

THE TEACHING, PRACTICE, AND POLITICAL ROLE SUFISM IN DUSHANBE

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Executive Summary

Like other Central Asian republics in the post-Soviet period, Tajikistan's political authorities have sought to curb Islamist trends by promoting a vision of Islam, intimately connected to Sufism, that is concerned with the preservation of national traditions and combating extremism. Similar to neighboring Uzbekistan, Tajikistan's government has allowed Sufi practices, such as the veneration of local saints and local shrine visitation, to flourish, and they have successfully contained any potential criticism of these practices by those who subscribe to more fundamental forms of ideology. Tajikistan's government and religious authorities contend that the best remedy against "extremism" is the promotion of Hanafi jurisprudence, considered by some to be the most liberal of the four schools of Sunni Islam (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali), coupled with Naqshbandi Sufism which, in their opinion, best reflects the so-called traditions and Islamic history of Central Asia. In this embrace of Hanafi jurisprudence and Sufi philosophy and practices, Tajikistan's government has sought to keep Tajikistan's "national" brand of Islam pure from outside influences, which are viewed as both a potential threat to the state as well as national and traditional religious customs.

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Western scholars and politicians have recently suggested that Sufism should be encouraged in Central Asia to combat extremist ideologies, especially Wahhabi¹ and Salafi strains found in the region. In fact, some Central Asian countries, such as Uzbekistan,² Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, have been implementing this approach for many years by

¹ In fact, the conflict between Sufism and Wahhabism conflict is not new, as it can be traced all the way back to emergence of Wahhabism. The conflict between Sufism and Wahhabism in the Caucasus is, however, a recent development because it was not until quite recently that Wahhabis emerged so visibly in the Caucasus. Nevertheless, the real struggle is not necessarily one between two sects; rather, it is indicative of a much grander struggle between fundamentalism and syncretism. In many respects, Sufism and Wahhabism may be seen as polar opposites—Sufism is syncretistic, adaptive, and innovative, whereas Wahhabism is rigid and fundamentalist, and anti-modern.

² In Uzbekistan, there has been an increase in the publishing of works about Sufis such as Baha ud-din Naqshband and Najmuddin Kubra, and the state funded the translation into modern Uzbek of Nava'i's "The Language of the Birds." There has been a governmental education attempt to show the compatibility of modern society with aspects of Sufism. In 1994 in Uzbekistan the ministry created a center for spirituality and Enlightenment. Similarly, in Morocco, another country afflicted with Wahhabi infiltration, they have been intentionally reviving traditional local Sufism.

investing money in preserving centuries-old shrines of Sufi saints, publishing ancient Sufi manuscripts, and promoting Sufism in Islamic education. Through interviewing Sufi sheikhs, khatibs, ulema, professors, and Islamic scholars in Tajikistan, I acquired a rich understanding of the ways in which Sufism is currently being embraced and promoted by religious authorities, in politics, and in official Islamic pedagogy in Tajikistan. The transformative spiritual and political power of Sufism in the contemporary Muslim world, especially in Central Asia, cannot be underestimated or ignored, and governments in Central Asia are well aware of its potential to both advance the goals of the national project and to act as an underground vehicle of resistance to the national Islam and politics promoted by the state. Nevertheless, Tajikistan's government, similar to those in neighboring Central Asian republics, currently views Sufism as the least suspicious vehicle of Islamic resistance and politicization.

In order to research the current practice, pedagogy and politics of Sufism in Tajikistan today, I journeyed to Tajikistan three times to spend time with Naqshbandi and Qadri sheikhs, visit a number of Sufi shrines, interview the main professor of Sufism at the Islamic University in Dushanbe, meet with the Ulema Council of Tajikistan, survey the visibility and accessibility of various sheikhs around Dushanbe, and record the presence of various Sufi texts available for purchase at the bookstores surrounding the central mosque of Dushanbe. Throughout different periods of history, Sufism has been both embraced and denounced in the region by the state religious authorities in debates about different schools of Islamic jurisprudence and the validity of local traditions and practices. The Soviet campaign to control the institutional bodies of religious authority in Tajikistan resulted in the strengthening of Sufism, the organizational basis of which served as an alternative to the heavily policed Islamic governmental bodies.

Sufism is connected intimately to the history of Central Asia, and it has often played a

significant role in politics in the region, even though Sufi philosophy in doctrine encourages the turning away from worldly affairs towards spiritual practices and essence. Sufism was an influential vehicle for the spread of Islam in Central Asia³ after the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258, because of its implicit tolerance, accommodations for the syncretization of other religious and folk traditions, and its stress on charity, humility, simplicity and piety. Sufi leaders helped demarcate relations between the ruler and populace during the Timurid period. Khans in the 18th century used Sufis for political and religious legitimization and they were influential in organizing protests against Russian colonial rule and the foundation of the Soviet Union.⁴ Sufism is largely credited by scholars as being responsible for the survival of Islam during the Soviet Period, as “orthodox” Islam was suppressed while secret Sufi brotherhoods operated illegally.

The most popular Sufi order, or *tariqa*, in Tajikistan, the Naqshbandiyya, dates to the 14th century and is named after a student of Abd al-Khaliq Ghijduvani named Bahauddin Naqshband (d. 1390), who was born and buried in Bukhara, an ancient Tajik political, cultural, religious center. His large and ornate shrine in Bukhara is a focal point for pilgrimage in Central Asia and for Naqshbandi followers around the world. The Naqshbandiyya tariqa is not just the most popular and influential in Tajikistan but also in all of Central Asia. Naqshbandis practice silent *zikr*, a Sufi ceremony of remembrance and meditation, and they have traditionally had strong ties with politics in Central Asia.

The second most popular Sufi order in Tajikistan is the Qadiriyya, which was founded by

³ Sufism was also the reason that Islam spread so rapidly and easily during the Ottoman period (14th-18th centuries).

⁴ After the suppression of an infamous uprising led by Dukchi Ishan, the Russian government treated Sufism with suspicion and surveillance, and it weakened the Sufi groups economically by stripping them of their waqf--tax-exempt real estate that belonged to religious institutions and individuals. In addition, influential Sufi leaders were deprived for their clerical status assigned to their waqf properties. The Soviets continued this practice by outlawing and then nationalizing the waqfs between 1922 and 1928. As a result, a large number of Sufi sheikhs fled to the provinces and to Afghanistan and Kashgar in western China. Many Sufi sheikhs were persecuted, arrested, deported, and even executed.

Abdul-Qadir Gilani (1076-1166), who was originally from the Persian city Jilan. The Qadriyya *tariqa* was first brought to Central Asia at the end of the 12th century from Baghdad. The Qadriyya, in contrast to the Naqshbandiyya, practice vocal *zikr*, yet during the Soviet period, the Qadiris practiced the Naqshband silent *zikr* to avoid persecution. Neither order, however, practices *zikr* and other forms of Sufi devotion in public. One of Tajikistan's most prominent sheikhs, Ishan Zubaydullah has declared that there is no need for dancing and chanting aloud, as silent *zikr* can be offered anywhere and without any other people present. Thus, the practice of Sufi *zikr* in Tajikistan is done in private and usually alone or in small groups, as opposed to in a public space with many people.

Shrine pilgrimage and the beliefs underlying it play a prime role in religious expression in Tajikistan and create a unique and communal religious identity which is intimately tied by the authorities at the state level to the national project. Sufi practice, especially shrine visitation, was widespread throughout the czarist and Soviet period and continues to be popular today. The strongest tie that links Tajiks to Sufism is the pilgrimage to holy places where Sufi saints are buried for blessings for fertility, exams, or business deals. Veneration of Sufi graves took on new importance during the years of Soviet religious persecution, making inevitable the revival of Sufism when the rebirth of Islam received state sanction during the late Soviet years and the first years of independence.

Shrine pilgrimage remains today, as it was in the Soviet period, the most popular and visible form of religious worship in Tajikistan. During the Soviet period, mosques were destroyed or turned into museums of atheism, the clergy was persecuted, religious literature was destroyed, and all Islamic courts of law, along with *waqf* holdings (Muslim religious endowments that formed the basis of clerical economic power), were liquidated. The shrines are

most visible and popular place of religious devotion in Tajikistan, as many of the mosques and madressas were destroyed during the Soviet period, and more recently constructed mosques are closely monitored by the state. The burial sites of Islamic saints, local rulers, learned scholars, warriors or pre-Islamic figures have always been popular sites of pilgrimage,⁵ and many of them survived the Soviet period because they were thought to fall outside of the realm of “official Islam,” yet access to many of them was restricted nonetheless. In the absence of these larger religious structures and communal sites of religious authority or instruction, local shrines became the true centers of religious life, and they have remained a prime feature of religious practice, ritual, and identity in Tajikistan today.

Unlike the Soviet period, however, the current government of Tajikistan has actively and vocally endorsed the practice of shrine visitation. The most important holy places in Tajikistan are served by mullahs, who look after the shrine, receive visitors, and are often Sufis themselves. As in other Central Asian states, the political and religious authorities have publically supported the shrine pilgrimage to simultaneously promote a “national” and traditional form of Islamic practice and curb undesired Islamist trends which are portrayed as posing a potential danger to the stability of the state and the uniqueness of Tajikistan’s national character. Shrines continue to offer a dynamic space which has the potential to offer an accessible public forum for both discussion and the practice of religious rituals in an environment that otherwise closely monitors public debate and discourse.

Widespread belief in the power of intercession and advocacy for multitude of mundane and spiritual ends; hence, they respect saints and their mausoleums. As a result, the country is dotted with innumerable number of shrines dedicated to the holy and the great men of the

⁵ Turkmen tradition also recognizes six non-Turkmen *öwlat* groups, which trace their lineage to the first caliphs of Islam. For instance, the progenitor of the *öwlat* group Ata is Gözli Ata, a Muslim saint with miraculous powers from the 14th century who came from Turkestan, a center of Sufi teaching, in order to carry his teachings into Western Turkmenistan.

country including martyrs, Sufis, and saints, mostly from the 12th to 16th centuries. These include the shrines devoted to the holy men like Zainulabidin at Khotlan/Koolab and Makhdoom-i Azam, Khalifa Hazrat Ali and Khalid Bin Walid at Hissar.⁶ The Lenin kolkhoz in Dushanbe contains the shrine of Yaqub Charkhi, Tajikistan's most famous Naqshbandi. Yaqub Charkhi, the great Naqshbandi shaykh and student of Khwaja Baha al-Din Naqshband, was both a Sufi master and Islamic scholar.⁷ The most popular shrines in Tajikistan are those of: Sheikh Yaqub Charkhi, Balagardan (a mythical being, probably a Zoroastrian deity in valley of Varzob district of Regar); Mohammed Bashara (a Sufi saint near Panjikent); Khoja Ab-I Garm, an old Zoroastrian deity (in the Lenin district near Dushanbe), Imam Zein ul-Abeddin, son of Imam Hussein and the sole survivor of the Kerbala massacre (in the district of Shaartuz, Kugan-Tube region); Khoja Sabzpush, a Zoroastrian deity in district of Aini; Mullah Junayd (in Hissar near Dushanbe); Khoja Hamadani near Kulob; Khoja Tajeddin, a Sufi saint (in the district of Danara, district of Kulab); Khoja Aref Revhari, a Sufi saint (near the city of Regar); and Khoja Takaburt, a pre-Islamic deity (in the mountains of the Kanibadam district).

The promotion of Sufism by the state can be seen explicitly at the shrine of Sayyid Ali Hamadani in the south of Tajikistan. Three major oblasts of Badakhshan, Koolab and Soghd are

⁶ A mausoleum just outside the Hissar Fort, 25 kilometres from the capital city of Dushanbe, is dedicated to one thousand Arabs who, by tradition, are reported to have sacrificed their lives for the sake of Islam in and around the 8th century.

This renovated dome-shaped mausoleum, is regularly thronged by the Muslim devotees to pay respects to the departed souls as a means to achieve their worldly and other ends.

⁷ *Tafsir Yaqub Charkhi* (a Tafsir (exegesis) of the first chapter Fatiha and the last two Ajza of the Holy Quran), *Risalah Na'iyab* (a commentary over the preface of *Masnawi*, the great book of Persian poetry by Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi), *Risalah Unsuyyab* (the merits of keeping wuzu at all times, Nawafil, and Zikr al-Khafi according to the Naqshbandi method, along with some quotes of Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshband and Khwaja Ala'uddin Attar), *Sharab Rubai Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair* (an unpublished manuscript commentary of a poem of Shaykh Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair kept in the Markaz Tahqiqat Farsi Iran wa Pakistan (Center for Persian Research in Iran and Pakistan), *Risalah Abdaliab* (a description of the existence of saints and their spiritual posts), *Sharh Asma-Allah* (the benefits and merits of the blessed Names of Allah (Asma-Allah).

dotted with numerous shrines, with one of the most popular shrines is that of Sayyid Ali Hamadani at Koolab in southern Tajikistan which borders Afghanistan. Even though he is buried at Koolab, Sayyid Ali Hamadani is revered greatly throughout Tajikistan. After the conclusion of the civil war, the Tajik government, with the support of the Iranian government, renovated the shrine. During this preservation and renovation process, the present government accorded the Sayyid the status of a national saint. The government also dedicated a museum to him in front of his shrine, which contains abundant literature on Sayyid Ali's life, performance and philosophy in the form of books and manuscripts published from different parts of the region including India, Pakistan, and Iran. The government investment in renovating this shrine and building this museum to a national saint illustrate their commitment to promoting the nation's Sufi past in the present.

While authorities in Tajikistan, including the President, extol the historical and cultural significance of Sufi shrines and saints in the media and literature, Tajikistan has not been as eager as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in co-opting the shrines and presents itself as the chief sponsor of traditions associated with the shrines. For instance, in my field-research in Uzbekistan in Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Karakalpakstan, it was abundantly clear that the government had taken control of numerous popular shrines, such as those of Zangi Ota (Tashkent), Bahauddin Naqshband (Bukhara), and Muhammad al-Bukhari (near Samarqand). While the government of Uzbekistan has gone beyond Tajikistan in making its presence visible at the shrines, it is important to recognize that this trend of Central Asian republics bringing popular sites of pilgrimage under the reach of the state is not in any way particular to Tajikistan and seems to be an attempt by these governments to claim these shrines as sites of national pride and a "national" brand of Islam to "sanitize" the state from other practices of Islam which are

portrayed as more fundamentalist or extremist.

To research the pedagogy used to teach Sufism in Tajikistan, I spent time at the Islamic University in Dushanbe to study their Sufi curriculum. The Department for Religious Affairs (DRA) is responsible for testing imams on their religious knowledge and ensuring that they followed official positions on religious issues. In January 2009, the government put the previously independent Islamic University in Dushanbe, the country's only religious institution of higher learning, under the administration of the Ministry of Education. Teachers now have to submit to a vetting process, and the university was changed to an "Islamic Institute" (a level below that of university but equivalent to a college). There are approximately 19 madressas at the secondary school level and home-based Islamic education is forbidden.

The president of Tajikistan, Emamoli Rakhmon, recently proposed a law, endorsed by Mavlon Mukhtorov (the deputy chairman of the Religious Affairs Committee), to ban children under age eighteen from attending mosques, and to fine adults accused of teaching religion without government permission. The law, however, would not prevent students from studying Islam at one of Tajikistan's government-run religious schools, in theology departments at universities, or at the Islamic University in Dushanbe. To limit foreign influence on traditional Islamic practices in Tajikistan, the government also called home 2,000 Tajik students last year who were studying in overseas religious schools in the Middle East. Thus, the government is increasing its attempts to centralize and control Islamic education in Tajikistan. The Islam which they are promoting in government-run schools, including the Islamic University, is infused with Sufi philosophy in an attempt to counter the perceived threat of Islamic extremism which they fear will be imported from abroad.

I found my interviews with Professor Nabotov Zainiddin, the professor of Sufism at the

Islamic University, to be especially informative about the place of Sufism in the curriculum at the college, and about the contemporary practice of Sufism in Tajikistan in general. Professor Nabotov Zainiddin believes that theology students must learn the history of Sufism for theological purposes as well as for their own personal spiritual development. Professor Nabotov Zainiddin is the author of the main Sufi textbook which he uses for his Sufism course. In this course, he surveys the history of all the major Sufi tariqas in Central Asia, such as the Qadariyya, Naqshbandiyya, Mevleviyya, Yaswiyya, Qalandariyya, and Khalwatiyya. He acknowledged that currently the two most popular tariqas remain the Naqshbandiyya and Qadariyya. He allowed me to watch him teach his Sufism course to students, and he even let me sit in on oral examinations he was giving to his students. He was very forthcoming in sharing with me how essential he feels Sufism is for Islamic education and for the development of each Muslim heart.

Professor Zainiddin said that Sufism is the path which can polish the heart of each Muslim, promote peace, and help each Muslim in their goal of trying to become an *insan kamil* (perfected human being). On a previous trip to Dushanbe, Professor Nabotov Zainiddin brought me to visit a Qadariyya sheikh, while the Khatib of the Yaqub Chakhi mosque brought me to a Naqshbandi sheikh. Professor Zainiddin also shared with me the names of other nearby living sheikhs in Dushanbe who are revered for their wisdom and piety. Thus, for this professor of Sufism and by extension the Islamic University as an institution, the practice of visiting living Sufi sheikhs for spiritual assistance and guidance is embraced as a living practice and tradition, in contrast to places like Turkmenistan, which promotes visitation to the shrines of dead sheikhs but not to the homes of living sheikhs.

The Islamic University in Dushanbe has also participated in implementing a curriculum to promote the Sufi tenets of tolerance and peace. Professor Nabotov Zainiddin is one of several

professors in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, along with his colleague Saodat Davlatova⁸ at the Islamic University, who have taught the “Religious Identity, Islam and Peace Building in Central Asia” curriculum created by the University of Peace in 2007⁹ for students, clerics, secularists, NGOs, and administrators in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to promote peace-building in Islamic societies potentially threatened with religious and other identity-based conflicts by bridging the attitudinal gaps between secular and Islamic education. As the curriculum of the Islamic University is controlled by the government, the offering of courses on Sufism and peace initiatives indicates that state is vested in promoting Sufism in Islamic education as an antidote to the perceived threat of Islamic extremism.

The bookstores which surround the central mosque of Dushanbe, the Yakub Charkhi mosque (named after Tajikistan’s most famous Sufi), carry a number of books on Sufism. There are currently no restrictions on the publication of Sufi literature or the importation of Sufi literature from other countries such as Iran. Nevertheless, all of the material sold at these stores adjacent to the mosque has been checked and approved of by governmental authorities. In the bookstores on the grounds of the Yaqub Charkhi mosque, I perused titles by notable Sufis such as Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi al Balkhi, Ibn Arabi, al-Ghazzali, Bahauddin Naqshband, and Abu Hamid Mohammad Ghazzali. Tajikistan has recently been receiving new editions of diwans and Sufi texts from Persia, a trend which will only increase with the rising and intensifying attention being paid to Persian language and poetry in Tajikistan. While some sheikhs in Tajikistan have published their own writings in newspaper and magazine articles, such writings are not currently

⁸ Other scholars who have taken part in this curriculum include: Baybolot Abytov, Osh State University, Kyrgyzstan; Asylbek Eshiev, Jalalabad State University, Kyrgyzstan; Nursuluu Eshimbekova, Institute of Linguistics and World Civilizations under the Kyrgyz State University named by Arabaev, Kyrgyzstan; Nabijon Rahimov, Modern Humanitarian Academy, Tajikistan; Ludmila Stavskaya, Kyrgyz Russian Slavonic University, Kyrgyzstan; Sanjar Tajimatov, Osh State University, Kyrgyzstan; and Kubatbek Asan Uulu, Narin State University, Kyrgyzstan.

⁹ Support for the Religious Identity, Islam and Peace-Building Project was supplied from Norway, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

available at these bookstores.

Throughout the history of Tajikistan, the ishans (leaders) of the Sufi orders have traditionally exerted a profound influence on the daily life of the people, and they continue to be popular today. In interviewing the shopkeepers, as well as Islamic clerics and professors at the Islamic University, I was told that the most popular living Sheikhs surrounding Dushanbe are: Sheikh Timur (Qadiriyya), Sheikh Abdul Khalil (Naqshbandiyya) in Hissar, Sheikh Zaidabdullah (Naqshbandiyya), and Sheikh Abdul Rauf (Naqshbandiyya). Prominent religious figures such as Ishan Turajan, Ishani Abdulhaliljon, Ishani Nuriddin and others are followers of the Qadiriyya *tariqa*. The followers of the Naqshbandiyya *tariqa* are Domullo Mukhammadi, Domullo Hikmatullo, and Makhsumi Ismoil. The organization of Tajikistan's main Sufi orders is generally not as hierarchical as Uzbekistan's Naqshbandiyya Abd al-Wahhab zadah Qahhari Ismail is a leader of the Qadiriyya movement and the imam of the mosque in the region of Vakhdad, south of Dushanbe. He studied with the grandfather of Khoja Akbar Turajonzade, former deputy prime minister and chief Mufti of Tajikistan. Many of Tajikistan's leading Sufis have been reluctant to involve themselves in political activity, and some vocally condemned the civil war. For example, Hajji Ismail Pir Muhammadzadah, a Naqshbandi sheikh and the imam of the mosque in the Ghissar region of Tajikistan, opposed the civil war in Tajikistan and actively spoke out against the involvement of spiritual leaders in that war. Abd al-Wahhab zadah Qahhari Ismail was against the war in Tajikistan and especially against participation in the war by people of religion.

The great Sufi families have traditionally provided the main religious personnel for the state. Many leaders and members of the Soviet Spiritual Directorate for Central Asia and Kazakhstan during the Soviet period were ishans or descendants of famous ishans.

Ibrahim Hoja Ishan, the grandfather of the deputy mufti of Central Asia, the sheikh Abdulgani Abdullaev, was a Qadiri murshid, and his son and grandson were adepts of the same brotherhood.¹⁰ The official muftis who replaced the contestory muftis in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were both Naqshbandis. The Soviet Spiritual Directorate for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (1943-1989), which had authority over the leading *qazi* of Tajikistan, was led by a Naqshbandi dynasty of sheikhs: Ishan Babakhan ibn Abdul Majid Khan (1943-1957), his son Ziyauddin Babakhanov (1957-1982), and his grandson Shamsuddin Khan. Even though he descended from a prominent Sufi family, Ziyauddin Khan ibn Ishan Babakhan, the longest serving mufti of SADUM (1957-1982), published several fatwas against local Sufi traditions, and he criticized the cult of Sufi saint worship at shrines, as the Communist Party Central Committee had passed dozens of special resolutions against such “unapproved gatherings” of “ignorant believers.”

Even though the genealogy of Ziyauddin’s family, linked them to the great Sufi families of Central Asia (*ishan-i mirathy*), Ziyauddin had received training in Saudi Arabia, where he was influenced by Wahhabism and a far less tolerant vein of Islam. In September 1958, Ziyauddin Babakhanov, as Chief Mufti of Central Asia, published a fatwa in which he condemned pilgrimages to the Throne of Suleyman in the outskirts of Osh in Kyrgyzstan, one of the most venerated of all holy places in Central Asia. In February 1959, he produced another fatwa in which he condemned the practice of pilgrimage to holy places in general, and then a third fatwa soon followed to declare ishanism as an innovation foreign to Islam. In late 1980 and early 1981, Ziyauddin Babakhanov delivered another fatwa on the subject of holy places in answer to a question of the *qadi* Abdullah Kalanov, who was the representative of the Spiritual Board of

¹⁰ Musulmans de l’OriEnt SoviEtique, no. 4, 1975, p. 9.

Tajikistan. This fatwa proclaims once again the “inadmissibility of pilgrimage to holy places, especially to such places whose Islamic character is dubious, such as *Takht-I Suleyman* (Osh Piri) in Kirghizia and *Shah-I Mardan* in Uzbekistan:

[These places] cannot be regarded as authentic, and Islam considers that paying homage to these graves is wrong. Under these circumstances, our Religious Board has made an appeal to all Muslims to safeguard themselves against such malpractices. We would like to emphasize once more that, under the guidance of uneducated imams, certain persons continue to pay homage to different graves as well as to burial grounds and commit these acts, being quite confident that they are paying homages to the burial places of holy persons and that by doing so they are performing acts of some importance. We wish to give a reminder once more that this is tantamount to a pure act of idolry and can only be looked upon as one of the gravest mortal sins of genuinely faithful Muslims....The Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan invites all qadis of our republics, the imams, the members of mutawaliat of the mosques, to explain to Muslims that paying homage to distant or neighboring graves and burial grounds is considered as a grave mortal sin.¹¹

The Sufi lineage of Ziyauddin and his fatwas against Sufi practices illustrate that it has not been easy in Tajikistan to easily understand the religious and political landscape of Sufism, as it is constantly shifting and many seemingly hypocritical compromises have been made to prevent persecution from state authorities.

Many of the most visible religious figures in Tajikistan in the post-Soviet period as well have come from influential Sufi dynasties. Khoja Akbar Turajonzade (b. 1947), the spiritual chief of the Tajik opposition is himself a Qadari. His father, Ishan Turajan, is the *murid* of a famous pir from Kurgan-Teppe, Hazrat Ishan Khalliljan. In fact, in the 1940s, all members of Turajanzoda family were sent to Siberia. The ones who survived returned to Tajikistan after Stalin's death. In 1988, as glasnost finally reached the borders of Tajikistan, local mullahs separated from the Muslim Spiritual Board based in Uzbekistan and elected their own Chief Mufti, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda¹, the former Qazi Qalon of Tajikistan (the country's highest

¹¹ *Muslims of the Soviet East*, no. 2, 1981, pp. 18-19.

Islamic imam) in the last years of the Soviet Union and first years after Tajikistan became independent. Turajonzoda later threw his support behind the Islamic Renaissance Party which, allied with the Democratic opposition, ousted the Communist regime in Dushanbe in 1992 to form a coalition government. Nevertheless, Communist supporters, backed with Russian and Uzbek support, fought back, and eventually the leaders of the coalition, including Turajonzoda, were forced to flee during the intense fighting of the civil war. Turajonzoda was replaced as Mufti in the midst of the Tajik civil war. As the leader of today's opposition, Turajonzade does not profess to be a Sufi leader, although he did legitimize his religious authority by emphasizing that he comes from a "noble family of ishans." Turajonzade's successor, Fatullah Khan Sharifzadeⁱⁱ (Fatkhulla Sharipov) was appointed mufti of the republic by the Kulyab government after neo-Communist had gained control of Dushanbe and Turajonzoda had fled to Afghanistan. Sharifzade was also a Sufi, but he was the son of a Naqshbandi *pir*, Damullah Mohamed Sharif Hissar. Speaking just after his appointment in February 1993, he pledged not to get involved in politics, while at the same time backing "the new government which has brought stability." Throughout his tenure as Chief Mufti, he was a devoted supporter of the government of President Emomali Rahmon in its efforts to suppress Islamic and democratic opposition within Tajikistan and made clear his opposition to attempts by some members of the IRP to install a pro-Islamic regime.

Sufi orders have traditionally held supreme authority among the population because people have been hesitant to turn to the formal, state supervised clerics for religious guidance. While in Dushanbe, I had the opportunity to interview a number of members of the Islamic Council of Ulema of Tajikistan, the country's highest Islamic institution, about Sufism and the issuing of fatwas in Tajikistan. While the Council of Ulema is officially an independent

religious body, it is heavily directed by governmental influence. After opposition fighters were forcibly removed from Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe in 1992, the government abolished the Soviet Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Tajikistan, which had supported the opposition, and formed a new organization in its place called the Council of Ulema (scholarly theologians)¹² to weaken the independence and influence of the Muslim clergy, who were positioned as potential political rivals to the secular state. Once the Council of Ulema demonstrated that it would be subservient to the state authorities, they granted the Council the authority once held by the Spiritual Administration.

The Council of Ulema provides fatwas on religious practice that imams throughout the country must respect and follow. The vacuum of independent religious authorities may not be felt profoundly in the hearts of religious practitioners, as teachers of Sufi orders, or *ishans*, traditionally played a more influential role than the *ulema* (Muslim scholars) in Tajikistan. Government officials visit mosques on a regular basis to monitor activities, and observe those who attended the mosques. The head of the Dushanbe municipal Department for Religious Affairs, Shamsiddin Nuriddinov, announced on August 2, 2007 that new requirements for the licensing of Islamic leaders, or imams, of local mosques would henceforth be imposed, including a new review process overseen by the Tajik Council of Ulema (Islamic scholars). A new "appraisal commission," composed of representatives from the Council of Ulema, was formed to supervise the process along with prosecution bodies and law-enforcement agencies. This was the largest state effort to supervise the selection and work of Islamic leaders in Tajikistan.

In addition to supplying a list of approved sermon topics to the mosques, the Islamic

¹² After independence, the post-Soviet Tajik Spiritual Board of Muslims published the first issue of the "Minbari Islom" ("Islamic Rostrum") newspaper on 10 January 1992, the aim of which was spreading Islamic education. In addition, two other religious newspapers were published: the "Paemi Hak" ("Message of God"), sponsored by the PIVT Deputy Chairman Davlat Usmon, and the "Nachot" ("Salvation"), a chief editor of which was Aimiddin Sattorov. Intense debates about religion and the treatment of the Muslim clergy by the Communist Party appeared in these newspapers.

Council also issues fatwas, or religious opinions, and helps to determine the curriculum at the Islamic University. Many of these fatwas issued by the Council of Ulema demonstrate governmental control and pressure over the Islamic scholars--a legacy of the Islamic bodies created during the Soviet period, which were themselves heavily influenced by former czarist policies and bodies.¹³ However, many of these religious fatwas are paradoxically the product of a staunch secularism that aims to advance a nationalist agenda by controlling the expressions and practice of Islam, negating the global connectedness of the *ummah*, and delegitimizing religious groups within pose a threat to the security and integrity of the state. Throughout Central Asia, fatwas have emerged as tools of influence to demarcate the parameters of the national project and define the relationship between state and non-state religious actors within the context of Islamic law.

I met with this Council to speak with them about their issuing of fatwas and the place of Sufism in Islamic education and society. In my interview with the Ulema Council, which I conducted in Arabic, I asked them first about their practice of issuing fatwas. They showed me some of the fatwa literature in their possession in their main office, and informed me that many of their fatwas were informed by both current and former fatwas from Uzbekistan and Iran. I asked them why, unlike several other Ulema Councils in Central Asia, they do not have a website. They said that they are currently working on a website to share the fatwas of the Ulema Council and to promote Islamic knowledge online. They informed me that most of their fatwas are issued above from the Council itself, such as their fatwas against “foreign-made” hijabs and women praying in the mosques,” yet they had recently begun listening more to calls for certain

¹³ Even in the 19th century, Russian experts on Central Asia attempted to oppose the official Muslim ulema to the Sufi dervishes; the former became partners to the Russian administration and their loyalty was partly ensured, while the latter managed to escape all control from Russian authorities, who considered them to be implacable enemies.

fatwas from the populace, such as the fatwa from April 2011 which banned divorce by SMS on the grounds that it violates Tajik and Islamic law, according to Abdurahim Kholiquov, the chairman of the State Committee on Religious Affairs. A number of women in Tajikistan had asked the Council to issue such a fatwa after hundreds of them had been divorced by their migrant worker husbands in Russia by text message. In fact, the majority of appeals brought before the Ulema Council concern divorce cases.

There has been a notable increase in the observance of *shari'a* (Islamic law) among Tajiks since the country's independence nearly 20 years ago. Qobiljon Boev, leader of the Fatwa Department of the Council of Ulema of the Islamic Center of Tajikistan, believes that most of the people who appeal to religious leaders seek both solutions to their problems but also rulings on the good or evil of their actions from the perspective of *shari'a*. The ulema do not feel that *shari'a* conflicts with the secular law of the state. All of the ulema members with whom I spoke said that they endorse education in Sufism at the Islamic University, and they believe that Sufism should be promoted and not repressed. Sufism has long been associated in Central Asia with Hanafi jurisprudence, even by scholars such as Muhammadjan Hindustani (d. 1989) (who achieved a high level of learning as a Sufi), and Ziyauddin Khan Ishan Babakhan, upon which Tajikistan bases all of its Islamic education and fatwas. As a result, Hindustani studied Rumi, Bedil, and Mashrab, and he believed that his close association with Sufi figures like Ishan Abdurrahmanjon, a prominent Sufi sheikh in the Soviet period, and Ishan Sheikh Asadullah, was an integral part of his personal religious education. Nevertheless, these men did not claim to represent Sufism or teach it—rather, they embraced it as being a valued component of Hanafi jurisprudence.

Tajik government officials, Islamic scholars, and Hanafi Muslims are concerned about

the ostensibly widening influence and harsh exclusionism of the Salafis, who renounce Shi'ism and Sufism.ⁱⁱⁱ In July 2011, the Tajikistan Ambassador to India, Syed Baig, urged the people of Jammu and Kashmir to embrace Sufism and propagate peace and brotherhood at an International Sufi Conference in Srinagar. It is important to note that the practice of shrine pilgrimage, which is at the heart of Islamic practice in Tajikistan, is often criticized as being a Sufic innovation by more fundamentalist Muslims who find rituals used to ward off the evil eye and appeal for healing or intercession from saints to be heretical. Salafi ideology is widely distributed in brochures, audio and videotapes, and books printed in Russia which are available on the streets and in bookstores at mosques. The Salafis' disapproval of Sufism has caused friction with many Tajiks because of Sufism's long and rich tradition in Tajikistan. The Tajik government is already trying to combat the spread of Salafism through several new policies. For instance, he declared 2009 "the year of Abu Hanifah", the founder of the Hanafi brand of Islam.

In addition to traveling to Tajikistan, I also journeyed to Kunduz, Balkh, and Mazar-i Sharif in Afghanistan to research how Tajiks in northern Afghanistan have recently returned to visiting Sufi shrines in these areas without fear of being punished by the Taliban. While in Tajikistan, I met with Tajiks who had fled Afghanistan because of the current violence. They arranged for me to be taken to the cities of Kunduz, Balkh and Mazar-i Sharif to observe the resurgence of Sufism being practiced in public without fear or restraint. In visiting these Sufi sites, I was struck by the visible practice of Sufism by hundreds of people, especially in Mazar-i Sharif at the legendary shrine to Hazreti Ali, numerous old shrines in Balkh, and the house of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi's father in Balkh. Everywhere I went in northern Afghanistan, I was able to speak about Sufism openly, and many Sufi shrines had detailed signs posted attesting to

the piety and blessings of the Sufi walis (saints) buried there. In meeting with Afghan diplomats at their embassy in Turkmenistan this past summer, I learned that the Afghan government has been promoting Sufism all around the country and using Sufis as mediators with the Taliban. Zikrs of the Naqshbandiyya, Qadariyya, and Chishtiyya are taking place very frequently each week in Kabul. Seeing the recent revival of Sufism among Tajiks in northern Afghanistan leads one to wonder whether or not this will have an impact across the border in Tajikistan.

The government of Tajikistan is currently promoting Sufism in Islamic education, promoting the visitation of shrines, allowing its citizens to visit the homes of influential sheikhs, and embracing Sufism in general as an alternative to other forms of Islam which it deems to be more at risk for politicization and extremism. Further, Tajikistan considers its Sufi spiritual inheritance and history to be a prime component of its post-Soviet national identity. While Tajikistan has been rather heavy handed in controlling various forms of Islam which are influenced by Salafi and Wahhabi tendencies, their treatment of Sufi sheikhs, philosophy, and pilgrims seems to more benign and hands off than other forms of Islamic revival in the country. As a result, it appears that Sufi practice is becoming more visible and Sufi aspirants are increasing in number. Unlike Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Tajikistan has allowed Sufi practice to flourish without trying to control it excessively from above. Sufism is not a political movement, yet it is a mistake to consider it pacifist in practice, as Naqshbandis in the Caucasus and in Central Asia have proven themselves as excellent fighters in the past. Nevertheless, it appears today that Sufis are devoting more attention to developing themselves spiritually and individually, rather than politically and communally.

The state promotion of religious beliefs and practices that are widely regarded as “national” and Sufi traditions in Tajikistan has sought to disempower Islamism by appealing to

the nation's past and its cultural memory and disarm the secularly defined religious realm from being fertile ground for politicization. At a time when the United States is currently promoting Sufism as an antidote to extremism throughout the world, especially in Pakistan and Egypt, it is essential that policymakers consider the example of Tajikistan, where the political leadership has subtly and successfully promoted the veneration of local saints and shrine pilgrimages, while also insisting upon a staunch separation of mosque and state. While Sufism has been used throughout history as a counterbalance to more extremist forms of Islam, this approach has often backfired, as is currently happening in Pakistan, with unprecedented attacks on Sufi shrines, which correlate with the promotion of Sufism by Pakistan and American government entities. Thus, Tajikistan supplies U.S. policymakers with a more balanced approach to allowing Sufism to flourish by promoting Sufi pedagogy in Islamic education, renovating Sufi shrines, allowing the spread of Sufi literature, and respecting living Sufi sheikhs without trying to overly control the practice of Sufism from above and risk a backlash.

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ⁱ He joined the Islamic opposition that was fighting government forces during the 1992-97 Tajik civil war and was forced to leave the country. He returned to Tajikistan after he and other opposition figures were amnestied as part of the agreement that ended the civil war.

ⁱⁱ Fatkhullo Sharifzoda (Fatkhulla Sharipov) was born in Kizyl, Tajikistan in 1942 and died 21 January 1996. A father of seven, he worked as a manager in the water service while at the same time serving as an unofficial mullah. In 1989, Sharifzoda devoted himself full-time to religion as the mufti of the main mosque in Hissar. He later became Tajikistan's leading Muslim cleric and was assassinated on 21 January together with his wife and two other relatives by unknown gunmen at his home in the Hissar region.

ⁱⁱⁱ Muhammadi Rakhmatullo, the head of Salafiyah in Tajikistan and one of the country's central Salafi leaders, claims that 20,000 people have joined the Salafi movement in Tajikistan in recent years.