

Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan

Svante E. Cornell
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Preface

Dramatic changes have occurred in Uzbekistan during the year and a half since Shavkat Mirziyoyev's election as President. Some of these changes have come in the form of legislative acts of the Oliy Majlis, Uzbekistan's parliament. Others have taken the form of administrative orders issued by the President or his principal Ministers. At no other time since Uzbekistan's establishment as an independent state have more innovations been introduced, or with greater speed.

Since these changes are bound to affect Uzbekistan's internal economic, social, and political life, and since they directly affect Uzbekistan's ties with its regional neighbors and its relations with all the world's major powers, the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center has undertaken to document this year of innovation. As part of this effort, we are pleased to present this study of the state's evolving relationship to religion, authored by Svante E. Cornell and Jacob Zenn. This *Silk Road Paper* follows a study released on Uzbekistan's foreign policy in December 2017, studies on the country's legal and political reforms published in March 2018, and a study on economic modernization issued in April 2018. All will constitute chapters in a forthcoming volume, *Uzbekistan's New Face*, to be published in the summer of 2018.

The reader may well ask how this dramatic series of initiatives will work out in actual practice. As the saying goes, "there is a big distance between the cup and the lip." Obviously, only the passage of time will enable us to reach firm conclusions on this important point. However, certain impacts of the reform agenda have already been registered in the economic realm. Others will follow. Our objective in cataloguing and presenting the

legislative acts, decrees, and executive orders that constitute the present era of reforms is to provide those interested in Uzbekistan with a base line and guide that will enable them to evaluate the ongoing process of implementation as it emerges. Stated differently, it is a story of aspirations that are sweeping in their intent and far-reaching in their likely impact. It will enable friends of Uzbekistan and academic analysts in many countries to track Uzbekistan's further evolution.

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S. Frederick Starr

Chairman, CACI & SRSP Joint Center

Executive Summary

Major political and economic reforms have been initiated since Shavkat Mirziyoyev became the country's President in fall 2016. The interaction between state and religion has been part and parcel of this reform process.

This area is a contentious one, rife with confusion. Many consider Central Asia peripheral to the Muslim world, but in fact the territory of present-day Uzbekistan occupies a central position in the history and development of the religion. The intellectual effervescence of the region a millennium ago, which has recently been dubbed the "Lost Enlightenment," included advances in both science, philosophy and theology, as well as the rise of Islamic mysticism. The Soviet period had more pernicious effects than only an onslaught against religion: in keeping with the tradition of dividing and ruling, Soviet authorities repressed traditional Central Asian Islam, particularly its Sufi variety, but actively encouraged more orthodox practices imported from the Middle East, including Salafi ideas. These took root in parts of Uzbekistan the Soviet period, and help explain the explosion of extremist jihadism in the Ferghana valley in the late 1980s.

Against this complex background, the independent state of Uzbekistan established a secular form of government in 1992. So did its Central Asian neighbors and Azerbaijan, but Tashkent took a considerably harder line against religious influences from abroad. On one hand, the state struck up cordial relations with the leaders of traditional religious communities – whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish. While seeking to guarantee religious pluralism, the Uzbek state worked to protect the state and society from novel, intolerant religious ideologies, which were rife in the civil wars in

nearby Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and imposed sometimes draconian punishments for individuals and groups deemed extremist in nature.

These policies became among the most contentious issues in Uzbekistan's relationship with Western countries and international organizations, which criticized Tashkent for human rights abuses and restricting religious freedom, and feared these policies would only strengthen the appeal of radical ideologies. Yet Uzbek officials were not content to target only the violent manifestations of extremist ideology: they opposed the ideology itself, viewing it as particularly dangerous in at a time of wide-ranging transition involving the consolidation of national identity.

When Mirziyoyev took over the reins of power, Uzbekistan – unlike several of its neighbors – had not experienced a terrorist incident on its soil for over a decade. From this position of relative strength, Mirziyoyev recalibrated religious policies, shifting from a defensive to an offensive strategy. He maintained the secular nature of the state, its laws, and its education system. But he also put increasing emphasis on promoting the tolerant Islamic tradition indigenous to Central Asia, something he dubbed “Enlightened Islam.”

Beyond steps to encourage public expressions of religion, Mirziyoyev has announced the creation of several new institutions. This includes an Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, as well as an Islamic Culture Center designed to “fight religious ignorance and promote Islam's true values.” In addition, he announced the creation of the Imam Bukhari International Scientific Research Center, headquartered at the Imam Al-Bukhari Academy in Samarkand. Remarkably, this latter initiative will focus equally on religious and secular knowledge.

Among other measures, the government has now removed 95 percent of individuals registered as “religious radicals” from a government list,

encouraged the return of religious dissidents to the country, and engaged with international bodies promoting the freedom of religion.

In sum, for a quarter century, Uzbekistan adopted a defensive approach in the religious realm, which focused on thwarting radicalization and safeguarding its secular governance. Today, the country's leadership is confidently presenting an Uzbek model of Islam to the world: a secular state in which the moderate Hanafi tradition of the region is able to flourish.

The longer-term question goes beyond the confines of Uzbekistan or even Central Asia: will this model be relevant to countries in the Islamic heartland? The negative experience of mixing religion and politics across the Muslim world may yet lead to a quest for a better solution to the age-old problem of negotiating the state's relationship to religion. If Uzbekistan, and its neighbors, succeed in safeguarding secularism while promoting tolerant and traditional religious institutions, other Muslim countries may well take notice. That would carry global significance, and suggests Western states and organizations take an active and constructive role in supporting the ongoing reform process.

Introduction

State policies toward religion have been among the most sensitive issues in Uzbekistan since independence, and among those that attracted most controversy abroad. This sphere has not been neglected in the wide range of reforms launched since the transition of power of late 2016. Uzbekistan has relaxed some of its restrictions in the religious field, while taking new initiatives on the international scene to promote what it considers to be the tolerant, traditional Central Asian understanding of Islam. This new approach goes hand in hand with the broader reassessment of foreign and domestic policies that started before the death of Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, and is described in this book.

Reforms in the field of religion should not be construed as simply a response to foreign criticism, or as a rejection of the policies of the past. As in the political and economic fields, changes in Uzbekistan have a more evolutionary character. Moreover, the country's leadership is taking this new approach from a position of strength: no extremist violence has been recorded in the country for over a decade, in contrast to the growing problems of religious extremism in several other Central Asian states. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation in 1991. At that time, the newly independent state faced a highly unstable regional environment. To its south, Afghanistan was consumed by civil war among armed groups motivated by a variety of religiously based extremist ideologies. Neighboring Tajikistan was descending into civil war. And in Uzbekistan itself, armed religiously inspired extremists confronted the central government and demanded the imposition of an Islamic state.

This formative experience is what led Uzbekistan's leaders to craft restrictive policies in the field of religious affairs. These policies, grounded in the objective of maintaining a secular state, sought to prevent the spread of foreign-based religious extremism in the country. However, they quickly became the focus of considerable criticism from Western governments and civic activists alike. But today, leaders of Uzbekistan appear satisfied that the state, its institutions, and society itself have matured, and that extremists no longer pose an existential threat warranting extraordinary defensive measures. Instead, the leaders appear confident enough to go on the offensive, to promote the revival of an indigenous religious tradition that can exist in harmony with secular statehood and could prove an example to other nations.

Uzbekistan's complex relationship to religious affairs cannot be understood in a vacuum. A thorough understanding requires a re-evaluation of many common assumptions about religion in Central Asia, paramount among which is the Soviet experience. Before discussing the reforms undertaken by President Mirziyoyev's government, let us therefore look briefly into the background to Uzbekistan's religious situation at the time it gained independence, and analyze the rationale behind the policies that were developed in the first twenty-five years thereafter.

State and Religion: The Historical and Soviet Heritage

To the untrained eye, Central Asia may appear peripheral to the Muslim heartland in the Middle East. But the broad region of Central Asia, and Uzbekistan in particular, occupy a central position in the history of Islam. Following the Islamization of Central Asia – the present-day Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – from the eighth century onward, the oases of the region developed a stunning intellectual environment unrivaled elsewhere in the world at the time.¹ Most of the most spectacular advances occurred in such secular fields as mathematics, science, and medicine, but the field of religion was by no means neglected. The most authoritative collection of *hadith* – accounts of the Prophet's sayings – were recorded by Muhammad al-Bukhari, a native of Bukhara.² Nor was orthodox theology the only field in which Central Asia played a prominent role. The region also figured centrally in the development of the mystical, esoteric forms of Islam known as Sufism. Several of the largest Sufi orders with a global presence originated in Central Asia – most prominently the Naqshbandiyya order, which presently extends from the Balkans to Indonesia.³

As this suggests, Islam in present-day Uzbekistan was never homogeneous or uniform: mystical and scriptural practices coexisted, while pre-Islamic beliefs and folk customs have continued to remain a part of religious life

¹ This is described vividly in S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Invasions to Tamerlane*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

² Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of Al-Bukhari and Muslim: The Formation and Function of Sunni Hadith Canon*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

³ Martha Brill Olcott, *Sufism in Central Asia*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Papers no. 84, May 2007. (http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp84_olcott_final2.pdf)

into the present. The religious environment has also been enriched by the continuing presence of Christian and Jewish minorities. In part, this pluralism was possible because it was tolerated, to some extent, by the formal Islamic authorities. The dominant Hanafi school of jurisprudence and Maturidi school of theology (named for Samarkand native Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Maturidi) gave Central Asian Islam a highly distinctive character. The Hanafi school is considerably more open than the other three schools to accepting non-scriptural sources of Islamic law, such as the independent reasoning of Islamic jurists (*ra'y*), the consensus of jurists (*ijma*) and deductive analogy (*qiyas*).⁴ Similarly, Maturidi theology places considerably stronger emphasis on human reason than its main rival, the Ash'ari school, accepting the notion that human reason is powerful enough to tell wrong from right even without the aid of divine revelation.⁵

Grounded in this tradition, Central Asian *Ulama* were tolerant of mystical practices, which stricter *madhabs* like the Hanbali or Shafi'i considered un-Islamic. They were also more tolerant of pre-Islamic beliefs, which they sought to integrate and cloak in an Islamic shroud rather than systematically suppress. This facilitated the spread of a distinct and local form of Islam across the region.⁶

Of course, Russian colonization and the subsequent Soviet experience had a significant impact on this tradition. But its impact is much more complex than what is widely assumed. The Soviet assault against religion was very real, as only a handful of mosques remained in Central Asia by the mid-

⁴ The Hanafi school dominates in former Ottoman lands and Central Asia; the Shafi'i school is followed in Kurdish-populated areas, Southeast Asia, and East Africa; the Maliki school is dominant in the rest of Africa, while the Hanbali school is followed in Saudi Arabia and some Gulf monarchies. For more details about differences in jurisprudence, see Mohammed Hameedullah Khan, *The Schools of Islamic Jurisprudence: A Comparative Study*, Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1991; Irshad Abdal-Haqq, "Islamic Law: An Overview of Its Origins and Elements", *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*, vol. 7 no. 27, 2002.

⁵ Ahmad Mohamad Ahmad El-Galli, *The Place of Reason in the Theology of Al-Maturidi and Al-Ash'ari*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1976. (<https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/17177>)

⁶ Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*.

1920s, and religion was effectively curbed from public life.⁷ As a result, it is often assumed that the Soviet experience led to a comprehensive secularization not only of the state and its institutions, but of the lives of Central Asians themselves.⁸ Yet in fact, while Central Asians may not have been conversant in theological matters, Muslim *identity* may even have been strengthened during the Soviet period. In a 1979 study, Rasma Karklins showed that Central Asians maintained strong elements of Islamic identity.⁹

Less known is that while Soviet authorities targeted Sufi practices and “folk Islam,” which they considered to be potentially subversive, they appear to have encouraged the flow of orthodox theological currents inspired by Salafism and the stricter Shafi’i and Hanbali *madhabs*. This conformed with the Soviet penchant for sowing division: just as Moscow encouraged the splintering of the Muslim and overwhelmingly Turkic peoples of Central Asia and Western Siberia into nine different territorial entities,¹⁰ it sought to splinter the Muslim community along religious lines as well, weakening the region’s Hanafi-Maturidi traditions by supporting more orthodox and ante-Sufi practices.

A key figure in this development was the Lebanese-born al-Shami al-Tarabulsi, who came to Central Asia in 1919 from Kashgar.¹¹ This Salafi-inspired graduate of Al-Azhar in Cairo forcefully endorsed the Bolshevik

⁷ Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941*, Westport: Praeger, 2001.

⁸ Eg. Yaacov Ro’i, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, London: Hurst, 2000.

⁹ Rasma Karklins, “Islam: How Strong Is It in the Soviet Union? Inquiry Based on Oral Interviews with Soviet Germans Repatriated from Central Asia in 1979”, *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, vol. 21 no. 1, 1980, p. 65-81. (http://www.persee.fr/doc/cm_r_0008-0160_1980_num_21_1_1374)

¹⁰ These were the Soviet Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan; the Autonomous Republics of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan; Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan; and Bashkortostan and Tatarstan in Russia.

¹¹ Ashirbek Muminov, “Fundamentalist Challenges to Local Islamic Traditions in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia”, in Tomohiko Uyama, ed., *Empire, Islam and Politics in Central Eurasia*, Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007. Sébastien Peyrouse, “The Rise of Political Islam in Soviet Central Asia”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 5, 2007, p. 41; Martha Brill Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012, p. 81.

destruction of Sufi saints' tombs.¹² As one regional scholar notes, “[Al-Shami] completely rejected the inheritance of the medieval ulama, called for the development of new judgments returning to the roots of Islam—the Qur’an and the authentic hadiths of the Prophet.”¹³

Al-Shami made a strong mark on the theological establishment that came to dominate Soviet Central Asia. Significantly, most of his disciples survived the 1937 terror, and were freed from prison during the Second World War. Those included Ishan Babakhan, who was appointed to head the newly formed Soviet Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM). In 1947, he and his son were allowed to perform the Hajj and to travel to Al-Azhar; three generations of the Babakhan family would remain at the helm of SADUM for a half century, until 1989.¹⁴

Thus, the very institution Moscow created to regulate and control religion was handed to figures deeply steeped in Salafi theology, and who were hostile both to the folk Sufi Islam and to the indigenous Hanafi tradition of Central Asia. In 1952, they issued a fatwa denouncing Sufism.¹⁵ From the 1960s onward, they benefited from repeated travels to the Middle East, bringing back religious literature from there that conflicted with Hanafi traditions of Central Asia.¹⁶

From the 1970s onward, independent theologians of a Salafi bent became even more outspoken critics of indigenous religious traditions. These included Abduvali Qori Mirzoyev and Obidxon Qori Nazarov, who would have great influence in the rise of extremist Islamism in the Ferghana valley

¹² Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, p. 40.

¹³ Muminov, “Fundamentalist Challenges,” p. 255.

¹⁴ Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*, p. 81-90.

¹⁵ Pawel Jassa, “Religious Renewal in Kazakhstan”, in Chris Hann, ed., *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2006, p. 177.

¹⁶ Peyrouse, “The Rise of Political Islam,” p. 43.

during the transition to independence.¹⁷ Research has confirmed that Soviet covert support for Salafi tendencies continued into the 1980s.¹⁸

What occurred in Soviet Central Asia was thus not just the attempted destruction of religion, but a purposefully orchestrated competition between traditionalist Hanafi Islam and a Salafi-inclined tendency with growing ties to the Middle Eastern heartland.

¹⁷ For a valuable rendering of the ideas of these theologians, see Allen J. Frank and Jahangir Mamatov, *Uzbek Islamic Debates: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*, Springfield, VA: Dunwoody Press, 2006.

¹⁸ Naumkin, *Radical Islam*, p. 52.

Uzbekistan's Model of Secularism

At independence, Uzbek authorities faced the challenge, common to all successor states of the Soviet Union, of redefining the state's relationship to religion. This was part and parcel of the momentous transition in all spheres of public life, but one poorly understood abroad: the U.S. Freedom Support Act of 1992, the main piece of American legislation dealing with the region, state many lofty goals, but does not mention secular governance at all.¹⁹

But secular governance can come in many shapes and forms. One might identify five distinct models for organizing the state's relationship to religion. A first can be termed the "Fusion" model, which features the merger of spiritual and political power. A second, the "Dominant Religion" model, affirms a single dominant religion in each state, but provides for the continued existence of minority religions. A third, the "State Neutrality" model best known from the American model, calls for strict state neutrality in religious matters, which are seen in law as purely civic and private in character. A fourth, the "Skeptical/Insulating" model exemplified by the French model of *laïcité*, adopts a skeptical approach to religion that seeks to insulate the state from the influence of religion. Finally, the fifth model is outright state hostility to any manifestation of religion, as was practiced in the Soviet Union and other communist countries.

Leaving the Soviet model of promoting atheism behind, Uzbekistan rejected the "Hostile" model outright. Yet it did not go as far as adopting the third model of state neutrality toward religion: as will be seen, the leadership of

¹⁹ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *The Long Game on the Silk Road: US and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp. 100-102.

Uzbekistan developed policies that feature elements of the second and fourth ideal types. In seeking to shield the state from religious influences and maintaining secular laws and education, Uzbekistan approximates French-style *laïcité*. Yet in promoting the restoration of the traditional religious practices of Central Asia, it borrows from the dominant-religion model prevalent in nineteenth-century European monarchies with state churches or in Meiji Japan.

In Uzbek, the term with the meaning closest to secular is “dunyoviy” In the 1981 Descriptive Dictionary of Uzbek, “dunyoviy” was defined as “relating to the world, life, universe, and existence.”²⁰ The word is contrasted with “diniy”, which refers to religion itself.²¹ This term is identical to the synonymous Turkish “dünyavi” and Persian “dunyavi.”²² The connotation of “dunyoviy” can also therefore refer to “worldly pleasures and riches” that exist in this life as compared to the rewards or punishments in the afterlife or the “other world”.

There is no mention of secularism as such in Uzbekistan’s current Constitution. The preamble states that the Constitution was adopted for “setting forth the task of creating a humane and democratic law-governed state.” Article 1 of the Constitution also states that “Uzbekistan is a sovereign democratic republic.” However, Article 18 implicitly refers to secular statehood, as it states that all citizens “shall be equal before law

²⁰ Ўзбек тилининг изоҳли луғати, 1981.

²¹ In a more recent 2006-8 edition of the Dictionary, “dunyoviy” was, similar to the past, defined as “relating to real, material world and life; realistic.” Ўзбек тилининг изоҳли луғати, 2006-2008 edition (<http://ziyouz.uz/durdona-toplamlar/zbek-tilining-izo-li-lu-ati-a-madvaliev-ta-riri-ostida-2006-2008/>) The dictionary also included an example of the use of the word “dunyoviy” from the Russian science magazine, *Science and Life (Nauka i Zhizn)*, which said that “Nowhere in the Qur’an does it say one should not seek secular education (*dunyoviy ilm*).” Like in 1981, the dictionary connected the word “dunyoviy” to education and emphasized that “dunyoviy ilm” was distinct from “diniy ilm” but not clashing with it.

²² The word “dunyoviy” is derived from the word “dunyo”, which is a loanword from the Arabic word “dunya”, meaning “world”; “Din” in Arabic means “religion” (“ilm”, also a loanword, means “knowledge” in Arabic). When Muslim leaders in Uzbekistan today invoke the word “dunyo” they often do so in context of there being “ikki dunyo” (“both worlds” or “two worlds”).

without discrimination by [...] religion [...].²³ Similarly, Article 31 states that “a compulsory imposition of religion shall be impermissible.”²⁴

The first laws in post-independence Uzbekistan that dealt with secularism were related to education. The Law on Education, adopted on July 2, 1992, determined that the public education system is based on science and secularism. The law further provided that certain disciplines, such as philosophy, are “an integral part of the curriculum” because they “help develop religious and ethnic tolerance among the younger generation.”²⁵ In addition, Article 7 of the Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations, as amended on May 1, 1998, provided that “The Republic of Uzbekistan guarantees the right of its citizens to obtain secular education (“*dunyoviy ilm*”) regardless of their religious beliefs.”

The promotion of secularism was not limited to the educational domain: the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Uzbekistan, adopted on August 30, 1995, stated that “Uzbekistan [...] is building a legal, democratic and secular (*dunyoviy*) society.”²⁶

Other laws, such as Article 5 of the Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations, prohibits proselytizing, which is defined as “attempts to convert from one religion to another.”²⁷ Article 216 of the Criminal Code, as amended on August 18, 2015, makes it illegal “to form public associations or religious organizations against the law and participate in their activities,”

²³ “Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan,” (<http://constitution.uz/en/clause/index>).

²⁴ “Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan.”

²⁵ “Ўзбекистон Республикасининг Қонуни: Таълим Тўғрисида, 636-ХП-сон 02.07.1992 й.” (http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact_id=56418) The law that was adopted in 1997 that replaced the 1992 law: “Ўзбекистон Республикасининг Қонуни: Таълим Тўғрисида, 464-І-сон 29.08.1997 й” (http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact_id=16188)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The law is available at (http://lex.uz/pages/GetAct.aspx?lact_id=65108)

and violators can be punished to up to five years in jail.²⁸ In addition, the law explicitly purports to promote pluralism.

Following independence, Uzbekistan developed two key institutions to manage religious affairs. One was the Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan (*O'zbekiston Musulmonlari Idorasi*), which is the national successor to the Soviet-era SADUM that covered all of Central Asia. Nominally an independent agency, it is nevertheless closely aligned with the state. A more direct state body tasked with religious affairs is the Committee for Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers, established on March 7, 1992. The tasks of the Committee, among others, was to ensure "mutual cooperation between religious sects and to represent their interests in front of the state."²⁹ A corresponding Cabinet of Ministers decree from April 23, 2004 tasked the Committee for Religious Affairs with furthering cooperation among all schools of religious jurisprudence (*madhabs*) in Uzbekistan.³⁰

Reflecting the tensions between the Skeptical/Insulating and Dominant Religion model referred to above, there is considerable ambiguity in the state's approach to Hanafism. On one hand, Uzbek law does not explicitly promote the Hanafi *madhab*. Materials produced by the Committee for Religious Affairs do not contain any normative acts or statement recognizing Hanafism or any other sect as the traditional *madhab* of Uzbeks. Nevertheless, in practice pronouncements and statements by state and religious officials related to Islamic tradition have regularly referred to Hanafism as "our tradition" or "our sect" (*mazhabimiz*). For example, in 1998 the deputy imam of the Tillya Sheikh Mosque, one of the largest mosques in Tashkent, said in an interview that:

²⁸ The law is available at (http://lex.uz/pages/GetAct.aspx?lact_id=111453&ONDATE=11.08.2015%2000#2722768).

²⁹ The law is available at (http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact_id=165464).

³⁰ The law is available at (http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact_id=416035).

We should take into account which faith or which religious sect we belong to. [...] our theology students learn Islamic theory in accordance with our Hanafi tradition because only this tradition is absolutely suitable to our local and regional conditions. A person may get knowledge about other religious traditions if he has a good knowledge of this Hanafi tradition. Only this way will prevent him from being mistaken.³¹

The corollary of this promotion of the Hanafi school was the identification of other, particularly imported Islamic traditions, as alien and potentially harmful. For example, Abdulghani Abdullaev, the first deputy head of the Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan (*O'zbekiston Musulmonlari Idorasi*), in 1998 referred to Wahabbism as "foreign:"

I think that Wahhabism is absolutely unsuitable to our local Islamic religion for several reasons. For example, this book has been published in Mecca.... The book's content is absolutely opposite to our local religion and to our national customs and traditions. [...] [Uzbek] customs have been inherited from our ancestors. And that is why our Uzbek people are shocked when they hear such unsuitable things. [...] Therefore, these books are very dangerous because they will bring a negative influence to bear on our people's minds.... The regulations of our local Islamic religion are also based on our own conditions. We have our own customs and traditions. These Wahhabists try to change our religion and establish their own regulations. It means that they want to establish a new Islamic religion here.³²

Uzbek officials decried other religious organizations such as the Salafi Hizb ut-Tahrir as alien to Uzbek religious traditions. In an interview in 1999,

³¹ "Religious Books to be Licensed in Tashkent," Uzbekistan Television First Channel Network, 1645 GMT, 29 June 1998, FTS19980706000829.

³² *Ibid.*

Abdulaziz Mansurov, the state advisor to the President for religious affairs, said:

Our country's independence gave our people opportunities to revive their religion, faith and belief. But certain extremist groups have been using this great fruit of independence for their own mercenary interests and have been trying to advocate their religious and extremist teachings about reviving Islam among our citizens. As a result, various religious sects have also appeared in Uzbekistan, including the Wahhabis and Hizb ut-Tahrir sects.... But we will always stay loyal to the sacred faith of our forefathers, the Sunni Hanafi branch.³³

As recently as March 17, 2018, the website muslim.uz published an article titled "Hanafism, a Moderate School" in which an author from Tashkent Islamic Institute refers to Hanafism as "our sect" (*mazhabimiz*).³⁴ As is clear, the Uzbek authorities proscribe religious organizations that fall outside of the parameters of Hanafism in the name of protecting Islam in Uzbekistan from alien extremism.

Thus, although the laws in Uzbekistan do not explicitly promote one *madhab* over another, religious authorities have prioritized Hanafism to the detriment of other *madhabs*. For example, in 1997 the Committee for Religious Affairs published 50,000 copies of a manual for imams that, according to Mansurov, was "dedicated to the wide-scale propagation of the Hanafi school."³⁵ The Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan also referred to a "state policy" to oppose "religious sects whose activities... loathe our national traditions and our peace and tranquility and which try to make use of our economic difficulties in order to carry out their mercenary tasks."³⁶

³³ "Presidential Adviser on 'Religious Extremists.'"

³⁴ "Жума Мавъизалари," muslim.uz, March 23, 2018 (<http://muslim.uz/index.php/maqolalar/zhuma-mav-izalari/item/6713>).

³⁵ *Islom Nuri*, no. 1, 128, April 18, 1997, p. 2.

³⁶ "Religious Books to be Licensed in Tashkent."

Under this policy, in 1999 the Tashkent city administration, citing Article 33 of the Constitution as justification, adopted Resolution No. 188 with the support of the Directorate of Muslims in Uzbekistan, the Committee for Religious Affairs and the Eparchy of the Orthodox Church of the city of Tashkent, which created the Qanoat Center.³⁷ The Center was “responsible for examining all kinds of religious literature, all video and audio tapes with religious content” and to provide or deny permission for their use. The Center particularly focused on identifying and prohibiting Salafi/Wahabbi materials.³⁸

While the promotion of Hanafism came at the expense of sidelining other “foreign” *madhabs*, it did not mean that “Muslimness” overrode other religious identities. Although the Jewish community in Uzbekistan decreased in population from nearly 100,000 to around 10,000 from 1991 to 2016 largely as a result of emigration to the United States and Israel, Jews have not faced persecution in Uzbekistan. The primary limitation on Jews or non-Uzbek Christians, such as ethnic Koreans or Russians, was the prohibition on proselytizing.³⁹ Nevertheless, various Christian denominations, Jews, Baha'is, Krishnas, Buddhists were generally able to register their religious organizations. Exceptions exist, including Jehova's Witnesses, who were generally excluded. Moreover, as a result of the government's restrictions on radical forms on Islam, these minority religious communities were also able to live free of the type of non-state or vigilante persecution that is common in other states surrounding Central Asian, such as Pakistan or Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Similarly, people espousing no religion at all have been free to do so.

³⁷ In Uzbek, Qanoat refers to “abstinence” or “moderation.”

³⁸ “Religious Books to be Licensed in Tashkent.”

³⁹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, And Labor, “International Religious Freedom Report”, 2007, (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2007/90237.htm>).

⁴⁰ “Why Uzbekistan's Jews already miss the iron fist of their late ruler,” *Times of Israel*, September 15, 2016. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/why-uzbekistans-jews-already-miss-the-iron-fist-of-their-late-ruler/>.)

In light of the above, during the first decade of independence, Uzbekistan built secular state institutions while simultaneously promoting traditional religious practices and seeking to discourage or prohibit novel and alien ones. Most of all, the government sought to maintain state control over religious processes in the country. This policy affected all religious communities, with the state cooperating with established, traditional Islamic, Christian and Jewish congregations while opposing new imports from abroad.

Rationale and Results: Government Laws and Policies

Uzbekistan's policies described above did not arise in a vacuum. Quite the contrary, they were the product of the particular challenges and vulnerabilities of the transition to independence – when the fledgling independent state confronted assertive home-grown Salafi groups that had grown up under the late Soviet state and the rapid rise of foreign extremist proselytizing.

Extremist Islamists rose to prominence in the chaotic period of the Soviet Union's collapse and the transition to independence, roughly from 1989 to 1992. This was a period of increasing lawlessness, including ethnic riots in the Ferghana valley that included the forced removal of Meskhetian Turks in 1989, and riots between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan in 1990. Uzbekistan as a whole experienced a period of turmoil as Soviet central authorities had sought to assert greater direct control in the Gorbachev era. By the time Islam Karimov was selected to head the republic in mid-1989, Tashkent's ability to exert power over Uzbekistan's territory had declined considerably. Meanwhile, Soviet attempts at economic reform had aimed at economic liberalization, but in fact led to widespread racketeering, as corrupt local officials were able to control and supervise the conduct of business activity.⁴¹

In the Ferghana valley, this lawless atmosphere contributed to the rise of Salafi-inspired radical groups, who variously referred to themselves as *mujaddidiylar* (reformers) or *vohhobiylar* (Wahhabis). These groups were the

⁴¹ Vladimir Brovkin, "Fragmentation of Authority and Privatization of the State: from Gorbachev to Yeltsin", *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 6 no. 3, 1998, pp. 504-17. (https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/06-03_brovkin.pdf)

product of alien influences and the Soviet policies described above: they rejected the local folk Islamic practices and sought to impose a literalist practice of Islam, and developed paramilitary formations that challenged – or competed with – racketeering practices with which local authorities were in collusion.⁴² The city of Namangan was the epicenter of the growing confrontation between these forces and the increasingly inept local authorities. By January 1990, a group calling itself *Islam Adolati* (Islamic Justice) gradually began to usurp the functions of law enforcement. It patrolled markets and apprehended thieves, but also violently closed down stores that sold alcohol and enforced Islamic dress for women. The outspoken aim was to impose a sharia-based order first in the city, and gradually to the entire territory of the republic and beyond.⁴³ The bulk of these vigilantes were recruited from heavily criminalized martial arts circles.⁴⁴ Subsequently, the Uzbek militants became heavily involved in the trafficking of drugs from Afghanistan; and the motivations of at least parts of the movement appear to have been strongly affected by this involvement.⁴⁵

The Ferghana valley had also become a haven for foreign Islamic missionaries from the Gulf, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.⁴⁶ This encouraged Tahir Yuldashev, the local Islamist leader, to set himself up as a *de facto* ruler

⁴² Bahtiyar Babajanov, "Le jihad comme idéologie de l' 'autre' et de l' 'exilé' à travers l'étude de documents du Mouvement islamique d'Ouzbékistan", *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, 15/16, 2007. (www.asiecentrale.revues.org/84)

⁴³ Babajanov, "Le jihad..."; Naumkin, *Radical Islam*; Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*.

⁴⁴ Bakhtiyar Babajanov, Kamil Malikov, and Aloviddin Nazarov, "Islam in the Ferghana Valley: Between National Identity and Islamic Alternative," in *Ferghana Valley, The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011); Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, p. 262.

⁴⁵ Svante E. Cornell, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan", in Svante E. Cornell and Michael Jonsson, eds., *Conflict, Crime and the State in Postcommunist Eurasia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, pp. 68-81.

⁴⁶ Naumkin, *Radical Islam*, 66-70; Michael Fredholm, *Uzbekistan and the Threat from Islamic Extremism*, Sandhurst: United Kingdom Royal Military Academy, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Report no. K39, March 2003, p. 4.

of the Ferghana valley.⁴⁷ The government of Uzbekistan was hardly equipped to handle a challenge of this magnitude. With Soviet power collapsing, the republican administration needed to consolidate its control over the functions of government. In this power vacuum, Uzbekistan's new leader, Islam Karimov, went so far as to travel to Namangan in December 1991 to meet with the Salafis, who demanded the declaration of Uzbekistan as an Islamic state. In a dramatic episode that has been preserved for posterity on the internet, Yuldashev forced Karimov, in a very hostile environment, to listen to his lecture on proper Islamic governance.⁴⁸

This experience proved formative both for Karimov and for the leadership of the country as a whole. Over the next few months, the government managed to consolidate enough power to restore control over the restive Ferghana, and engaged in a broad effort to suppress Islamist forces, Salafi and non-Salafi alike.⁴⁹ President Karimov's apprehensions concerning political Islam were exacerbated by events in Tajikistan: that country's civil war pitted the post-Soviet government against a diverse opposition force led by Islamists, who were in turn closely connected with the ethnic Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. The Uzbek militants exiled from the Ferghana valley became an important component of that opposition, but gradually gravitated toward the Taliban movement. Tajikistan's descent into chaos strengthened the conviction of the Uzbek leadership that stability had to be maintained at all cost, and Islamic extremism fought with all available means.

Following the 1997 peace agreement in Tajikistan, the Uzbek militants moved to Afghanistan, established close ties with the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and officially reconstituted themselves as the Islamic Movement of

⁴⁷ Naumkin, *Radical Islam*, pp. 52-60.

⁴⁸ Babajanov, Malikov, and Nazarov, "Islam in the Ferghana Valley" pp. 319-320. The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwVS8CQg2s4>

⁴⁹ Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, p.70; Ahmed Rashid, "The Fires of Faith in Central Asia", *World Policy Journal*, vol. 18 no. 1, 2001, pp. 45-55.

Uzbekistan. This organization then planned and executed a series of attacks on the homeland. In early 1999, a series of bomb explosions in Tashkent presumed to be the work of the IMU nearly killed President Karimov. In August 1999, the IMU conducted a military incursion into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, close to Uzbekistan's borders. The IMU returned the next summer, better armed, and this time managed to reach several areas of Uzbekistan, where they engaged government forces. It was only after the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 that the IMU was forced into the Tribal Areas of Pakistan, where it merged with other foreign fighters loyal to Al Qaeda.

The government managed to largely remove violent Islamist extremists from the republic's territory. But purportedly non-violent foreign groups sought to fill the vacuum, including Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HTI) and Jamaat al-Tabligh. HTI, a global Islamist movement, generally eschews violence, but aims to build a Caliphate uniting all Muslims in which there would be no place for non-believers.⁵⁰ HTI spread rapidly in Central Asia in the 1990s,⁵¹ and by the mid-2000s, there was much alarm raised about the organization's proliferation. Post-2010, however, HTI appears to no longer be functioning in Uzbekistan, while it continues to exist in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

HTI sired a number of splinter groups. One is the curious case of Akromiya, named after its founder, Akram Yuldashev, who split from HTI in the early

⁵⁰ Zeyno Baran, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, p. 48.

⁵¹ This is documented in Baran, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*; Emmanuel Karagiannis *Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb Ut-Tahrir*, London: Routledge, 2010; and Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, pp. 127-200. Further studies include International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," Asia Report no. 58, June 30, 2003; Emmanuel Karagiannis and C. McCauley "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami: Evaluating the Threat Posed by a Radical Islamic Group That Remains Nonviolent" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 18, 2006; Alisher Khamidov, "Countering the Call: The U.S., Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Religious Extremism in Central Asia", Brookings Institution, 2003; Didier Chaudet, "Hizb-ut-Tahrir: An Islamist Threat to Central Asia", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 26 no. 1, 2006, pp. 113-125; Svante E. Cornell and Regine Spector, "Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists", *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 25 no. 1, 2002, pp. 193-206.

1990s. Concentrated in Andijan, Akromiya members were successful in operating an Islamic community that included prominent businesses and educational institutions, which were not only tolerated but praised by the Uzbek government.⁵² But following a change of Governor in Andijan, local authorities had a fallout with the group, who jailed two dozen men connected with Akromiya. The movement responded with a heavily armed attack against the city government and the local prison in Andijan in May 2005, taking hostages and using human shields. This provoked an Uzbek government response, and a standoff that ended in a shootout between hostage-taking Islamists and interior ministry forces in which up to 200 people were killed.⁵³

This is the reality against which Uzbekistan's policies in the religious field evolved. The challenge to the state from both violent and non-violent revolutionary Islamists was very real, and led to widespread concern that Islamists would destabilize the country, as had happened in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The Uzbek government and its critics agreed on this point, but differed on the correct policy to counter Islamists.

Uzbekistan's policies led to sometimes draconian punishments for individuals and groups deemed extremist in nature. Many individuals were convicted to lengthy prison sentences. These policies became among the most contentious issues in Uzbekistan's relationship with Western countries and certain international organizations, as both Western officials and representatives of advocacy groups reacted by issuing frequent condemnations. Critics of Uzbekistan's policies took offense for at least three distinct reasons. First, they voiced allegations of abuse against the

⁵² Jeffry Hartman, *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising: What We Know*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, May 2016, p. 20.

(<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13204>)

⁵³ John C. K. Daly, *Rush to Judgment: Western Media and the 2005 Andijan Violence*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, May 2016.

(<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13205>)

individuals affected by these policies, and accused Uzbekistan's government of failing to live up to international human rights commitments. Second, they opposed the very notion of restricting or punishing individuals for exercising or voicing their beliefs in a non-violent manner, even when the beliefs in question were manifestly extremist, and incompatible with either secularism, the equal rights of citizens, or democracy. Third, they predicted that Uzbekistan's policies would be counter-productive: it was (and remains in some circles) widely assumed that efforts to restrict religiously based ideologies would only strengthen the appeal of such ideologies.⁵⁴

Uzbek officials disagreed. They were not content to target only the violent manifestations of extremist ideology, for they considered that the problem lay not simply in violent acts but in the nature of the ideology itself, which they considered particularly dangerous in view of the vulnerable nature of a young nation in the middle of a wide-ranging transition that involved the consolidation of national identity. As for the notion that restricting extremist groups only fuels their appeal, the systematic research that has been conducted does not support this assumption. In fact, rigorous scholarly studies of the drivers of extremism elsewhere have failed to prove this hypothesis, pointing instead to a complicated array of other factors as the main drivers of extremism.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Prominent examples of this criticism include Ahmed Rashid "The Fires of Faith in Central Asia." *World Policy Journal* Vol. 18, No. 1, 2001; Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2002; Eric McGlinchey, "The Making of Militants: The State and Islam in Central Asia," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Vol. 25, No. 3, 2005; McGlinchey, "Autocrats, Islamists and the Rise of Radicalism in Central Asia", *Current History*, October 2005; International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," Asia Report no. 58, June 30, 2003; Alisher Khamidov, "Countering the Call: The U.S., Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Religious Extremism in Central Asia", Brookings Institution, 2003.

⁵⁵ Royal United Services Institute, *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review*. London: Royal United Services Institute, 2015; Katerina Dalacoura, *Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Michael Freeman, "Democracy, Al Qaeda, and the Causes of Terrorism: A Strategic Analysis of US Policy." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 31 no. 1, 2008, pp. 40–59.

Reforms and Initiatives under President Mirziyoyev

When Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded President Karimov, the general sense was that Uzbekistan had largely succeeded in managing the spread of extremism. While Uzbekistan's policies had come under censure in the West and among human rights organizations, no terrorist attacks or religiously motivated violence have taken place in Uzbekistan in over a decade. In fact, building on policies that restricted the operations of religious groups considered non-traditional, Uzbekistan's government subsequently complemented this essentially defensive policy with an effort to restore the traditionally dominant Hanafi form of Islam in the country. President Mirziyoyev, whose Prime Ministership coincided with the implementation of this approach, would now put greater emphasis on this aspect of governmental policy, while easing restrictions on religious life overall.

President Mirziyoyev has maintained the emphasis on secularism in the field of education, while he has advocated explicitly for "traditional" Islam. Soon after Mirziyoyev took office in 2016, the Cabinet of Ministers passed three decrees related to secular education, while also emphasizing the importance of religious tolerance in a secular society.

Thus, an April 2017 decree establishing education standards for secondary schools and vocational training, emphasized that students needed to exhibit understanding of secular values, while specifically in the teaching of philosophy, students are required to have "an understanding of religious

relations in a secular country.”⁵⁶ Similarly, a July 2017 decree focusing on preschool education reaffirmed that the curriculum of both government and non-government preschool institutions and programs “shall be secular.”⁵⁷

On July 10, 2017, Mirziyoyev issued a decree on “Establishing the Imam Bukhari International Scientific Research Center.”⁵⁸ The decree stated that the mission of the center would be to “study the rich cultural and spiritual heritage, secular and religious knowledge, and to use them in bringing up young generations, and to educate the public about them.”⁵⁹ Mirziyoyev had first announced the establishment of this center while serving as interim president in October 2016, during the 43rd Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Tashkent. At that time, he said the center would be headquartered at the Imam Al-Bukhari Academy in Samarkand and affiliated with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Uzbekistan’s representative to the OIC indicated that this center was a continuation of a Karimov-era initiative. He stated that the theme of that OIC conference, “Education and Enlightenment: Path to Peace and Creativity,” had been proposed by President Karimov before his death as a way to show the way Uzbek scholars, such as Imam al-Bukhari, had “enriched human history.”⁶⁰ Mirziyoyev has since promoted the center in international fora. For example, at the June 2017 summit of the Shanghai

⁵⁶ Decree No 187 of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Approving Education Standards for Secondary Schools and Vocational Training Institutions, April 6, 2017; Annex 2, Paragraph 5 (History); Paragraph 22 (Philosophy).

⁵⁷ Decree No 528 of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Improving the operations of preschool education institutions, dated July 19, 2017; Annex 1, Article 10.

⁵⁸ Decree No. 483 of July 10, 2017 on “Establishing Imam Bukhari International Scientific Research Center. The law is available at (http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact_id=3263382&query=%D0%B4%D1%83%D0%BD%D1%91%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B9).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ “Uzbekistan to establish Imam Al-Bukhari Research Center,” Arab News, November 2, 2016. (<http://www.arabnews.com/node/1005506/corporate-news>).

Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Astana, Kazakhstan, Mirziyoyev affirmed that the center would be established in Samarkand and would “serve to propagate Islamic culture and values, to protect young people from various alien ideas, to give them modern education and upbringing and to instill such feelings in the hearts of the younger generation as being worthy of their great ancestors.”⁶¹

In addition to the Imam Bukhari International Scientific Research Center, Mirziyoyev has also publicly announced the establishment of other new Islamic academies and centers. On December 15, 2017, he issued a Resolution on Establishing the Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan. The resolution stated that one of the Academy’s primary goals would be “to learn through scholarly research and to promote the true essence of Islam, which is kindness and humanity.”⁶² In a speech at the UN General Assembly on September 12, 2017, Mirziyoyev explained the establishment of the academy in the following terms: “We cherish our sacred religion as the focus of the time-honored values. We strongly condemn and we will never reconcile with those who rank our great faith together with violence and bloodshed.”⁶³ Similarly, according to the commentary to the resolution, the decision to create the Academy reflected Mirziyoyev’s belief that:

It is not a secret that, in a rapidly changing globalization period, there are attempts to misconstrue and falsify Holy Islamic values, and to organize conspiracy and destruction. Such difficult situation calls for preparing highly educated specialists with scholarly religious

⁶¹ President Shavkat Mirziyoyev: New centre will serve for Islamic culture development, uza.uz, June 12, 2016 (<http://uza.uz/en/politics/president-shavkat-mirziyoyev-new-centre-will-serve-for-islam-12-06-2017>).

⁶² “Ўзбекистон Ислом академиясини ташкил этиш чора-тадбирлари тўғрисида,” president.uz, December 15, 2017 (<http://president.uz/uz/lists/view/1350>).

⁶³ “President Shavkat Mirziyoyev addressed the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” uza.uz, September 20, 2017 (http://uza.uz/en/politics/president-shavkat-mirziyoyev-addressed-the-72nd-session-of-t-20-09-2017?sphrase_id=2638544).

competence, who can explain to the public, especially to the youth, that the essence of our religion is peace and compassion.⁶⁴

In practice, Mirziyoyev has continued the long-standing policy of focusing on education. Thus, the Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan will serve to provide the country's religious educational institutions (universities and madrasahs) with highly trained teachers and mentors, "improve the research and professional skills of scholars, educate graduate students in the fields of Qur'an, tafseer, fiqh, science of hadith, and kalam, and raise the qualification of the leading academic and teaching experts."⁶⁵ It will also engage in research, teaching and publicity.⁶⁶ The Ministry of Justice registered the Islamic Academy as a religious organization in January 2018, and formally handed credentials for the academy to the chairman of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan and the academy's rector.⁶⁷

Another program that Mirziyoyev has inaugurated in order to "fight religious ignorance and promote Islam's true values" is the establishment of a new organization called the Islamic Culture Center in Tashkent, which Mirziyoyev suggested could be renamed as the "Islamic Civilization Center." Mirziyoyev said this center would take over the running of Islamic educational establishments in Uzbekistan from the country's highest Muslim authority, the Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan. The center would include two higher Islamic educational institutions – Tashkent Islamic University and the Mir Arab higher education madrasah in Bukhara – and eight Islamic secondary educational institutions in Uzbekistan. In addition, Mirziyoyev said a new museum would be built under the Islamic

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Commentary to the President's Resolution.

⁶⁵ "Information about Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan" Center for International Relations Studies, Tashkent, November 2017.

⁶⁶ "Adliya vazirligida O'zbekiston Islom akademiyasi davlat ro'yxatidan o'tkazildi," religions.uz, January 16, 2018. (<http://www.religions.uz/news/view?id=802>).

⁶⁷ "Uzbekistan Opens Islamic Studies Academy," *Eurasianet.org*, January 19, 2018. (<https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-opens-islamic-studies-academy>).

Culture Center, which “God willing...will be one of its own kind in the world.” The funder of the center will reportedly be the Russian business magnate of Uzbek origin, Alisher Usmanov.⁶⁸

The decrees on secularism and new educational institutions since Mirziyoyev took office reflect a continuation of earlier policies, but with a shifting emphasis toward the promotion of traditional Uzbek forms of Islam. In a separate vein, Mirziyoyev has also attempted to counter accusations that Uzbekistan violates religious freedoms. It should be clear that Mirziyoyev in no way seeks to reject the practices of his predecessor: indeed, Mirziyoyev publicly holds President Karimov in high regard and has overseen the erection of monuments to him in Tashkent, Karshi, Samarkand, and even in Turkmenistan.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, perhaps feeling that Uzbekistan has reached a level of development that has seen a reduction of the threat of extremism, his government has undertaken measures to reduce restrictions on religion.

Among these new measures aimed at facilitating Islamic practice are plans to build “numerous small mosques along roads and streets”, which, according to a senior imam in Tashkent, will “help practicing Muslims pray five times a day.”⁷⁰ The Committee for Religious Affairs suggested the “mini-mosques” would meet the needs of Muslim tourists from around the world and that up to 10 percent of hotels in Uzbekistan will provide Qur’ans in their rooms for the same purpose.⁷¹ Mirziyoyev has also suggested that the muftis in the country should arrange more Qur’an recital competitions

⁶⁸ “Leader Says Most of Uzbeks Listed As Extremists Rehabilitated,” Ozbekistan Television 1530 GMT, September 1, 2017. (CEL2017090251831961)

⁶⁹ “Monument to Islam Karimov has been opened in the city of Karshi,” uza.uz, January 30, 2018 (<http://uza.uz/en/politics/monument-to-islam-karimov-has-been-opened-in-the-city-of-kar-30-01-2018>). “Monument to Islam Karimov is opened in Samarkand,” uza.uz, February 9, 2017. (<http://uza.uz/en/politics/monument-to-islam-karimov-is-opened-in-samarkand-02-09-2017>).

⁷⁰ “Uzbekistan Plans ‘Mini-Mosques’ To Help Muslims Pray,” rferl.org, January 16, 2018 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-mini-mosques-muslims-pray/28978754.html>).

⁷¹ Ibid.

as part of a campaign to raise awareness of “true values of enlightened Islam.”⁷² He added, “You may make your proposals on arranging competitions for the best recitation of Qur’anic verses, first, in the districts and then in the regions. We could find a holy place as a venue for the final, national, stage of the competition.”⁷³ This active and public facilitation of religion is a departure from past policies.

Mirziyoyev also stated in a speech to Islamic clerics and religious officials in Tashkent on September 1, 2017, that 16,000 of the 17,000 individuals that had been registered as “religious radicals” would be removed from the list.⁷⁴ Some individuals imprisoned on extremism charges were released: this included the older brother of the founder and former leader of the IMU, Tahir Yuldashev, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan in 2008. Upon his release after serving in prison since 1994, Yuldashev’s brother commented that the reforms of Mirziyoyev “are approved by the people” and that Mirziyoyev “lives up to the aspirations of the people.”⁷⁵ Mirziyoyev also has continued his predecessors’ religious policies towards minorities and his administration has, for example, openly embraced the Jewish community as well as relations with Israel.⁷⁶

In addition, under Mirziyoyev’s leadership religious dissidents have returned to the country. The author Nurullo Otahanov had been dismissed from his posts as general director of the Movarounnahr publishing house and as editor-in-chief of the *Khidoyat* magazine after he was put on a “blacklist” for, among other reasons, writings that were deemed extremist

⁷² “Leader Says Most of Uzbeks Listed as Extremists Rehabilitated,”

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ “Brother of leader of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan calls on extremists to ‘open their eyes,’” Interfax, January 11, 2018 (<http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14170>). “Brother of Prominent Terrorist Takhir Yuldash Emerges in Uzbek Town After Release from Prison,” fergananeews.com, January 12, 2018 (<http://enews.fergananeews.com/news.php?id=3708&mode=snews>).

⁷⁶ “Monument to Bukharan Jews erected in Uzbekistan,” Tashkent Novosti Uzbekistana, June 21, 2016 (Text of report by *Novosti Uzbekistana*, CEL2016062135420526).

by the Committee for Religious Affairs.⁷⁷ However, after living in exile for two years, he returned to Uzbekistan in September 2017 on the invitation of President Mirziyoyev, who had called on Uzbeks living abroad to return to the country during his address to the UN General Assembly.⁷⁸

While Mirziyoyev's approach may appear to be an innovation, it should be noted that a liberalization of the religious space had begun prior to the leadership transition. For example, the journalist and soccer commentator Khayrulla Hamidov had been arrested and imprisoned in 2010 after he began giving religious talks, reciting spiritual poems and raising social and economic issues on his popular radio talk show, "In Pursuit of Impartiality" ("Xolislik Sari"), and in various publications.⁷⁹ Although he was not a cleric, he considered the late Sheikh Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, the last mufti of Central Asia and first mufti of independent Uzbekistan, to be his mentor. The Sheikh reportedly revered Hamidov's influence over younger Muslims.⁸⁰ During one instance where Hamidov was speaking to young Muslims who followed "non-conventional Islamic views," he was suspected of being a member of a prohibited religious group and was sentenced to six years in prison.⁸¹ He was nevertheless released from prison early in February 2015, and has since written poems countering the Islamic State and acquired more than 13,000 followers on Facebook.⁸² By August 19,

⁷⁷ Ferghana [Moscow], *ferghananews.com*, September 27, 2017.

⁷⁸ "Uzbek Writer Reportedly Detained Upon Return from Exile," *rferl.org*, September 27, 2017 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-writer-otahonov-raufhon-returns-exile-detained/28759795.html>).

⁷⁹ "Хайрулла Ҳамидов мусулмонларни "ИШИД фитнаси" дан огоҳлантирди," *ozodlik.org*, March 10, 2015 (<https://www.ozodlik.org/a/26891576.html>). <http://www.bbc.com/uzbek/uzbekistan-40961763>).

⁸⁰ "Хайрулла Ҳамидов гаров эвазига озод этилиши мумкин," *ozodlik.org*, January 26, 2010 (<https://www.ozodlik.org/a/1939170.html>).

⁸¹ "Хайрулла Ҳамидов 6 йилга қамалди," *ozodlik.org*, May 27, 2010 (<https://www.ozodlik.org/a/2054233.html>). "Хайрулла Ҳамидов "қора рўйхат" дан чиқарилди," BBC O'zbek, April 5, 2017 (<http://www.bbc.com/uzbek/uzbekistan-40837818>).

⁸² "Uzbekistan: Prominent Religious Figure Freed," Human Rights Watch, February 17, 2015 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/17/uzbekistan-prominent-religious-figure-freed>). "Хайрулла Ҳамидов мусулмонларни 'ИШИД фитнаси' дан огоҳлантирди," *ozodlik*, March 10, 2015. (<https://www.ozodlik.org/a/26891576.html>). Hamidov's Facebook page is available at (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009400864389>).

2017, Hamidov had again returned to the Sports channel of Uzbek State Television as a sports commentator.⁸³ Evidently, amnesties and reconsiderations of possible wrongful convictions had been conducted under Karimov, but appear to have accelerated under Mirziyoyev.

Mirziyoyev has not only won the support of the religious establishment in Uzbekistan – the government has been able to make the case, particularly to the West and international organizations, that it is no longer “suppressing religion.” For example, when the U.S. labeled Uzbekistan as one of “10 Countries of Particular Concern” for violating religious freedoms in a “systematic, ongoing and egregious” manner in January 2018,⁸⁴ the Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan issued an objection:

We think including today’s Uzbekistan on this list is a mistake. That is because there have been great changes and improvements in the religious field over the past year... many things have been done to make unachievable dreams come true and to solve accumulated religious issues.⁸⁵

Citing the opening of new Qur’an study centers, higher educational institutions and an increase in the annual quota for Uzbekistani haj pilgrims, the Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan said that the country’s inclusion on the list was “based on former views” but did not reflect current realities.⁸⁶ Thus, the Directorate highlighted the changes that occurred under the Mirziyoyev government.

⁸³ “Хайрулла Ҳамидов “Спорт” телеканалига қайтди,” *BBC O‘zbek*, August 19, 2017. (<http://www.bbc.com/uzbek/uzbekistan-40987361>). “Хайрулла Ҳамидов Твдаги Фаолияти Ва Келажақдаги Режалари Ҳақида,” *uzbekistan24.uz*, August 20, 2017 (<http://uzbekistan24.uz/uzk/yangiliklar/12/1339/>).

⁸⁴ “U.S. Hits Pakistan, Iran, Three Central Asian Nations for Religious Freedom Violations,” *rferl.org*, January 4, 2018 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/religious-freedom-violations-pakistan-iran-turkmenistan-tajikistan-uzbekistan-u-s-state-department/28955204.html>).

⁸⁵ The message was posted on the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan's official website, *Muslim.uz* on January 13, 2018.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Uzbek officials similarly attempted to impress upon the UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion of Belief that there have been significant changes made since Mirziyoyev assumed office. When the Special Rapporteur visited Uzbekistan in October 2017, Uzbek officials explained to the delegation that Mirziyoyev had promoted religious education and opened various research centers aimed at propagating the "true values of peaceful Islam."⁸⁷ Similarly, when the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Uzbekistan in May, 2017, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov announced that human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, were now "free to return to the country."⁸⁸ When Human Rights Watch made its visit to Uzbekistan in October 2017, the organization said that Uzbek authorities had taken "some positive steps" during Mirziyoev's first year in office and called for "sustainable" improvements in human rights.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ "President of the Republic of Uzbekistan received the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief," ombudsman.uz/, October 13, 2017 (http://ombudsman.uz/en/press_center/news/uzbekistan/president-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-received-the-un-special-rapporteur-on-freedom-of-religion-or/).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ "Powerful Uzbek Security Service Chief 'Dismissed'," rferl.org, January 31, 2018 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-powerful-security-chief-inoyatov-ousted/29009224.html>)

Conclusions: The Way Forward and Challenges Ahead

Uzbekistan still faces a number of challenges in the realm of religion. The continued existence of Uzbek jihadist groups in Syria and Afghanistan, for example, remains a real challenge. Since 9/11, the IMU has primarily operated in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. However, after the IMU pledged loyalty to Islamic State in 2015, the Taliban destroyed the remnants of the IMU, including killing its leader.⁹⁰ Since then, the IMU's chief mufti, an ethnic Rohingya of Pakistani nationality, has expressed regret for the mistake of pledging loyalty to Islamic State and has reaffirmed his loyalty to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.⁹¹ In addition, since facing pressure from Russian air strikes in Syria that commenced in 2015, the two Uzbek jihadist groups that were aligned with al-Qaeda and the Taliban and based in Syria – the Imam Bukhari Brigade (IBB) and Katibat Tavhid wal Jihod (KTJ) – have returned to Afghanistan, where in 2018 they were fighting in the north of the country, not far from Uzbekistan's border.⁹² Considering that the Taliban is active in about 70 percent of Afghanistan's territory in early 2018, it is likely that Uzbekistan will have to deal with Uzbek jihadists threatening its border areas in the long term.⁹³

Uzbek jihadists are active not only in foreign wars, but in the online space. In some cases, the jihadists communicate online principally with each other

⁹⁰ Edward Lemon, "IMU Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State," *eurasianet.org*, August 1, 2015 (<https://eurasianet.org/s/imu-pledges-allegiance-to-islamic-state>).

⁹¹ Jacob Zenn, "Abu Zar and Al Qaeda's presence in Central Asia," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, January 16, 2017 (<https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13420>).

⁹² Caleb Weiss, "Uzbek group shows ambush in northern Afghanistan," *Long War Journal* (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/01/uzbek-group-shows-ambush-in-northern-afghanistan.php>).

⁹³ "Taliban threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC finds," *BBC*, January 31, 2018 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-42863116>)

and not with the Uzbek population. For example, in September 2017, the pro-Islamic State Uzbek jihadists on the Telegram channel Movrounnakhr Akhborot Agentligi (Transoxiana news agency), which had 740 members, verbally attacked the IBB and KTJ for failing to establish sharia law in the territories they controlled, supporting groups with nationalist rather than global jihadist agendas, and being in the service of foreign intelligence agencies. The members of the channel even claimed that the Islamic State assassinated the leader of IBB in April 2017.⁹⁴ In other cases, Uzbek jihadists have attempted to reach out to Uzbeks in Uzbekistan via social media. In January 2016, KTJ condemned Uzbeks engaging in the social media fad “Ice Bucket Challenge” to raise money for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and said that, “If you are real men, then take up arms and fight infidels.”⁹⁵

It should be noted that Uzbekistan’s policies do not have a direct effect on the hundreds of thousands of labor migrants in Russia. Indeed, current research suggests that the overwhelming majority of Uzbeks recruited to extremist organizations are migrant laborers in Russia without a social safety net there, and not Uzbeks from Uzbekistan itself.⁹⁶ If Uzbekistan’s economy boosts job creation as a result of the economic reforms detailed in Mamuka Tsereteli’s contribution to this volume, that would potentially reduce labor migration and Uzbeks’ exposure to the conditions in Russia that appear to facilitate extremist recruitment. But until that happens, the problem of individuals radicalized in Russia returning to Uzbekistan to spread their ideology will remain – and is one Uzbek authorities are aware of and seeking to contain through the local *mahallas*.

⁹⁴ “Uzbek jihadist group in Syria appoints new commander after previous leader’s assassination,” *almasdarnews.com*, May 5, 2014 (<https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/uzbek-jihadist-group-syria-appoints-new-commander-previous-leaders-assassination/>).

⁹⁵ The discussion occurred on Facebook on January 9, 2016.

⁹⁶ Noah Tucker, “Research Note: Uzbek Online Recruiting to the Syrian Conflict,” CERIA Brief No. 3, November 2014

(https://www.academia.edu/11854983/Research_Note_Uzbek_Online_Recruiting_to_the_Syrian_Conflict).

While the threat from the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and various other jihadist groups remain the most obvious, if not imminent, threats to secularism in Uzbekistan, there may be other threats under the surface. With Uzbekistan's increased outreach to multilateral organizations, such as the OIC, and efforts to meet the demands of international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, the country may face new pressures or open up the religious space to influences beyond the "traditional" Hanafi *madhab*. While this would in theory seem beneficial and a step forward for Uzbekistan, it also carries risks offsetting the delicate balance the country has maintained between prohibiting "non-traditional" and often intolerant forms of Islam and the "traditional" and tolerant Hanafi *madhab* in the country – which has a near perfect record in not producing any violent or extremist offshoots in post-independence Uzbekistan's history.

For a quarter century, Uzbekistan adopted a defensive approach in the religious realm, which focused on thwarting radicalization and safeguarding its secular governance. Today, the country's leadership is adopting a new approach. It is confidently presenting an Uzbek model of Islam to the world: a secular state in which the moderate Hanafi tradition of the region is able to flourish. Will this model be relevant to countries in the Islamic heartland? The negative experience of mixing religion and politics across the Muslim world may yet lead to a quest for a better solution to the age-old problem of negotiating the state's relationship to religion. If Uzbekistan succeeds in safeguarding secularism while promoting tolerant and traditional religious institutions, other Muslim countries may well take notice. For Western observers, this would carry global significance, and suggests Western states and organizations take an active and constructive role in supporting the transformation process in Uzbekistan.

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