to 12 incidents per year that might fit into the terrorism/violent extremism category. How rapidly, how much, and if the situation will change further is anyone’s guess”.\(^2\) Following incidents in Western Kazakhstan U.S. Mission in this country encourages the American citizens travelling the aforementioned region to remain vigilant.

Thus today considerable changes in the dynamics of the Muslim community (Ummah) of Kazakhstan represent serious challenge for the authorities. The differences in the varieties of the Kazakhs’ perceptions of Islam – in other words the questioning of whether Kazakhstan should adopt a more “traditional” or “non-conventional” type of Islam – carries the threat of not only inter-ethnic but intra-ethnic divisions and oppositions (especially within the ethnic majority of the population). This difference in perception accounts for the increase in conflict situations within the community between the Muslim rejecting national traditions and traditionalist Muslims. There are

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\(^1\) Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) was created in 1985 under the Federal Advisory Committee Act to promote security cooperation between American private sector interests worldwide and the U.S. Department of State. The OSAC "Council" is comprised of 30 private sector and 4 public sector member organizations that represent specific industries or agencies operating abroad.

cases when representatives of different viewpoints use violence against each other.

For a long time (at least till the late 1990s) Kazakhstan had the most liberal policy on religious affairs of any of the Central Asian states. Most highest-rank officials including the President saw little reason for more intrusive controls. The constitution (adopted in 1995) provides for religious freedom and defines the country as a secular state with the right to decline religious affiliation. At the same time the national government has tried to use the symbolism of Islam and Islam-Orthodoxy peaceful co-existence (through the prism of particular Eurasian identity) as a part of legitimization. The foreign preachers unlike other Central Asian countries in the 1990s enjoyed the religious freedom in Kazakhstan. There were numerous other religious education institutions, many set up with funding from Arab countries or Turkey.

However, the increasing activity of militant Islamic groups from Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the rise in support for Salafis and Hizb ut- Tahrir especially in the South of the country (it was impact of both domestic self-radicalization and migration from Uzbekistan where religious policy had not been so liberal) prompted a debate among officials on new approaches. In this context it’s worth noting the case of Kazakhstan clearly demonstrates the state policy of religious restrictions could be reaction on radicalization while many of the Western observers see the growth of militant and non-official Islam as a public response on the official repressions. The National Security Council, chaired by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, created a commission in 1999 to develop policies to combat religious extremism. The Committee for National Security (KNB) has said that fighting religious extremism is one of its top priorities. The government implemented a 2011 law applying stringent mandatory registration requirements on missionaries and religious groups. The law gives the government broad grounds to deny religious
groups legal status. While most religious groups managed to obtain legal registration, some were denied registration because they lacked the requisite number of members, and a few groups, such as the Ahmadi Muslims, were denied registration based on their religious beliefs.\(^1\) However the reasons for radicalization as well as spreading of non-conventional Islamic trends are not limited by ideological influences outside the country. One of the most important problems is uncompleted process of the national identity shaping and contradictions between its civic and ethnic versions. The other significant point is regional differences determined first and foremost by the living standards. It is also necessary to pay attention to the level of educational preparation of state-supported Islamic structures. National security services control proselyte activity of Islam missionaries, confiscate weapons and extremist publications but the expansion of radical ideas is often connected with unsatisfactory work of official Muslim clerics. Mosque imams are often poorly trained and unprofessional in their work. Not all of them have higher or secondary specialized religious education. It is not always that mullahs can correctly explain the essence of traditional Islam to believers, and, moreover, they do not dare to participate in discussions on religious questions and Salafism with representatives of radical or non-official movements active in Kazakhstan.

Unlike its neighbors the Kazakhstan experience of terrorism and anti-terrorism is not so long. Thus now for this country’s elite it will require colossal effort to differentiate between radicals and those who would be amenable to pledge their political loyalty to the state. It would be wrong to label all nonofficial-Muslim groups as “extremist” or

\(^1\) The Ahmadi Muslim communities are established in over 200 countries. Originally it was founded in India founded in 1889 in India by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian (1835–1908). Ahmadis subscribe to the same beliefs as most Muslims, but with a difference of opinion regarding Khatam al-Nabuwwah (finality of prophethood). In Kazakhstan this community was established in 1991.
“terrorist organizations”. Sometimes opposition groups exist, primarily focused on local interests (anti-corruption, social conditions and so on); these could be integrated into activities already underway within country’s legal and political framework.

IV. Islam in Tajikistan: between civil war and reconciliation

The history of Islam in post-Soviet Tajikistan has been sharply different from the rest of Central Asia. This small young state has demonstrated three unique phases of very contradictory and tangled interaction between the secular governmental structures and politically loaded Muslim community:

- Civil War (1992-1997)
- Post-reconciliation status quo shaping (2003- currently).

Unlike Russia and Kazakhstan politicized Islam began playing more significant role in the Tajikistan process since its first day as independent state. It was the only former Soviet Union Republic where civil war was waged around religion not only for political sympathies (like in Georgia between 1991 and 1993 where supporters of first elected president Zviad Gamsakhurdia fought against ex-Soviet leader Eduard Shevardnadze). It was not also interethnic conflict like those in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria and Chechnya where religious component either was invisible or overshadowed by issues of ethnicity and nationalism. Islamist opposition used hostilities against ethnic Russians and Uzbeks, residents of Tajikistan but nevertheless religious discourse played much more important role in the course of the Tajik civil war of 1992-1997 and afterwards for the post-war political reconstruction. Due to the active engagement of the Islamists in the civil war Islam as a potential political solution lost its initial popularity by the end of the fight in 1997. Many people, rightly or wrongly, considered the IRP and the United Tajik opposition (UTO) in general the fomenters of the civil war.
After five devastating years of civil war, the parties of the conflict sat around the negotiation table. According to the Peace treaty (1997) the opposition got 30 percent of the positions in different governmental structures and 25 percent of the positions in the Central Electoral Commission. Two years later, the Supreme Court of Tajikistan abolished a law on the prohibition of the activity of the UTO’s political parties and media. On the year of signing the Treaty the President of Tajikistan ex-communist Emomali Rakhmon (then Rakhmonov) went to Mecca.

After it Tajikistan was represented as a pattern to reconciliation processes and state-religion relationship across the region. Muslim communities and Islamic parties got wide freedom in their activities. The IRP till now is the only legal Islamist political party not only in Central Asia but in the whole post-Soviet space. According to estimates of the International Crisis Group (ICG) Tajikistan was the country of “Islamist compromise”. It is worth noting the former leaders of the Islamist opposition seriously contributed in criticism of Hizb-ut-Tahrir party. So Haji Akbar Turajonzoda (distinguished Islamist activist born in 1954, one of the UTO leaders and then former deputy prime minister in 1998-2005) claimed HT as a serious challenge for the Tajik security and stability. He said that “more detailed analysis of HT’s programmatic and ideological views and concrete examples of its activities suggests that it was created by anti-Islamic forces. One proof of this is the comfortable existence this organization enjoys in a number of Western countries, where it has large centers and offices that develop its concept of an Islamic caliphate”.

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1 See the official web-site of the party in both Tajik and Russian versions: http://www.nahzat.tj/
3 Ramtanu Maitra, “Remarking Central Asia”, May 27, 2005, see the following website, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/GE27Ag01.html
However the following years the governmental policy toward Islam began to dramatically change. The third phase of the State-Islam relationship started. The Tajik regime in early 2000s step by step began to minimize the political influence of its former partners in peacemaking process and treaty. Since the mid of 2000s the Tajik government has started a firm struggle against “fundamentalism”. Some observers (Elizabeth Van Wie Davis and analysts of ICG) as well as the U.S. Department of State tend to explain this shift due to repressive policy of the authorities and “the mentality of most political leaders owes much more to the Soviet legacy of religious control than to the compromise peace”.

It is impossible to deny the influence of the authoritarian political style on the current president of Tajikistan who has held his post since November 1994 and his minimal readiness for compromises and sharing power. But the problem has not been limited by exclusively archaic political culture dominating in Tajikistan. The government has really faced new generation of Islamists whose religious and political formation was not connected with the Soviet underground activity and dissent and consequent Tajik civil war. First of all it has been the “Salafia” movement prohibited in 2009. The new Islamists don’t concern the old status quo and following previous compromises. They in more extent are linked with the global religious trends including Jihadists. Thus even legal Islamists represented in the Tajik parliament (during the parliamentary elections of 2010 IRP received 8.2 percent of all votes) are considered by them like servants of “Infidelis”.

Anyway last years the crackdown of Rahmon’s regime on Islamic political activity

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and even everyday life of Muslim communities has been the most evident of that changing policy. The law of 2012 prohibits persons under the age of 18 from participating in public religious activities, and women were also effectively barred from attending Muslim religious services. Most members of minority religious groups were able to attend places of worship, but Muslim boys, even when accompanied by an adult male, required an approved petition from the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) to attend services in mosques. The government does not permit school and university students to wear the hijab, although it permits wearing traditional Tajik hats and scarves. In some districts the authorities closed mosques which were controlled by the IRR. So in 2012 President Emomali Rahmon’s administration supported the closing of the Muhammadiya Mosque, a popular one run by Haji Akbar Turajonzoda’s family and about 70 parishes all over the country have been turned into clubs and tearooms. It is necessary to note that regardless dramatic changes in the state policy towards Islam IRP leadership even elaborating its own alternative project did not resist the adoption of amendments to the Law Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (March, 2009)\(^1\). Furthermore, President Rakhmon substantiates every new restriction on “suspicious” Islamic activity by his concern for the purity of traditional for Tajikistan Hanafi Madhab.

However this strict state control over Islam partially justified by real challenges and being tactically effective is rather vulnerable in terms of strategy because it ignores some very important realities. First of all it is based on exclusively bureaucratic mechanisms and doesn’t propose any effective solution for social and political issues (such as regional differences, poverty and corruption, problems which are actively exploited by the Islamists in their propaganda). It deals with more on post-reconciliation status quo keeping and does not relate to the social development.

It does not also help to the official Muslim clergy to be more educated, legitimate and attractive in the religious competition with non-traditional and non-conventional trends. Second, those strict approaches are useless in terms of strengthening of state institutions. Spreading of Islamism today and formation of new Islamists have been caused not only by successful efforts both local and international preachers but rather with decay of the secular system that regulated different life spheres (especially courts, law-enforcement agencies). Hence there is the growth of popularity of the alternative jurisdictions including radical Muslim groups. Third, the restrictive policy practically does not take into the account the generations’ change and dynamics of public attitude to the Islamists. In the late 1990s people in Tajikistan were tired from the war and considered the Islamist opposition as the main factor of violation of their stability. Since 1997 they have been living in different realities and reminiscences on the civil war are not so strong while there are many reasons for criticism addressed to the authorities and used by their opponents. Moreover the new post-Soviet generation of Tajiks is more religious especially in their everyday life in comparison with their parents brought up in the conditions of the state atheism.

This is why the most important strategic goal of the Tajik authorities is strengthening of effective secular institutions of power, national identity, development of the attractive model of national Islam as a counterweight to the foreign influences and supra-ethnic Islamist discourses, as well as more active engagement of the youth in those projects.

V. Islam in Uzbekistan: the price of stability

In the Soviet time Uzbekistan played a particular role in the relationship between the atheist state and Islam. The Soviet Council on Religious Affairs (special state body responsible for all issues concerning religions and believers) considered the Central Asia’s Spiritual Board of Muslims (SADUM) located in Tashkent as the core Islamic
structure for the whole USSR controlled the most of then existed mosques and communities. Rather the Islamic clergy was trained at the Mir-i-Arab Madrasah in Bukhara and the Tashkent Islamic Institute, both in Uzbekistan while medieval monuments in Samarkand and Bukhara were widely used by the country leadership for the foreign delegations’ receptions especially from the Middle East and North African countries. In Tashkent numerous conferences and round tables devoted to the USSR “peaceful foreign policy” took place. Thus Uzbekistan was perceived like a showcase and façade of the Soviet Islam.

However since the 1970s small informal groups of Islamists uncontrolled by official clergy began playing more active role propagating their views on the faith (including criticism on the Soviet policy in Afghanistan and support of mujahedeen cause) especially in Andijon and Namangan (future centers of Islamist radicalism in the independent Uzbekistan and the post-Soviet Central Asia in general). As Martha Brill Olcott rightly notes, “the loosening of Soviet control—first through the growing gray economy in Uzbekistan and then, in the mid-1980s, through the introduction of limited cooperative-based trade and private enterprise—provided the opportunity for these groups to make the money needed to support their activities. It also gave them the ability to use corrupt Soviet institutions for their own purposes”\(^1\).

The extreme politicization of Islam and State-Religion relationship dates back to the late 1980s- early 1990s, when the former Soviet system rapidly declined and interest to the ethnic and religious revival grew tremendously.

In those conditions the two contradictory approaches to Islam were highlighted. Till nowadays the conflict between them is one of the most topical issues of the

independent Uzbekistan political agenda. The primary axis of this conflict has been between perception of Islam as a part of the cultural tradition and ethno-national legacy and advocating strict adherence to spiritual behavior. For the supporters of the first approach belonging to Islam means to have one more significant marker of the national identity distinguishing the Uzbeks from the others while for the people sharing the second approach personal piety and observance is mandatory and they are more important that the ethno-national background.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 the elite of newly independent state faced the necessity to ensure nation-building with limited and subordinated role of religion challenged the supporters of Islamic statehood. In the post-Soviet period nowhere in Central Asia Islam has become more of a political issue than in Uzbekistan. Just this republic has been the regional epicenter for the struggles over the meaning of being Muslim and role Islam should play in the society.

On the one side leading governmental figures of Uzbekistan including President Islam Karimov tried to represent themselves as born-again Muslims, reciting prayers and verses from the Quran before public speeches and cabinet meetings though they had been former Communist leaders and apparatchiks (bureaucrats). On the other side the national government definitely suppressed any attempts of Islamist forces to violate its political control. Any attempts to set up legal Islamic party in Uzbekistan were quashed by authorities.

Unlike Tajikistan the Uzbek national government in the early 1990s managed to prevent full-scale civil war and to keep territorial integrity of the country even if nominally (taking into account the factor of the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley).

Historically the Ferghana Valley was a center of Islamic piety. Uzbekistan’s Ferghana region remained staunchly conservative after the 1991 collapse of communism, unlike cosmopolitan
However this victory was ensured due to highly repressive policy traditionally criticized by the USA and European Union countries as well as human rights organizations, numerous restrictions on the religious freedoms and tough state control over Islamic institutions. Series of terrorist acts such as bombings in Tashkent (1999), attacks in Tashkent and Bukhara (March-April, 2004), U.S. and Israeli embassies bombings (July, 2004) as well as unrest in Andijon (May, 2005) just strengthened this governmental policies. The latter event was explained by the authorities as an attempt of “fanatics and extremists” to overthrow the constitutional order. Following the Andijon uprising in May 2005, the Uzbek government intensified repressions against real and imagined Islamists (practically all opponents of the power are labeled “Islamists” or “Wahhabis”).

Today the national legislation restricts the religious freedom of unregistered groups and prohibits many activities, such as proselytizing. Many members of registered and unregistered minority religious groups faced heavy fines and short jail terms for violations of these laws. The government continued to deal harshly with Muslims who discussed religious issues outside of sanctioned mosques. However, the government generally did not interfere with worshippers at sanctioned mosques, and permitted the regular activities of religious groups traditionally present in the country, including the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Russian Orthodox communities.

The government perceives “religious extremism” as a serious threat to domestic security and stability. As a result, its policy is to ban Islamic groups it broadly

Tashkent. This territory of in politico-administrative terms divided between Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is over 100 thousand sq. km. and its population is over 11 million. It is a multi-ethnic region, although the dominant ethnic groups are Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz. It has become the poorest region of Central Asia with the highest level of unemployment among its population. In the post-Soviet period the Ferghana Valley has witnessed the impressive rise of radical Islamism.
determines to be extremist ones and criminalize membership such groups, which include Akromiya, Tablighi Jamaat, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The government also bans Nurcu founded by Sa'id-i Nursi (1878-1960) and associated with the religious teachings of Turkish scholar Fethullah Gülen, despite. It asserts that repression of persons or groups suspected of “religious extremism” is not a matter of religious freedom, but rather of preventing overthrow of the secular authorities and precluding incitement of interreligious and ethnic instability and hatred in a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional society.

Meanwhile just Uzbekistan-originated militant and radical Islamist organizations have been considered the strongest forces throughout Central Asia.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir activity has played a special role for Uzbekistan. Although, HT is a part of a wider international organization, its objectives and tactics are determined by local context. The doctrinal and legal platforms of the local leaders of the HT are characterized by vagueness and eclectism which allows significant deviation from the original HT ideas. In the rhetoric it is nonviolent stressing on ideological struggle and spreading literature unlike militant jihadists. At the same time HT is considered to be reservoir of jihadists especially on the local level.

Thus the Uzbek secularism and deterring Islamism is ensured to strict state control, restrictions and repressive policy. However in the current conditions there are no clear alternatives to the both sides. The secular opposition is rather marginal. Moreover in the case of scenarios similar to the Arab Spring weak and divided opposition with secular-democratic slogans could be swiftly overtaken by rapidly developing events and that such a revolution could slide into chaos or anarchy, overthrowing the Karimov government and bringing a radical Islamic or nationalist regime to power. The Uzbekistan’s regime has serious vulnerabilities. The first challenge is the likely
upcoming succession of political power. The whole political system and
decision-making process is extremely personified and the problem is search of the
person who could be legitimate not only among power clans but among the people.

Thus the most important problem for Uzbekistan is to minimize risks from both
external and domestic factors especially potential transfer of power and its consequent
consolidation. At the same time not denying the necessity to fight radicalism,
extremism and jihadism it is necessary to provide more qualitative policy which
would not provoke masses or people to be Islamists.

VI. Islam in Kyrgyzstan: instrument of the country’s unity?

Kyrgyzstan faces a very different challenge from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.
Especially in the North of the country, religious observance is quite limited, and many
citizens are Muslims in name only. Many Kyrgyz Muslims practice their religion in a
specific way influenced by shamanic tribal customs. Kyrgyz tribes traditionally
adopted reindeer, camels, snakes, owls, and bears as objects of worship. The strong
dependence of the nomads on the forces of nature reinforced such connections. Traces
of such beliefs remain in the religious practice of many of today's Kyrgyz residing in
the North. The South of the country is a different matter: here a large Uzbek minority
has been the main support of radical political groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The problem is Kyrgyzstan’s minority Uzbeks are disproportionately
underrepresented in state institutions. In 2002-2012 the number of Uzbek schools
decreased significantly (from 141 to 91) though before it their ratio (5.5 percent of all
republican schools) had not corresponded to the ratio of the Uzbek minority (about 15
percent of the population). The Uzbek language, unlike Russian, is not an official
state language—this despite the fact that Uzbeks are a larger minority than are ethnic
Russians. Recent efforts to promote Kirghiz nationalism and especially ethnic
violence of 2010, moreover, have further exacerbated ethnic Uzbek feelings of exclusion provoking popularity of Islamist ideas.

The South in general is characterized by much greater religious observance. Ethnic minorities such as Dungans and Uighurs also have an active role in religious life. Members of Russian Orthodox and other non-Muslim religious groups live mainly in major cities while Muslims concentrate predominantly in rural areas.

Unlike Uzbekistan and Tajikistan the Islamic factor in Kyrgyzstan during the first years of independence did not play a significant role in the politics. Some elements of Islamic values urged the process of nation-building. Additionally officials were allowed officials to travel to Mecca on a hajj under a tax-free agreement. However those times then Ombudsmen Tursunbai Bakir-ulu may be exaggerated when he said, “I am the only politician in Kyrgyzstan who prays”, but not by much. Most political figures lead an entirely secular lifestyle and have little insight into religious affairs.

However this relatively liberal religious policy was gradually revised since the second half of 1990s due to appearance of foreign Islamic missionary activity as well as more radical forms of Islam especially in the South of country. The policy shifted to the protectionism of alleged “traditional religions” (state-controlled Islam and the Orthodoxy). The state concern became more serious after the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) launched a series of raids into Southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. Since that time the national government significantly restricted the number of foreign missioners especially from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

In 2005 and 2010 the power in Kyrgyzstan was overthrown due to popular protest and

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clashes (in the latter case these changes were accompanied by ethnic violence in the South of the country). Now Kyrgyzstan stands as a contrasting case where there is an extreme shortage of effective government and a deficit of power and it multiplies concerns on the radical and non-conventional Islam as an effective tool for the social-political destabilization.

Although the constitution forbids the intrusion of any ideology or religion in the conduct of state business, a growing number of public figures have expressed support for the promotion of Islamic traditions. As in other parts of Central Asia, non-Central Asians have been concerned about the potential of a fundamentalist Islamic revolution that would emulate Iran and Afghanistan by bringing Islam directly into the shaping of state policy, to the detriment of the non-Islamic population.

The non-official and radical Islam in Kyrgyzstan looks less dangerous and ideologically rooted in comparison with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan while the state policy being restrictive is less repressive. However there are many prerequisites for concern. First of all it is ongoing regional split and lack of integral strategies. Second, the state institutions are rather weak and power looks extremely divided. Third, instable environment strengthens instability and unpredictability. For the Kyrgyz government the most urgent issue is minimizing ethnocracy and engagement of ethnic minority (especially Uzbeks) in the state-building and shaping civic national identity. No resolving this problem isolation of the largest minority is fraught by Islamization. In parallel the leveling two parts of the country is needed. Otherwise there is a ground for separatism or at least strong regional particularity which would become an obstacle for real not nominal territorial integrity. The absence of sufficient educational level among official Islamic clergymen is not unique problem of Kyrgyzstan. It is common for all post-Soviet entities. However in the Kyrgyz context it must be also resolved because without it the formation of Islamic alternative to radical and militant
Islam could not be realized.

**VII. Islam in Turkmenistan: the cult of leader instead of religiosity?**

The case of Turkmenistan is rather unique in the post-Soviet space. Statistics regarding religious affiliation are not available. Unlike all other Central Asian countries Turkmenistan for a long time witnessed the developing and strengthening the unprecedented personal cult of the first president of the country Saparmurat Niyazov (1940-2006). Turkmen media referred to him using the title "His Excellency Saparmurat Türkmenbaşy (the Father of Turkmen), President of Turkmenistan and Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers”. Niyazov became a substitute for the vacuum left by the downfall of the communist system, with his image replacing those of Marx and Lenin. He renamed the town of Krasnovodsk "Turkmenbashi" after himself, and renamed schools, airports and even a meteorite after himself and members of his family.

*Ruhnama* (The Book of the Soul), book written by Saparmurat Niyazov, combining spiritual/moral guidance, autobiography and revisionist history was recognized as a kind of sacred text for all Turkmens. The text includes many stories and poems, including those by Sufi poet Magtymguly Pyragy. It was intended as the "spiritual guidance of the nation" and the basis of the nation's arts and literature, by creating a positive image of the Turkmen people, a heroic interpretation of its history, the review of Turkmen customs and the definition of "moral, family, social and religious norms for modern Turkmens".

*Ruhnama* was introduced to Turkmen culture in a gradual but eventually pervasive way. Niyazov first placed copies in the nation's schools and libraries but eventually went as far as to make an exam on its teachings an element of the driving test. It was mandatory to read Ruhnama in schools, universities and governmental
organizations. New governmental employees were tested on the book at job interviews. In March 2006, Niyazov was recorded as saying that he had interceded with God to ensure that any student who read the book three times would automatically get into heaven.

Although after the death of Niyazov its popularity decreased and his cult was not so consistently supported it still remains important. In December 2009, the second President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov strongly recommended the government to use Ruhnama as an instrument of youth education. However observers have noted the gradual developing of the personal cult of the current president. In October 2012, the first monument to the honor of the president’s father was erected. Some schools were renamed in his family members.

All aforementioned practices contradict Islam which treats them as pagan cults. More radical forms of Islam found little ground in Turkmenistan, although the government has suppressed any sign of external influence, expelling hundreds of foreign Muslims, mostly Iranian teachers, in the early 2000s. Restrictive government practices in more extent are addressed to Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The Law on Political Parties adopted in January, 2012 prohibits the establishment of political parties on the basis of religion. Members of the theology faculty in the history department at Turkmen State University in Ashgabat were the only academic faculty members allowed to conduct Islamic higher education.

Although now there is a sporadic attention to the Islamic development of Turkmenistan its isolation as well as personified power in this country make situation visibly stable but poorly forecasted.
VIII. Basic conclusions

The post-Soviet Islam today is a patchwork of colors. The Islamic revival in Central Asia after the USSR breakup is a deeply complex phenomenon. It has been driven by internal socio-political and religious dynamics, by religious globalization, and by the penetration of radicals into new territories. Officially recognized Muslim structures, as well as nonofficial and radical Islam, are far from homogeneous; the degree of radicalism among the adherents of different groups varies widely. Each of these groups has a different set of motives and rationales for their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the current government. As such, this problem cannot be considered a narrowly regional issue, especially given the strategic importance of Central Asian countries. Islam in Central Asia today is markedly different from even a decade ago.

The political leadership of Central Asia faces growing Islam as well as challenge to its popularity in the process of new identities’ shaping. The issue of deterring extremism and jihadism is not disputable. But the Islamic rise cannot be controlled only through restrictions or law-enforcement operations. Of course, radicals or terrorists who overstep the bounds of the law must be held accountable. Still, any attempt to minimize the Islamist threat will be ineffective if it does not incorporate an understanding of social and ideological issues and not considered in the wider contexts (poor governance, poverty, regional and ethnic differences and corruption).

Second, policymakers should support policies that strengthen traditional Central Asian Islam, which is linked to the history and culture of those countries. However, political leadership should not conflate these policies with the straightforward support of loyal Muslim structures like spiritual boards at the republican and territorial levels, nor with the support of narrowly focused lobbyists. Following such an approach would be potentially dangerous, as the interests of a small number of groups could end up
driving the religious policy of the state. Tashkent, Astana, Dushanbe, Bishkek and Ashgabat have to recognize the growing role of religion in the political and social life of the country, but they also need to counter the radicals that provoke militant insurgency and instability. Thus, the focus should be on large-scale public, cultural projects in which the state does not subcontract its responsibilities to anyone and in which the state remains the initiator of all key decisions affecting not only the religious but also the secular sphere. This should include education, especially in the teaching of history and other humanities to emphasize cross-regional contacts among all regions especially multi-religious and multi-ethnic ones.

Third, it will require colossal effort to differentiate between terrorists and those who would be amenable to pledge their political loyalty to the state. It would be wrong to label all nonofficial-Muslim groups as “extremist” or “terrorist organizations”. Some of them are needed to engage to oppose to militants and jihadists. In this context the important task for the Russian and Chinese governments is to be engaged in pragmatic cooperation with Central Asian countries to deter jihadism and promote security in the region.

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