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ISLAM AND POST-INDEPENDENCE STATE BUILDING IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Executive Summary

The overnight transformation of Central Asia from five republics into five independent states created an almost immediate change in the balance between secular and religious authorities. With the formal withdrawal of Moscow, Islam became a potentially powerful tool for state-building, but a risky one as well, since the Islamic authorities too now viewed themselves as independent actors.

After the Communist Party folded, Central Asia’s leaders were effectively compelled to transform themselves into national leaders, because they were now denied the legitimating mechanisms of Politburo nomination or CPSU support. The search for popular political legitimacy was no longer an abstract political exercise. Popular rejection could mean ouster, and if the partocrats chose to fight back—as they did in Tajikistan—it could also mean civil war. The support of religious leaders was deemed an important part of the popular mandate, but all of the region’s leaders also feared ceding influence to anti-establishment religious activists. The political turmoil in Tajikistan was a constant reminder of the toll that such a power struggle could exact.

All of the Central Asian leaders would claim as their goal the transformation of their respective republics into economically developed secular states, but none of Central Asia’s leaders really understood what a secular state is. In addition, the suddenness with which the USSR collapsed made it impossible for the leadership to work out strategies for the state-building tasks which they had so unexpectedly inherited.

Consequently, throughout Central Asia the political leadership has courted the Islamic elite, in the hopes of controlling it. Islamic clerics have begun to play a limited role in the governments of all of the states of the region. Those Central Asian leaders who believe themselves capable of dominating the relationship remain on cordial terms with the local religious elite, while those who do not—which is the case in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—have turned on the religious elite, defining them as "fundamentalist". This paper provides a country-by-country survey of the relationship between Islam and the state in each of the new Central Asian countries.

The issue is most complex in Uzbekistan, where nearly ninety percent of the population is Muslim. Although Uzbekistan has a far smaller trained clerical class than is the case in other Muslim countries of comparable size, and the general level of formal religious training is undoubtedly lower than would be the case in comparably-sized non-Soviet states, Islam has remained a tenacious force in the country.

However, the Karimov government has been unwilling to allow Islamic organizations to set up parallel authority, even though Karimov understands that his republic is undergoing an Islamic revival which will not be reversed. Karimov is attempting to walk a narrow line, of
encouraging popular Islam in order to legitimate himself, but discouraging the formation of allegiances which he cannot control. The extreme political control that Karimov is attempting to exercise has the effect of radicalizing Islam, pushing a portion of the population into more extreme forms of religious allegiance.

By contrast, Turkmenistan is the most traditional Islamic state in Central Asia, and President Niyazov has been sensitive not to step on the toes of his republic’s believers. Unlike Karimov, Niyazov steadfastly avoids public discussions of an "Islamic threat." He has clearly stated that Turkmenistan is and will remain a secular state, but he has also now recognized all of the major Islamic holidays as state holidays. Niyazov supports Islamic religious instruction in state schools, and funds an aggressive policy of mosque construction. Turkmenistan’s President appears in general to be betting that his policies will allow his nation’s transition to an inevitable Islamic statehood to be both peaceful and so drawn out that it will not be completed during his lifetime.

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are the most ethnically diverse of the Central Asian republics, requiring that each remain clearly secular. For now Kazakhstan’s formal Islamic establishment is a creature of the state, but Nazarbaev constantly underscores the potential dangers which the spread of "Islamic fundamentalism" would bring to his state. The situation in Kyrgyzstan is more complicated, in part because Kyrgyzstan shares borders with both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; there is risk that armed fighters will enter the country from the first, and that Islam will be spread through the other.

Finally, in Tajikistan, Islam has become a factor both in state-building and in state destruction. There, as in the rest of the Central Asian states, the present leaders fear that if a religious elite gains ascendancy over secular authorities, then the current political elite, who are still either from the old nomenklatura or were selected by them, will everywhere be threatened.

The Central Asian leaders may talk of the dangers of fundamentalism, but what everyone in positions of authority in Central Asia really fears is fundamental change.
ISLAM AND POST-INDEPENDENCE STATE BUILDING

A Changing Role for Islam

The overnight transformation of Central Asia from five republics into five independent states created a subtle and almost immediate change in the balance between secular and religious authorities. With the formal withdrawal of Moscow, Islam became a potentially powerful tool for state-building, but a risky one as well, since the Islamic authorities too now viewed themselves as independent actors.

For the first time the dependency relationship between religion and the state could now be formally challenged. Seventy years of Soviet rule had, for all practical purposes, eliminated the discretionary powers of Central Asia’s Islamic elite, as part of the product of an official ideology which endorsed state suppression of all religions.

It is true that the state began to move away from militant atheism in the late Gorbachev years, as part of the de-ideologizing of society which those intent on the reform of communism were sponsoring. In the three years prior to the break-up of the USSR religious authorities were able to regain considerable discretionary authority. However, until the dismantling of the Communist Party which followed the failed August coup, there was a lingering fear that the ideological thaw would prove temporary, and that Moscow would clamp down once again—just as it had done in the past.

Fear of Moscow remained even after the coup and the outlawing of the Communist Party, since neither event changed the fact that the Soviet Union was a Russian-dominated country. Though constraints on religion were being lifted, Islam was the country’s second faith. In Moscow, the new religious freedoms being granted were largely designed to meet the needs of a Christian constituency. This left Central Asia’s Islamic leaders with a double dependency upon the now former Communist leaders who still ruled their societies and provided the clergy with authority within their societies, while also having to make the case for Islam and Muslim interests more generally in Moscow.

At the same time, however, the Central Asian political elite were increasingly eager to receive the approval of local religious elites. The political situation in the former Soviet Union deteriorated rapidly in the months just prior to the formal collapse of the USSR, in December 1991. After the Communist Party folded, Central Asia’s leaders were effectively compelled to transform themselves into national leaders, because they were now denied the legitimating mechanisms of Politburo nomination or CPSU support. Sensitive to the changing political climate, Central Asia’s religious leaders understood that they could extract a high price for help in legitimating their respective republic rulers as popular leaders. This process was not always an orderly one, as the events in Tajikistan make clear.
The struggle for political control intensified in each of the Central Asian states after they were forced to become independent, and the power which the elites now held increased substantially. Central Asia's leaders now directly controlled the population and natural resources of their respective countries, without need of Moscow's approval for exercise of their authority. However, this greatly increased the political stakes, since local leaders also could not depend upon Moscow's protection if they were rebuffed by their populations.

The search for popular political legitimacy was no longer an abstract political exercise. Popular rejection could mean ouster, and if the partocrats chose to fight back—as they did in Tajikistan—it could also mean civil war. The support of religious leaders was deemed an important part of the popular mandate, but all of the region's leaders also feared ceding influence to anti-establishment religious activists. The political turmoil in Tajikistan was a constant reminder of the toll that such a power struggle could exact.

All of Central Asia's leaders were committed to trying to stay in power themselves, and to keeping the ruling elite (the nomenklatura) in position more generally. Their secondary aim—which in public statements the Central Asian leaders would of course say was their primary aim—was to achieve the transformation of their respective republics into economically developed secular states. Most also spoke of aspirations to turn their countries into democratic societies, but some warned from the start that there would have to be a long transition period before this could be achieved.

For all their support of the goal, however, it is unclear whether any of Central Asia's leaders really understood what the development of a secular state required, or indeed whether what they were proposing was a realistic goal for their own societies. For one thing, none of the new leaders had ever lived in a really secular society; although religion had been banned in the Soviet Union, its slavish devotion to ideology had made the nation which formed all the leaders more like a theocracy than a secular state. For another, none of Central Asia's leaders could claim close contact with or much knowledge of the Central Asian "common man."

Two of the leaders (Turkmenistan's Niyazov and Uzbekistan's Karimov) had spent their childhoods in Soviet orphanages, but even those who did grow up in traditional rural settings (like Kazakhstan's Nazarbaev and Kyrgyzstan's Akaev), had spent their adult years rising up through the ranks in hierarchies dominated by the all-union Communist Party, living lives which put them well out of touch with the day-to-day realities of the lives of all but a thin layer of privileged people like themselves.

In this regard at least, Central Asia's political leadership demonstrated a certain naivete. In most secular states it is formally stated that it is the prerogative of the state to
define the limits of religious authority, but the realities of the relationship between the secular and the religious are far more complicated, even in advanced Western societies. In all societies there is an implicit battle between state and religious authorities.

The suddenness with which the Soviet Union collapsed made it impossible for the leadership to work out detailed or elaborate strategies about how to proceed with the tasks of state building which they had so unexpectedly inherited. People write of the suddenness of England's withdrawal from India or Palestine, but the national elites of those states were well prepared by comparison with those of the ex-Soviet republics. By 1947 the former had already spent decades contemplating the problems which might be associated with nationhood. By contrast with Gandhi or Ben-Gurion, Central Asia's inadvertent founding fathers had reached their leadership positions for precisely the opposite reason, appointed to serve Moscow loyally and well.

Which is not to say that all of Central Asia's first presidents were not skilled politicians, for they are. Despite their protestations of aspiration to secular societies, in the short run at least, the elites did not do a great deal to bring such societies into being. In fact, throughout Central Asia the political leadership has made an effort to court the Islamic elite, in the hopes of controlling it.

Islamic clerics have begun to play a limited role in the governments of all of the states of the region. It is now commonplace for state occasions to begin with some form of prayer or blessing, although in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan a Russian Orthodox priest is often invited to give a benediction as well. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan there is formal, if limited, clerical participation in the government; Islamic clerics--rather than party ideologists--now head departments of religious affairs, where part of their task is to introduce limited formal religious (Islamic) instruction in state schools.¹ Both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are determinedly secular in their government philosophy, but the Akaev government's draft constitution specifically recognized the Islamic heritage and nature of Kyrgyzstan.²

Those Central Asian leaders who believe themselves capable of dominating the relationship remain on cordial terms with the local religious elite. Those who do not—which is the case in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—have turned on the religious elite, defining all those who refuse to accept the primacy of state authority to be fundamentalist, and hence worthy of restriction.

Islam and State Building in Uzbekistan

The problem is most complex in Uzbekistan, Central Asia’s most populous country, where nearly ninety percent of the population is Muslim. Islamic revivalist leaders in the region, especially when they are talking to western correspondents and analysts, always stress how impossible it would be to introduce an Islamic state in Central Asia, on the grounds that seventy years of anti-religious propaganda have torn the population from their Islamic roots. Although such protestations may have an obfuscatory goal, it nevertheless would be a mistake to exaggerate the impact of Soviet anti-religious policies.

Uzbekistan has a far smaller trained clerical class than is the case in other Muslim countries of comparable size. Among the adult population the level of formal religious training is undoubtedly lower than would be the case in comparably-sized non-Soviet states, especially among the urbanized population. However, although belief may be unsophisticated and untrained, Islam has remained a tenacious force in the Uzbekistan countryside, one unanticipated result of the unbalanced developmental strategies which Soviet policy-makers pursued.

The rural population may not be a sufficient base on which to make an Islamic revolution, but it has been fertile grounds for an Islamic revival, which has already proceeded far enough to make it very difficult for Uzbekistan’s politicians to campaign openly for a secular state. This is a political reality which is accepted by Uzbekistan’s secular and religious leaders alike.

Beyond that, however, President Islam Karimov has seen Islamic activism as posing a real threat to his regime, so he has monitored the development of Islamic groups and their politicization quite closely, especially after the fall of Rahmon Nabiev’s government, in May 1992. Secular critics of Karimov’s regime have also been brought under close surveillance, and Karimov has felt less constrained in attacking secularists than religious figures, possibly because he perceived that the secular opposition did not enjoy the same broad popular support that religious activists did.

After the military defeat of the pro-Islamic (and pro-democratic) Iskandarov government in November 1992, Karimov went on the offensive against Islamic groups. Once Tajikistan’s Islamic activists began to seek the violent overthrow of the Uzbek-backed regime of Imomali Rakhmonov, Karimov believed his rule to be threatened by Uzbekistan’s own Islamic activists. Mufti Muhammad Yusuf was ousted from office and forced into exile, and Uzbekistan’s security forces began to forcibly disband unregistered Islamic groups.
How justified were Karimov’s actions is difficult for an outsider to judge. Uzbekistan was certainly awash in weapons, and the swelling flow of arms from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan was no figment of Karimov’s imagination. It is also certainly true that the Islamic revival in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were firmly interconnected. Akbar Turajonzade and Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf knew each other well, and the latter did quite genuinely sympathize with the former’s goals. However, Tajikistan’s Islamic revival was only one small part of the conditions which had led the country into civil war. Had intense feuding among the republic’s secular authorities not created a political vacuum, the political collapse of Tajikistan might not have occurred.

The situation in Uzbekistan was quite different from that in Tajikistan. As has been noted in earlier chapters, Uzbekistan was the initial center of Islamic revivalism in Central Asia, not Tajikistan; it was also in Uzbekistan that the revival first acquired a political dimension. Obviously, independence provided a real boost to the revivalist forces.

The republic’s declaration of independence, on September 1, 1991, was understood as a call for the greater politicization of revivalism. It was not that religious leaders believed that Uzbekistan was independent, however; all of the political activists and revivalist spiritual leaders whom I interviewed in Tashkent and in the Fergana Valley made it clear that they saw the republic as not merely still a part of the USSR, but also still firmly under Moscow’s thumb. Even after Uzbekistan achieved internationally recognized de jure independence, in December 1991, they continued to view the republic as a de facto dependent of Russia. To both groups, real independence would not come until the republic was ruled by someone whom the Uzbeks themselves had chosen, rather than by someone whom Moscow had chosen, even if the Uzbeks had later affirmed that choice by vote. However, activists of both groups recognized Karimov’s authority and the religious leaders were determined to gain whatever concessions they could from the president, in order to increase their opportunities for proselytizing among the population and to improve their position for the political struggles that would inevitably lie ahead. The religious leaders believed that time was on their side, because younger generations would inevitably judge Karimov and the existing political elite unfit to rule.

Karimov was considered to be a formidable opponent, whose command of resources was so great that he could not be defeated in the immediate future. After the failed coup and the republic’s declaration of independence, though there was a real change in thinking among the religious elite, who now believed that Karimov had to be directly engaged, and his vulnerabilities exploited.
This change in tactics was marked by an almost immediate change in the behavior of Mufti Muhammad Yusuf, who now began to project a far more independent stance, distancing himself from the president whose protection he had sought only a few months before. The Mufti’s first project was to try to close the rift between himself and the fundamentalists. To this end, the Mufti travelled to Andizhan in October 1991. Religious activists whom he then addressed claim that he endorsed their call to bring religious instruction to Uzbekistan’s schools, from kindergarten through college, to allow religious activists to gain jobs in the educational system, to increase public appearances of religious figures in all media outlets, to try to have Friday made a non-working day, and to get Islam declared the state faith.3

Islam Karimov himself travelled to Namangan in October 1991, in large part to meet with the region’s Islamic activists, who by this time were playing a growing and very visible role in the social life of the communities in the Fergana Valley, especially those in the Namangan-Andizhan area. Karimov received a list of demands similar to those presented to the Mufti, promising the Islamic activists who met with him that he would give full consideration to their demands.

Islamic institutions were mushrooming in the Fergana Valley. Abduhvahitov claims that by late 1991 the number of mosques and medresseh in Namangan had exceeded the pre-revolutionary number, which was 360 mosques and two medresseh. He also says that during this period there was a great increase in the number of students in religious schools in the Valley, including for the first time young people who had been withdrawn from the state schools, for education exclusively in religious establishments. He further estimates that there were hundreds of young men and women getting advanced Islamic training in special semi-clandestine medresseh.4 Certainly the bookstores and bazaar stalls of the area seemed to support this revival, for all were selling books and pamphlets on Islam, published by both state and private publishers.

What would have seemed more ominous to the regime, though, was that Islamic groups were also beginning to claim for themselves rights which traditionally had been viewed as belonging to the local government. In October 1991 the first Islamic security patrols were organized, called Adolyat (justice) bands, and within a few months there were similar patrols in each mahalle of Namangan. As a result of local demonstrations a central Adolyat group also gained access to a part of the gorispolkom (city executive) building in Namangan. These bands were designed to combat social and criminal offenses, including theft and extortion, because,

4 Abduhvahitov, in Eikelman, Muslim Societies...
Muslim activists argued, the state authorities were simply not doing their job. Adolyat bands patrolled their areas seeking out offenders, who were then brought before religious tribunals, which "sentenced" them to various forms of rehabilitation, which invariably included mandatory religious instruction.\(^5\) Abduhvahitov claims that at the time of their formal dissolution in 1992, Adolyat groups boasted some eight thousand members, under the leadership of Kahimjan Satimov.

The forcible dissolution of the Adolyat groups came after a December 1991 political protest in Namangan, which was reputedly organized by Islamic Renaissance Party members. At this time Islamic activists seized the former communist party headquarters in Namangan (then the seat of the oblast government) and demanded, among other things, the establishment of an Islamic state and the resignation of Karimov, who had just been elected to the presidency by popular vote. The action was taken to protest Karimov's lack of progress towards meeting the goals which local activists believed Karimov had endorsed during their meetings in October. The demonstrators managed to hold the building for just over twenty four hours before security forces recaptured it.\(^6\)

Those activists whom I interviewed really did believe that they had received Karimov's endorsement for their program, although it is unlikely that Karimov offered anything more than a vague assent, as part of the government's general concessions to the increasing social role of Islam in the republic.

As part of these concessions the republic's press was granted the right to explore religious themes, of which the Uzbek-language press took enthusiastic advantage. Lengthy explanations of the real meaning of Qurani suras appeared in provincial newspapers,\(^7\) while profiles of religious leaders,\(^8\) discussions of the sermons and other writings of current religious leaders, and explanations of religious holidays and the rituals which were observed at these times, all became common in the press. The Mufti himself was given considerable direct access to the media. He was often interviewed to discuss pressing events of the day, and for most of 1992 he broadcast a half-hour sermon on television every Friday.

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\(^5\) **Megalopolis Express** 16 January 1992, p. 6.
\(^7\) For an example see *Kashkadarinskaia pravda* (in Uzbek) 14 November 1992.
\(^8\) Such as the one of Muhammad Yusuf Baibutaev of Andizhan, in *Golos Uzbekistana* 13 October 1992.
As was noted above, an office of religious affairs was created, in April 1992, headed by Gandizhan Abdullaev, of SADUM, to serve in Uzbekistan’s Council of Ministers. After this there was an attempt to introduce religious education in a few select schools, on an experimental basis. Islamic organizations were also allowed to organize their own schools, and in December 1991, the Tashkent Islamic Institute Imam al-Bukhari opened the first official girls’ school in the region.

However, the Karimov government was unwilling to allow Islamic organizations to take up functions which paralleled those of the state. Part of the rationale behind the establishment of an office of religious affairs had been an effort to dilute the authority of the Mufti and SADUM more generally, since, from the regime’s point of view, Muhammad Yusuf was becoming less tractable. After the December 1991 seizure of Namangan’s former party headquarters it was clear that the Islamic activists would have to be made to cede to the authority of the state. It was then that Adolyat was outlawed, and the local authorities were pressured to maintain Karimov’s ban, even though the arrest of key Adolyat figures was leading to further demonstrations.

For all these efforts, however, it seems highly likely that the new Islamic institutions did not disappear, but merely went underground. Although, of course, no one whom I interviewed would admit to membership in an illegal organization, everyone with whom I spoke in the Namangan area talked of the growing influence of revivalist clerics in regulating mahalle life, of pressure applied to parents to send their children for religious education, and of the social ostracism which would result if religious rituals were not properly observed in weddings or funerals.

My informants also spoke of growing pressure on women to dress hijab, according to the Quran; however, in the villages which I visited many of the women were still dressed in traditional, non-Islamic Uzbek dress—with colorful short-sleeve dresses, leggings, and bright headscarves which left bits of their hair exposed. On the other hand, wherever I went in the Namangan and Andizhan area I saw women in traditional Islamic dress, although it would be hard to estimate the precise percentage; in some few cases women had covered their faces as well. Women were similarly clad, including a few with covered faces, around the main revivalist mosque in Tashkent.

What is more important, Abduhvahitov reports that the revivalist mosques were accumulating greater economic resources throughout this period. He cites an Islamic foundation

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9 Nezavisimaia gazeta 3 April, 1992.
in Namangan, Sabadi A’zam, with some twenty thousand members, which was organized with the express purpose of collecting money for building mosques. He also reports that by 1992 the revivalists had accumulated enough capital to be able to attempt to create an Islamic bank.11

Throughout 1992 and most of 1993, the campaign against Islamic activists intensified. Several key activists were arrested, although the spiritual leaders of the main revivalist mosques managed to avoid arrest by scrupulously maintaining a politically neutral public posture. Karimov was generally more tentative in his treatment of Islamic activists than he was of secular democrats. In this same period several prominent leaders of Birlik were arrested or mysteriously beaten, and one even burnt to death in an unexplained fire, although at the time Birlik was still a legally registered organization.

Karimov proceeded far more tentatively, and much less publicly, in his campaign against religious activists, taking great pains to present himself as a practicing Muslim. In January 1992 Karimov had insisted on swearing his oath of presidential office with his hand on the Quran, and soon after he gave interviews in which he spoke of having become a believer who now ate only halal meat. He also said that, as a firm advocate of religious education for children, he planned to return nationalized property to Islamic institutions.12

For all this piety though, Karimov seems at the same time to have been encouraging a campaign to remove the Mufti, who was being publicly accused of having sold a million Qurans which had been donated to the republic by Saudi Arabia. Muhammad Sadyk claimed in return that this was slander, and that the Qurans had been distributed free of charge.13 The Uzbek informant who translated this article into Russian for me added a postscript to the text that in his institute, the Academy of Science Institute of Language and Literature, a subscription list had been distributed which offered the Qurans at fifty rubles per volume, or a week’s wages in 1990.

In January 1992, supporters of Muhammad Yusuf’s predecessor in the muftiate, Sh. Babikhanov, sought unsuccessfully to oust Muhammad Sadyk, but did manage to force him to schedule a full kurultai in February so that a vote of confidence could be held. This assembly was held in late February, with more than a thousand people in attendance, including guests.

11 Abduhvahtov in Eickelman.
13 Muhammadsadyk Muhammad Yusuf, Esli byi myi vse byli nabozhnymi (Tashkent: Chulpan, 1992 pp. 28-34.)
from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, as well as two senior Uzbekistan government officials.\textsuperscript{14} Those assembled voted to give Muhammad Sadyk a five-year term as mufti, reportedly because of behind the scenes politicking by Akbar Turajonzoda, the \textit{kozi kolon} of Tajikistan, and by Abduhwali, fundamentalist leader from Andizhan.

Shortly after, in March 1992, Karimov made another trip to the Fergana Valley, to mark the discovery of oil in the region. Upon his return to Tashkent, however, a list of seventy one local activists was circulated, and nineteen alleged IRP members were arrested.\textsuperscript{15} In June 1992 a second Islamic defense group in Namangan, the \textit{Lashkari islomi} (Warriors of Islam), was banned and a Congress of Muslim Intelligentsia was forbidden to hold an organizing session, because of ties which the group was alleged to have with the IRP.\textsuperscript{16} This attempted Congress had been put together largely through the combined efforts of Birlik and Erk, both of which organizations are dominated by secularized intellectuals. Erk, then headed by Uzbek poet Muhammad Salih, was even against the legalization of the IRP.

For all this pressure, however, when I travelled to the area in March 1992 the Islamic revivalists whom I interviewed described their situation as stable, although of course they were highly critical of Karimov’s government. When I re-interviewed these same leaders in May and August, 1992, they were far more positive about the local situation in the Fergana Valley, largely because they now perceived themselves as having the support of Mufti Muhammad Sadyk. They believed that SADUM (which had been renamed Mavarranahr at the February 1992 meeting) provided them with a new and strong umbrella under which their proselytizing could continue.

In autumn 1992 events in Tajikistan changed the situation, among other things making it unwise for a westerner to travel through the region asking these sort of questions, and even more unwise for Uzbek Islamic leaders to answer them. Events in Tajikistan faced Uzbekistan’s religious establishment with some stark choices, even before Tajikistan’s Turajonzade was dismissed by the new Tajik government, and a new mufti was appointed to replace him. Islam Karimov perceived Tajikistan’s democratic-Islamic coalition, in which Turajonzade played a critical role, as providing a dangerous example for his critics in

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{15}] \textit{Nezavisimaia gazeta} 21 March 1992.
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Uzbekistan, so much so that he moved to eliminate both the Tajikistan coalition and his own critics.

Mufti Muhammad Yusuf was a friend and associate of the soon-to-be-dismissed Tajik religious leader. It is unclear whether Muhammad Sadyk had the same ambition or capacity as his Tajik colleague, but he did have a growing Islamic revival upon which he could call for support, or so it increasingly seemed. Although in his public appearances Uzbekistan’s mufti was careful to say nothing which might be construed as criticism of Karimov’s leadership or personal devotion to Islam, he also made it plain that he thought Turajonzade had little to apologize for.¹⁷

This was sufficient to make Muhammad Sadyk’s leadership unacceptable to Karimov. In September 1992 the attacks on the Mufti increased, and Uzbekistan’s Procurator General’s office charged SADUM with financial irregularities in the handling of foreign donations, and with the sale of religious books.¹⁸ Finally, on April 30, 1992 it was announced that Mufti Muhammad Sadyk had stepped down for “reasons of health”, to be replaced by Muftarkhan Abdullaev, the rector of the Bukhara Medresseh and of Bukhara’s main mosque. Muhammad Sadyk, however, rejected the graceful exit which was being offered him, stating publicly that he was in perfect health. Soon afterward he was formally charged with malfeasance in connection with sale of the Qurans, and escaped with his family to Saudi Arabia in order to avoid prosecution.

Muftarkhan Abdullaev is of a very different background than is the man he replaced. Abdullaev considers himself to be the leader of Uzbekistan’s (and hence Central Asia’s) Naqshabandiya order. He also claims to have spent his decades in SADUM secretly spreading the Naqshibandiya cause. If Abdullaev shared this information with me,¹⁹ it is impossible to imagine that he did not also share it with Karimov, since the two travelled to Turkey together in 1991.

Second-guessing Islam Karimov’s reasoning is both dicey and difficult to confirm, but one plausible explanation for the president’s choice of appointment is that Sufism is different from the fundamentalist revival which is underway in the Fergana Valley, as well as that the new Mufti has far fewer ties to the Fergana Valley than his predecessor, who was born and educated in that region. Perhaps, too, Karimov was persuaded in part by the example of Turkey, which has a vigorous Naqshabandi movement— including among its adherents, as he

¹⁷ Nezavisimaiia gazeta 1 April 1992.
informed Abdullaev personally, the late President T. Ocal—and yet Sufism and the state seem to coexist relatively harmoniously.

Whatever his motivations, Karimov is plainly hoping that this appointment will strengthen the newly renamed SADUM (now Mavarannahr), to give better control of all Islamic affairs in the republic. Karimov understands that his republic is undergoing an Islamic revival, which will not be reversed. In the months following the dismissal of Muhammad Sadyk, Karimov has repeatedly stressed that he is not against Islam, which he sees as a source of purification for the Uzbek people, but rather that he is against Islamic extremism. 20

Since Muhammad Sadyk’s dismissal Karimov has also continued to put pressure on “extremists”, not just in the Fergana Valley, but, more recently, in Surkhan Darya and Kashka Darya (which border on Tajikistan and Afghanistan) as well.21 At the same time, though, he has welcomed visiting Islamic guests warmly, including receiving Iranian President Hashemi-Rafsanjani with enormous public fanfare.

Turkmenistan’s Islamic Variant

His reception in Uzbekistan, however, was not an exception; during his twelve day tour in October 1993, which took him everywhere save Tajikistan, Rafsanjani was very well received throughout Central Asia. Nowhere, however, is the Iranian presence more important than it is in Turkmenistan, which shares a nearly seven hundred mile border with Iran, and which hopes to make its southern neighbor into a guarantor of Turkmenistan’s independence, rather than a threat to it.

To date, Iran has embraced Turkmenistan’s independence with even greater enthusiasm than it has those of the region’s other states, in the hope that the close economic ties which are being forged between the two states will provide Iranians more access to the region. Unlike Saudi Arabia—which has linked economic credits to the construction of mosques and religious schools in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—Iran has put no religious conditions on the foreign economic ties that are being developed. However, the growing "Islamic tilt" of the Niyazov regime is undoubtedly to Iranian liking, one demonstration of which is that they have made (Sunni) theological instruction and Islamic tracts available to their northern neighbors.22

21 Khorezmskaia pravda, 17 April 1993.
Turkmenistan is the most traditional Islamic state in Central Asia, and President Niyazov has been sensitive not to step on the toes of his republic’s believers. Turkmenistan, like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, also has a border with Afghanistan, but unlike those two and the other Central Asian states, the country has not sent soldiers into Tajikistan. Niyazov steadfastly avoids public discussions of an "Islamic threat." He has clearly stated that Turkmenistan is and will remain a secular state, but he has also now recognized all of the major Islamic holidays as state holidays. Niyazov supports Islamic religious instruction in state schools, and Turkmenistan’s muftiate (now formally independent of SADUM) has endorsed an aggressive policy of mosque construction.23

For all their frequent references to Makhtamkuli, Turkmenistan’s great eighteenth-century Sufi poet, modern Turkmens do not have the same strong tradition of religious education that their neighboring Uzbeks do, even if republic bookstores are now reporting a brisk trade in legally and illegally printed religious tracts.24

It is hard to know how quickly Turkmenistan’s Islamic revival will develop intellectual roots. Several dozen young people are studying at the local medressehs, and at least as many have been sent out of the republic for religious education. However, Turkmenistan’s Kazi was originally appointed from Tashkent by SADUM and said to lack local influence, which is probably why Niyazov is content to keep him in office.

Khezretkuli Khanov, the imam of Ashgbat’s main mosque, Khezret Omar mosque, appears to be a more dynamic figure; however, he is entirely self-educated, with a background as a pump operator in the Water Canal administration, and is said to be skeptical of Niyazov, whom the imam does not accept to be a Muslim. Imam Khezretkuli argues that Islam is by definition political, and says further that eventually all the Central Asian states will be Islamic, although the transformation may take ten to twenty years since every Muslim society will have to develop its own unique Muslim form.25 Turkmenistan’s President Sapurmurad Niyazov is plainly betting that his policies of courting Islam will allow this transition in his nation to be both peaceful and so drawn out that it will not be completed during his lifetime.

Two More Secular Variants
Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are the most ethnically diverse of the Central Asian republics; nearly forty-five percent of Kazakhstan’s population is of European extraction, as is about a quarter of Kyrgyzstan’s population. In addition, although the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz have

24 Turkmenskaia iskra 31 March 1992
been Muslims for about two hundred years (and in some parts of these nations adoption of the faith goes back several hundred years farther even than that) the Islam of these nomads was almost entirely based on ritual rather than dogma.

It is on these grounds that the leaders of both republics hope to be able to develop fully secular states in their respective countries. In the case of Kazakhstan there is no other choice, for attempts to create anything other than a secular state would court an ethnic rift which would tear apart the state. Islamic parties are banned in both republics, just as they are elsewhere in Central Asia; however, the definition of an Islamic party is drawn more tightly in Kazakhstan than it is anywhere else in the region. The republic's closest equivalent is Alash, a Kazakh nationalist party which advocates the development of Central Asia as an explicitly Islamic region, but does not call for a specifically Islamic state; nevertheless, the party has never been legalized.

Nazarbaev separated his republic from SADUM before independence, and it is not clear that Mufti Ratbek Nysanbaev enjoys the confidence of the republic's community of believers. What I saw during my one visit to the republic's Islamic Institute, in October 1992, was very reminiscent of the Soviet period, with secular state-appointed officials, former anti-religious propagandists, having an obviously strong supervisory role.

However, this quiescence is unlikely to continue indefinitely. Islam (as well as Christianity) can now be practiced freely. Kazakhstan's newspapers tell every week of new mosques and religious schools opening throughout the republic, generally supported by funds which have been collected locally. Even urban Kazakhs are becoming more observant. Religious funerals are now a matter of course; even Kazakhstan's longtime Communist Party boss, Dinmukhamed Kunaev, had a religious funeral. For the moment Kazakhstan's formal Islamic establishment may be largely a creature of the state, but Islam is a dynamic faith, which will not long remain even a partial captive of the state. Nazarbaev himself seems to realize that, for which reason he constantly underscores the potential dangers which the spread of Islamic fundamentalism would bring to the region, even threatening the stability of Kazakhstan itself. However, for the moment, at least, the "fall out" from Tajikistan seems much more warned-against than actual.

The situation in Kyrgyzstan is more complicated, in part because the situation in Tajikistan could directly threaten state stability. Kyrgyzstan shares borders with both Tajikistan.

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26 *Kazakhstanskaja pravda* 24 August 1993

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and Uzbekistan; there is risk that armed fighters will enter the country from the first, and that Islam will be spread through the other.

Kyrgyzstan, as already noted, has a large Uzbek population which lives in Kyrgyzstan’s section of the Fergana Valley. This population has always been well integrated into Uzbekistan. For the moment at least, the Kyrgyzstan Uzbek population is very quiet. The Islamic revival in southern Kyrgyzstan has been allowed to proceed along its own, self-generating course. Islamic parties and newspapers associated with Islamic political movements are forbidden, but everyone understands that this has been done to appease Islam Karimov, who would not scruple at violating Kyrgyzstan’s borders to shut them down, if such newspapers or parties were to come into existence. Karimov has announced a "defense policy" similar to that of Russia, claiming for Uzbekistan the right to protect Uzbeks wherever they live. His attitude to Kyrgyzstan’s sovereignty has twice been made plain: in December 1992 Uzbek KGB operatives arrested three Uzbekistani human rights activists (two Uzbek and one Tajik) in the main square of Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Bishkek; and in March 1993, with the permission of the local Kyrgyz governor (since removed from office), the Uzbek army held military exercises in Osh.

Osh excluded, Kyrgyzstan’s religious revival is much like that of Kazakhstan. However, quite possibly because Kyrgyzstan is in more desperate financial straits than is Kazakhstan, President Akaev has been a much more enthusiastic Muslim than has President Nazarbaev. Although considered to be the most secular and pro-western leader in Central Asia, Akaev in an October 1992 interview stated bluntly that, if it would result in increased foreign aid for his republic, he would make pilgrimage to Mecca. He has, and it did. Akaev has developed good relations with Iran too, probably for much the same reason, both travelling to Teheran and, when Rafsanjani was in Kyrgyzstan, attending prayers and a meeting with the leaders of Kyrgyzstan’s religious board.

Even Akaev, however, appears to wish to limit the degree to which Kyrgyzstan will seem hospitable to Islamic activists from neighboring states. The mufti of the state’s new religious board, established in August 1993, is Kimsanibi haji Abdurahmanov, who has fewer ties to the Fergana Valley activists than did his predecessor, Satimzhan Kamalov.27

Kyrgyzstan’s leadership does not fear fundamentalism nearly as much as it does the infiltration of arms. The porosity of its own border with Tajikistan has led Kyrgyzstan to send peace-keepers and soldiers to its neighbor. Indeed, it is quite clear that all of Central Asia’s

leaders, to one degree or another, view the struggle for power in Tajikistan as impacting on the political stability of their respective republic. All of the present leaders fear that if a religious elite gains ascendancy over secular authorities in any of their states, then the current political elite, who are still either from the old nomenklatura or were selected by them, will be threatened everywhere in the region. The leaders talk of the dangers of fundamentalism, but what everyone in positions of authority in Central Asia really fears is fundamental change.