

Religion and the Secular State in Turkmenistan

Victoria Clement

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Preface

This Silk Road Paper is part of the ongoing research effort on secular governance, religion, and politics at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center. We issue this paper as a contribution to the meager research that exists on secular governance in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

While there is considerable opinion expressed by Western governments and NGOs on policies toward religion in Central Asia and the Caucasus, there is little analysis of what those policies actually are, what their intellectual antecedents may be, and what they intend to achieve. Indeed, until the publication in 2016 in this series of *Azerbaijan's Formula: Secular Governance and Civic Nationhood*, there had been no case study of what secular governance actually means in this regional context – let alone a comparative study of the similarities and differences among the Muslim-majority states of the region, who constitute half the secular states in the Muslim world.

That study was followed in 2018 by *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, authored by Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr and Julian Tucker; and later that year by *Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan*, by Svante E. Cornell and Jacob Zenn.

This study of Turkmenistan's experience by Victoria Clement is particularly timely given that country's experience, which differs considerably from the rest of Central Asia as it has been following a policy of "permanent neutrality" and remained in partial isolation from the rest of the region.

Building on these and other case studies, the Joint Center will eventually produce a comparative study of secular governance in the region as a whole.

Executive Summary

Since gaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan has seen an increased presence of religion in everyday life. Islam has been a continuous cornerstone of Turkmen identity for centuries and is even more so in the post-Soviet period. *Turkmeniçilik* (Turkmen identity) and *Musulmançilik* (Muslim identity) are correlated.

Similar to what is found in several Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan distinguishes between traditional and non-traditional religious practices. In Turkmenistan, the state actively privileges a form of traditional Islam. That is, the leadership mobilizes the faith in its construction of a post-Soviet, national Turkmen identity. Yet, Turkmenistan is an officially secular country with constitutional provisions for the separation of state from religion. What does this mean for religious practice in that Muslim-majority country? What is the role of the state in mobilizing religious practices even as it curtails others? And why are there so few external influences on worship in Turkmenistan?

Turkmen were historically a nomadic people that began to adopt Islam as they migrated westward in the 9th and 10th centuries. Yet Islam is a religion that has tended to flourish in urbanized societies that could establish formal institutions like mosques and madrasas. Turkmen created intensive and rich religious practices, but those were often mixed with pre-Islamic practices or honed to suit the nomadic lifestyle. Nevertheless, this did not diminish the importance of religion in Turkmen culture and Islam came to be a key marker of Turkmen identity.

Today, that culture, including Islam as a key facet, contributes to the Turkmen national identity. The state encourages the conceptualization of “Turkmen Islam,” or worship infused with veneration of elders and saints, life-cycle rituals, and Sufi practices. Yet, it discourages external influences in most spheres of life, resulting in a limited foreign religious presence. The Constitution’s claims to uphold a secular system in which religious and state institutions are separate. Nevertheless, examples of state interference in religious matters abound.

While Turkmenistan’s initial years of independence saw an increase in religious practices and the development of institutions like the Muftiate and the building of mosques, today it is more regulated. Still, the government leadership uses Islam to legitimize its role by sponsoring holiday celebrations such as iftar dinners during Ramadan or presidential pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. This sponsorship has validated the country’s two presidents (Nyýazow and Berdimuhamedow) as pious Turkmen, giving them an aura of cultural authority. In these ways, the government promotes a singular form of “Turkmen Islam” that is tightly bound to national identity and makes use of religious symbols to reinforce the concept of the nation-state.

In light of this, this study aims to shed light on the relationship between state, religion, and society in Turkmenistan, highlighting the model of secular governance the state observes even as it embraces Islam as part of national identity project.

Introduction

For much of the 20th century Turkmenistan was a republic of the Soviet Union where the state struggled against religion and did not allow people to worship freely. As an atheist state, the USSR deemed religion and communism to be incompatible.¹ However, today the role of Islam in Turkmenistan is unparalleled. With independence in 1991 the leadership in the capital Ashgabat adopted a secular form of government in which there is an official separation between state and religious practices. At the same time, while Turkmenistan's government discourages some religions, in an apparent contradiction, it promotes a local form of Islam. How is this contradiction reconciled in everyday life? How great is religion's influence in Turkmenistan and what are its limits? How does the state define "secular" and when does it promote religiosity? After more than seven decades as a Soviet entity, how is the state engaging with religion generally? This paper explores these questions and the intersection of religion and politics in this distinct country.

¹ Sonja Luehrmann, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 7.

A Secular State?

As Turkmenistan emerged from its Soviet experience, it adopted a form of government based largely on French *laïcité* and Turkish *laiklik*, which are models of secularism. Along with the United States, France and Turkey are serious about the separation of state from religious institutions, but in each country that principle is interpreted differently. The French, Turkish, and Turkmen models proclaim a secular status in their constitutions, however, the respective states engage religions selectively and each in its own complex way.² In Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk began designing a modern, secular republic in 1923; *laiklik* was declared formally in the Turkish constitution in 1937. Atatürk's philosophy, Kemalism, heavily influenced by French *laïcité*, was considered synonymous with secularism.³ However, because Turkey's population is 98 percent Muslim, Islam holds a special if at times contested place.⁴ As in France, where religious symbols are prohibited in schools, the Kemalist system was designed to protect citizens' rights, but also to protect the system of government from citizens' passions.⁵ Meanwhile, the Turkish state has promoted Hanafi Sunni Islam:

² For a comparative study of secularism that examines both France and Turkey, see Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³ Ertan Aydin, "The tension between secularism and democracy in Turkey: Early origins, current legacy," *European View* 6, 1 (2007): 11-20; Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ "Turkey," *Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project*, http://globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/turkey/#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2016

⁵ Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies*, 6. See also, Şerif Mardin, "Religion and Politics in Modern Turkey," in *Islam in the Political Process*, edited by James P. Piscatori (Cambridge: Cambridge

it is the only religion taught in schools, and is also the only religion being promoted by the state through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*). More recently, under President Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey is becoming more publicly inclined toward Islam as it moves away from its Kemalist heritage.⁶ That is, a form of the religion is explicitly privileged, and symbols such as women's headscarves are now acceptable, if not endorsed, in public spaces such as schools. At the same time, the state continues to control Islam by making clergy state employees and authoring their sermons.

In Turkmenistan, similarly, a state-sponsored religious discourse prevails in spite of the official declarations of secularism.⁷ This Turkmen model of secularism may be thought of as a combination of the "skeptical" model of state-religion relations, in which the state seeks to prevent independent religious movements from having an influence on itself and on society, with the model of a "dominant religion", "in which religious minorities are tolerated, but the state endorses one particular religion."⁸ The Turkmen concept of secularism (*dünýewilik*) is an amalgam of earlier models, informed by the Soviet experience, which left religion in Central Asia

University Press, 1984), 138-159; Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University press, 2007); Andrew Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Anastasia Colosimo, "Laïcité: Why French Secularism is So Hard to Grasp," *Institut Montaigne* (December 11, 2017),

<https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/laicite-why-french-secularism-so-hard-grasp>

⁶ Berna Turam, *Between the State and Islam: The Politics of Engagement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁷ On state regulation of religion, see the case of Azerbaijan in Kamal Gasimov, "The Bureaucratization of Islam in Azerbaijan: State as the Principal Regulator and Interpreter of Religion," *Central Asian Affairs*, 7, no. 1, (2020), 1-37.

⁸ On the models of secularism and for a case study, see Svante Cornell, S. Fredrick Starr, and Julien Tucker, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2018), 7.

decidedly “localized and rendered synonymous with tradition.”⁹ During the Soviet period, many Islamic rituals came to hold symbolic meaning as local cultural practices. “Religion could be invoked, but only as it announced national belonging.”¹⁰

Given that Turkmenistan’s constitution specifies a separation between state and religion, we may consider its model to be *de jure* secular. However, it is not *de facto* secular, in the American sense, because in Turkmenistan the state involves itself in religious life, manipulating religious symbols and employing religion to the leadership’s advantage.¹¹ The government in Ashgabat is not neutral towards religion;¹² neutrality fits with the American definition of secularism. Regulation of religious life is not contradictory to secularism per se, at least not in the French and Turkish definitions which Turkmenistan builds upon. Indeed, Turkmenistan’s authorities strictly regulate religious life, allowing only a few forms of worship in the country. The government promotes a singular form of “Turkmen Islam” that is tightly bound to national identity and makes use of religious symbols to reinforce the concept of the nation-state. The government sometimes uses the term “traditional” to describe the form of Islam that is established among Turkmen—to differentiate from the Saudi or Iranian versions—but more often it refers to “Turkmen Islam.” This reference stems directly from

⁹ Adeeb Khalid, “A Secular Islam: Nation, State and Religion in Uzbekistan,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 35 (2003): 577. On the Soviet legacy generally, see Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Julie McBrien, *From Belonging to Belief: Modern Secularisms and the Construction of Religion in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 30. See also, Irene Hilgers, *Why Do Uzbeks Have to Be Muslims? Exploring Religiosity in the Fergana Valley* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009); Sergei Abashin, “A Prayer for Rain: Practicing Being Soviet and Muslim,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 25, 2 (2006): 178-200; Johan Rasanayagam, “The Politics of Culture and the Space for Islam: Soviet and Post-Soviet Imaginaries in Uzbekistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 33, 1 (2014): 1-14.

¹¹ A symbiosis between state and religion began to serve the leadership in the early 1990s. See M. S. Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan* (Moscow: Natalis, 2002), 19-44.

¹² See Cornell, and Tucker, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, on categorizations of states’ relationship to religion, including “neutral.”

efforts to foster a Muslim, Turkmen national identity after the long Soviet experience.¹³ In sharp contrast to the Soviet system that denied its people the right to worship without restrictions, post-Soviet Turkmenistan's governments have endorsed popular religious traditions and Sufi-infused, Turkmen Islam as part of the country's "golden heritage" (*altyn miras*). The golden heritage involves worship in the form of shrine pilgrimage, esteem for elders and veneration of ancestors, life-cycle events, and Islamic holidays.

Despite allowing for these limited forms of worship and the legal separation of state from religious organizations, Turkmenistan's government systematically intervenes in the organization of religious life and daily practices. Human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, are enshrined in Turkmenistan's Constitution.¹⁴ Yet, these freedoms routinely go unrealized. In fact, the stated rights are regularly violated. Turkmenistan's government makes allowances for religious practices that buttress the government's legitimacy but at the same time actively limit practitioners to prevent them from opposing the state in an organized way. Such considerations have particular significance in Turkmenistan where in 2002 there was a coup attempt against then-president Saparmurat Nyýazow (in power 1985-2006).¹⁵ Though the attempted overthrow was unrelated to religious matters, it reinforced the authorities' determination to counter extremism in any form and specifically any organized opposition to the

¹³ See Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism*.

¹⁴ Felix Corley and John Kinahan, "Turkmenistan: Religious freedom survey, January 2017," *Forum 18* (January 6, 2017), http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244

¹⁵ There are some who assert that the regime itself was behind the 2002 incident to create a pretext to subdue members of the opposition. On the contrary, many who were living in Ashgabat at the time, including then-US Ambassador to Turkmenistan Laura Kennedy, believe that the coup attempt was genuine. Telephone interview with Ambassador Laura Kennedy, (Ambassador 2001-03, Charge d' Affairs 2014), April 1, 2020.

presidency.¹⁶ The fear of strife in public spaces is fueled by what Turkmen see in nearby regions. Turkmenistan's government is painfully aware of the effects of Tajikistan's five-year civil war, Russia's conflict in Chechnya, and the potential for extremists to cross the border it shares with Afghanistan. All of this creates apprehension within Turkmenistan's leadership that is reflected in religious policy.

Turkmenistan shares much with its neighbors,¹⁷ but also manifests distinct features. It is less diverse in ethnic, linguistic, and religious terms than other Central Asian countries.¹⁸ Also, the Turkmen people historically were mainly nomadic and disposed to a syncretism that embraced mystical practices. Indeed, it was Sufi dervishes who helped bring Islam to the Turkmen.¹⁹ These factors remain relevant for the way Turkmen worship today.

¹⁶ Bruce Pannier, "Is There A Terror Threat in Turkmenistan?" *RFE/RL* (August 1, 2017), <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-turkmenistan-terror-threat-afghanistan-islamic-state/28653368.html>

¹⁷ See Cornell, Starr, and Tucker, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, 7-8; Bayram Balci, *Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus Since the Fall of the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Johan Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Bruce Grant, "Shrines and Sovereigns: Life and Death, and Religion in Rural Azerbaijan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, 3 (2011): 654-81.

¹⁸ Unlike in neighboring Kazakhstan, where more than 25 percent of the citizens are Christian, the overwhelming majority of Turkmenistan's population is at least nominally Muslim. Because Turkmen are fairly homogeneous in their religious convictions this study will focus primarily on the role of Islam in society. Pew estimated that in 2010, 93 percent of Turkmenistan's approximately 5 million citizens identified as Muslim. "Turkmenistan," *Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project*, http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/turkmenistan/religious_demography#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010

¹⁹ Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, "Islam Contested: Nation, Religion, and Tradition in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," in *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe*, Chris Hann ed. (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 125; Devin DeWeese, "A Khwārazmian Saint in the Golden Horde: Közlük Ata (Gözli Ata) and the Social Vectors of Islamisation," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 143 (2018), 107-132.

Turkmen forms of worship are informed by their identity formation and nomadic heritage. Turkmen trace their lineage back to the Oguz tribes which identified as descendants of the semi-mythical, eponymous leader Oguz Han, who is still regarded in oral traditions.²⁰ The Oguz tribes, like other Turkic groups and confederations, revered the sky-entity, *Tengri/Taňry*, and found the spiritual in natural sites such as caves, mountains, and waters.²¹ The Oguz began to migrate westward from the area around the Altai Mountains in the 9th and 10th centuries.²² There they encountered Islam which fused with their animistic and shamanistic beliefs. Those Oguz Turks who adopted Islam came to call themselves “Türkmen.”²³ External observers, and some Muslim purists, commonly assume that because Turkmen were nomadic or are “relative newcomers” that Islam “sits lightly” upon them or they are “bad Muslims.”²⁴ In fact, traditional Islam—or Turkmen Islam—plays a pronounced role in everyday life in Turkmenistan. However, Turkmen tend to eschew dogmatic Islamic rituals and have retained some pre-Islamic values. In this now nationally

²⁰ Adrienne L. Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 20; Golden Peter B. Golden, *An Intro to the History of the Turkic Peoples* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 207-219, 221-25, 307; William Irons, *The Yomut Speaking Turkmen: A Study of Social Organization among a Central Asian Turkic-Speaking Population* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 40. Turkmen remain mindful of their tribal and clan affiliations and are still expected to list three generations of ancestors in state paperwork.

²¹ Golden, *An Intro to the History*, 211.

²² *The Book of Dede Korkut*, translated by Geoffrey Lewis (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 9. For the most concise English language account of pre-Islamic Turkic history, see Carter Vaughn Findley, *The Turks in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21-55.

²³ V. V. Bartold, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, vol. III, translated by V. and T. Minorsky (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), 77.

²⁴ Roustem Safronov, “Islam in Turkmenistan: the Niyazov Calculation,” in *Islam and Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or An Evolving Threat?*, Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000), 7; Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Political Islam in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan,” *Central Asian Survey*, 20 (4) 2001, 451; Kehl-Bodrogi, “Islam Contested,” 127. Adeeb Khalid, “A Secular Islam,” 587, addresses this phenomenon.

recognized form of worship, respect for ancestors and veneration of Sufi saints dominate.²⁵

Religious traditions in Turkmenistan and Institutions

The majority of Turkmen are Sunni Muslims,²⁶ following the Hanafi *madhab* or school of jurisprudence, like much of the rest of Central Asia. Sunni Muslims accept that there are four schools of jurisprudence or interpretations of Islam; alignment with a school has implications for finer points of interpretation of Islamic law, the issuance of fatwas, and the manner in which people pray. The Hanafi school is understood to be liberal concerning rituals and accommodation of local traditions and customs (*'urf-adat*). This allows traditional Islam to flourish in Turkmenistan.

Unlike among Uzbeks and Tajiks, who were settled long before the nomadic Turkmen, neither mosques nor formal institutions played a central role in everyday Turkmen worship. For example, judges (*kazi*) were few and mollahs did not act as social arbiters. Instead tribal chiefs (*aksakal*) imparted wisdom, mediated disputes, and enforced customary law (*adat*). Formal Islam tends to be found in settled, urbanized societies. By contrast, the Turkmen, much like Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, were for centuries a non-urbanized people,

²⁵ Ruslan Muradow, "The Unfading Paints of Turabek Khanum," *Laçyn*, 23 (2008), 51-59; Ruslan Muradow, "Köpetdagyn Mukaddes Ýerleri" [The Shrines of the Köpetdag Mountains], *Syýahat*, 5-6 (2017), 16-25; Ruslan Muradow, "Regeneratsiia Sviiatin' [Regeneration of Holy Sites]," *Oazisy Shelkovogo Puti* [Oases of the Silk Road], (Moscow: Sovet Muftiev Rossii Institut vseobshchei istorii RAN Fond Marjani, no date), 744-755.

²⁶ In July 2016, the U.S. government estimated that 9 percent of Turkmenistan's population is Orthodox Christian, while 2 percent represent other faiths. These include small numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i, Roman Catholics, and evangelical Christians (Baptists and Pentecostals). Small communities of Shi'a Muslims (ethnic Iranians, Azerbaijanis, and Kurds) live along the border with Iran and in the western city of Türkmenbaşy. The U.S. estimates that 200-250 Jews live in Turkmenistan, mostly in Ashgabat. See, "International Religious Freedom Report 2016 Turkmenistan," U.S. Department of State, <https://tm.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/official-reports/international-religious-freedom-report-2016-turkmenistan/>

moving seasonally with their herds over a territory so vast it extended into today's Iran and Afghanistan. This created a rich array of distinct religious practices that come down to us today as traditional forms of worship. The Turkmen had a history of building small numbers of mosques, madrasas, *maktabs*, and mausoleums, but by the mid-1980s Soviet destruction of religious sites left only four small mosques operating in all of Turkmenistan.²⁷ To this day, Turkmen (men) visit mosques infrequently. Most Turkmen who pray (men and women) do so primarily in their homes. Attendance is up on Islamic high holidays (Oraza Baýram or Eid al-Fitr, and Gurban Baýram or Eid al-Adha), though less interest is shown on Fridays (the traditional holy day in Islam).²⁸ However, there is a greater tendency among both men and women to visit *mazars* (tombs/burial sites) to express their faith, especially to honor ancestors. It is even more common to gather friends and family in the home to experience the community of believers. Instead of Friday (*Juma*) prayers, Turkmen are more likely to mark Thursday as the "evening of tempting aromas" (*ysy günü*). At Thursday night dinners, also thought of as Friday eve, special foods are prepared with oil in the hope that the aromas will be inviting to deceased ancestors whose presence in the home will be a blessing. It is at mealtime that you can observe Turkmen saying the *töwir* (prayer) and taking the *nur* (light) from heaven in their cupped hands which they "wash" over their faces after eating.

²⁷ Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 132; Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan*, 33. Two remained in the north near Daşoguz and two in the south near Mary. In the early 1990s, madrasas were opened in Dashoguz, Chärjew, and Mary but those have since closed. See Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan*, 33.

²⁸ According to Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan*, 35, in Turkmenistan there has long been a fundamental relationship between the state and the high holidays of Islam and Orthodoxy. As early as the 1980s Gurban Baýram and Easter achieved official status. By 1993—June 2—the president of Turkmenistan declared Gurban Baýram a day of rest. In 1994, he extended the holiday to 3 days.

Today, formal Islamic practices are embodied in the Muftiate (Muslim Spiritual Administration), observation of Islamic holidays, and life-cycle events such as circumcision, but traditional practices in the form of *zyýarat* (shrine pilgrimage) remain the more prevalent popular expressions of devotion among Turkmen.²⁹ As part of the religious revival seen during the early post-Soviet period, both the state and individual neighborhoods erected mosques, but these houses of worship have not retained their significance in the eyes of the state. According to the 2019 Annual Report issued by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Turkmenistan's authorities have demolished eight of Ashgabat's fourteen mosques.³⁰ This demolition included residential buildings as part of an "urban renewal" program in which the state is razing older structures in order to build a modernized capital city. The state's tearing down of mosques was not part of a larger anti-religious policy. Nevertheless, these houses of worship were not preserved.

Shrine pilgrimage or *zyýarat* holds an important place in Turkmen Islam.³¹ Though Turkmen recognize the hajj to Mecca as one of the five pillars of Islam, for financial and logistical reasons most Turkmen are unable to make the trip. Turkmen pilgrims do make the hajj, but their numbers are small.³²

²⁹ Personal observations, 2019. Victoria Clement, "Pilgrimage Sites that Should not be Missed," *Turkemensands* (March 11, 2020), <https://turkemensands.com/pilgrimage-sites-that-should-not-be-missed/>. See also, David Tyson, "Shrine Pilgrimage in Turkmenistan as a Means to Understand Islam among the Turkmen," *Central Asian Monitor* 1 (1997), 15-32. The Muftiate is the equivalent of the Diyanet in Turkey.

³⁰ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, which ranks Turkmenistan as a problematic Tier I country and advises the U.S. government that Turkmenistan should remain a CPC (Country of Particular Concern) does not contextualize this demolition. See, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2019 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: USIRF, 2019), 120, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

³¹ See Tyson, "Shrine Pilgrimage;" Kehl-Bodrogi, "Islam Contested."

³² According to Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan*, 36, while a few Turkmen participated in the hajj during the late Soviet years (1960s-1980s), organized groups started to make the trip in

Moreover, Turkmenistan's authorities encourage their Muslims to make domestic pilgrimages to local spiritually significant sites (*kerematly ýer*).³³ These visits (*zyýarat*) are typically to the site of a miraculous event or the tomb (*mazar*) of a well-known religious figure, such as the tomb of the Sufi master Najmuddin Kubra in Könye Urgenç.

Islam influenced by Sufism permeates Turkmen society. In fact, while the word "Sufism" is known in Turkmenistan, ordinary Turkmen adherents do not distinguish between Islam and Sufism. Sufi rituals have been folded into everyday practices.

In the Soviet period, there were unofficial adherents of Sufism who practiced "silent *zikir*" (rhythmic repetition of the name of God) and even initiated new *murids* (student followers), for example in the Shahid-jan mosque in the city of Chärjew (today's Türkmenabat).³⁴ In those years, Turkmen mostly gathered in homes, posting a watch outside lest anyone detect their "anti-Soviet" activity. Today, the state appropriates elements of Sufism. The most frequently seen example of this is the national dance *küşt depti*, which is commonly referred to as an ancient tradition or *gadym däp-dessur*.³⁵ The energetic dance, which is made up of a circle of dancers singing "Hü hüve" (a reference to the Almighty), is incorporated into most state-sponsored events, holidays, and national celebrations.³⁶

1990. Though the initial group, which was state-sponsored, only included 10 people by 1994, there were closer to 300. Today there are about 3,000, including privately organized travel as well as those sponsored by the state.

³³ Bruce Pannier, "Turkmen Pilgrims Make a Homegrown Hajj," *RFE/RL* (November 25, 2009), https://www.rferl.org/a/Turkmen_Pilgrims_Make_A_Homegrown_Hajj/1887880.html

³⁴ Vitalii Ponomarov, "Islam v sisteme gosudarstvennoi politiki Uzbekistana i Turkmenistana," *Rossii i Musul'manskii Mir*, No. 4, 2002, 96.

³⁵ "Türkmen dokumental film - Tuwakgylyç kakaň gadym däp-dessur gürrüñdeşligi" *youtube* (September 24, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6zDIF3laKI&feature=youtu.be> ; See also, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kushtdepdi-rite-of-singing-and-dancing-01259>

³⁶ The Almighty has many names, including *Biribar* (There is One), *Yaradan* (Creator), *Perwerdigar* (Supplier or the one who takes care).

Life-Cycle Ceremonies: *Sadaka*, *Huday' ýoly*, *Toý*

Life-cycle ceremonies are the mainstay of Turkmen daily religious traditions. Historically, these were carried out in the home, with friends and families, and typically included a meal along with expressions of Turkmen's generous hospitality. Today they may take place at a restaurant rented for a wedding, the workplace, or a state event. *Sadaka* (voluntary charitable giving),³⁷ *Huday' ýoly* (literally "God's path", typically a commemoration of a death), and *toý* (ceremony or party marking a life-cycle event) are occasions for Turkmen to gather, break bread, and mark the passage of time. *Sadaka* typically takes place at the opening of a mosque, a business, or a conference. *Huday' ýoly* are "thanks-givings" commemorating several days (3rd, 7th, 40th) after a loved one's death and the one-year anniversary.³⁸ *Toýs* are usually held for uplifting celebrations such as weddings, birthdays, and (male) circumcisions.

The state began to include such events, especially *sadaka*, in its proceedings in the early 1990s. When a mosque named after the president opened, he personally took part in the *sadaka*; at the commencement of an international conference, a molla or the Mufti led a prayer at the *sadaka* meal.³⁹ Turkmenistan's two presidents have also hosted *iftar* dinners to break the fast during the holy month of Ramadan. On these occasions the state used Islamic or popular religious tradition as a political aid in shaping the post-Soviet national identity.

³⁷ *Sadaka* differs from *zakat* in that Muslims are obliged by their faith to make charitable contributions called *zakat*, but *sadaka* is a voluntary giving. For a closer look at the Turkmen approaches to *sadaka* see Cara Kerven, "Regenerating Life: The Power of Reproducing People in Desert Turkmenistan," *Central Asian Affairs*, No. 4, 2019, 253-282.

³⁸ Victoria Clement, "Changes in Turkmen Alphabets, 1904-2004" in *Daily Life in Central Asia*, Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, June 2007), 266-280.

³⁹ I participated in many of these over the years I have been traveling to Turkmenistan, starting in 1997.

Religious Influences after Independence

Since Independence, Turkmenistan's state has sponsored classical Islamic institutions even as it encourages expressions of traditional Islam (shrine pilgrimage, saint veneration). The principal institutions are the Muftiate, which is headed by the Mufti, as well as mosques and the hajj. Moreover, the country's two presidents have used Islam (taking the oath of office on a Qur'an, partaking in *sadaka*, making the hajj and *umrah* to Mecca, sponsoring iftar dinners) to legitimize their power. Turkmenistan's leadership assumes moral authority to promote the state's legitimacy by making Islam subservient to national identity.

The First Period of Independence: The "Golden Age" Under Nyýazow

In contrast to the limited opportunities for public self-expression today, in the initial years of independence Turkmenistan's citizens openly discussed all matter of things, including religion, education, language, and politics. Newspapers were full of opinion pieces that reflected critical thinking.⁴⁰ At this time, works on Islam were readily available and prominent scholars and major institutions such as the Academy of Sciences and the Writers' Union participated in the translation, exposition, and publication of Islamic texts.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Clement, *Learning to Become Turkmen*, 124-131; Khalid, "A Secular Islam," 586, notes a that similar situation occurred in Uzbekistan.

⁴¹ Translations of surahs from the Qur'an appeared in the section "Heritage" [*Miras*] in the prominent journal *Garagum* (the organ of Turkmenistan's Writers' Union). There were booklets about the life of the Prophet Muhammed; shrine pilgrimage; prophets (including Muhammed, Noah, Jesus); and the four (rightly guided) Caliphs (published by the Academy of Sciences);

The Qur'an was translated into the Turkmen language twice, though not from an Arabic language edition. The first translation, published in 1994, was based on an Uzbek language edition with commentary in Turkmen. It had a run of 20,000 copies. The second rendering appeared in 1995, with a printing of 50,000 translated from the Tatar language. Portions of the Qur'an were published in the Turkmen-language literary journal *Garagum*.⁴² In addition to getting access to texts, participation in religious events became possible with the opportunity for foreign travel, including the hajj in Mecca. In 1992, the leadership in Ashgabat for the first time allowed 150 citizens to take part in the state-funded travel for the hajj.⁴³ The small window of candid self-expression lasted just a few years before the state began closing avenues for discourse and adopted a policy of permanent neutrality, which had strong isolationist tendencies. After that time, critical thinking and openness were discouraged. The state began to assume the primary role in public discussions. In this role, the government took control over all aspects of culture and discourse. Discourse extended to architecture designed to celebrate Turkmen national identity and highlight Turkmen Islam.⁴⁴

In 1995, President Saparmurat "Türkmenbaşy" Nyýazow built the sizable Saparmurat Hajji Mosque at the site of the critical Gök-Tepe battle that took place between the Turkmen people and the Russian army in 1881. The

Islamic law (Sharia) for students (published by the Writers' Union); prayer techniques; and Hadith or the example and sayings of the Prophet Muhammed. Atamyrat Atabaew and Döwletmyrat Kerimow, "Gurhan," *Garagum*, 10 (1993), 166-188; *Muhammet pygamberiň ömri* (Daşhowuz: Kitap, 1990); *Ërsarybaba zyýarat* (Aşgabat: Turkmenistan RNÇB, 1991); *Pygamberler, dört çaryýarlar, perişdeler* (Aşgabat: Türkmen Ylymlar Akademiýasy, 1991); *Şerigat buýruklarynyň toplymy* (Aşgabat: Ruh, 1992); *Namaz her bir öýe gerek* (no date, no publisher); *Hadys* (Aşgabat: Turan-1, 1991).

⁴² There were also editions available in Russian, and at least the Mufti had access to Arabic language Qur'ans published in Saudi Arabia. See, Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan*, 34.

⁴³ Ponomarov, "Islam v sisteme," 95.

⁴⁴ Natalie Koch, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche, and the New Capitals of Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

Russian army had slaughtered the Turkmen at the Gök-Tepe fortress, including women and children, marking the time and place where Turkmen lost their independence. After regaining independence, this mosque became a place where the Turkmen state formally observed Islamic holidays, combining the sense of Turkmen identity (*Türkmençilik*) with Muslim identity (*Musulmançylyk*).

Mosques materialized as part of the revival of Islam that took place throughout Central Asia and Azerbaijan with post-Soviet independence.⁴⁵ One scholar estimated that by 1996, over 240 mosques functioned in Turkmenistan, with approximately 20 to 30 additional mosques built over the rest of the decade. Moreover, a small number of Shi'a mosques functioned for the Azerbaijani and Kurdish communities in the cities of Ashgabat, Chärjew (*Türkmenabat*), Mary, Nebitdag (*Balkanabat*), Krasnovodsk (*Türkmenbaşy*), and in Firuze, the holiday resort area outside Ashgabat.⁴⁶

Mukkades Ruhnama (Holy Book of the Soul)

Just a decade later, Nyýazow built the *Türkmenbaşy Ruhny Mosque* or *Gypjak Mosque* in his home village of Gypjak just northwest of Ashgabat. Its capacity of 10,000 made it the largest mosque in Central Asia at that time. With sayings in Turkmen from Nyýazow's own writings inscribed on the minarets, this site cemented the first president's efforts to correlate Turkmen identity (*Türkmençilik*) with Muslim identity (*Musulmançylyk*), along with his individual role as founder of the modern Turkmen nation and head of the Turkmen people (*Türkmenbaşy*). The inscriptions come from his two-volume tome, *Ruhnama* (Book of the Soul), which he published as a sacred exposition on Turkmen culture and values, and what it means to be

⁴⁵ Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan*, 44, describes the early years as "characterized by political, economic, and ideological euphoria," including on the topic of religion.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Turkmen.⁴⁷ In other words, the work imparts what makes a good Turkmen and describes what is acceptable in Turkmen society. The ideas are grounded in a combination of Turkmen legends and Islamic values, leaving no doubt that the national project was designed for Muslims, as opposed to the country's minority Christians, Jews, or Baha'i. In it, Nyýazow explains that the *Ruhnama* would be—"after the Qur'an"—*the book of the Turkmen, "who are the real owners of this land."*⁴⁸ *Ruhnama* underscored that Turkmen morals are embedded in "Turkmen Sufism," while highlighting that Islamic law is not to be forgotten, for example in the passage "lawful (*halal*) things give pleasure, while forbidden things (*haram*) are bitter and sorrowful."⁴⁹

Nyýazow assured his readers that *Ruhnama* was "not a religious book" and could never replace the Qur'an.⁵⁰ Yet, he and many other Turkmen referred to the work as the "Holy Book of the Soul" [*Mukkades Ruhnama*] and the "lighthouse of the people" [*halkyň şamçyragy*].⁵¹ Further underscoring the importance of *Ruhnama* and its links to the approved version of Islam, he also required clerics to display the book in mosques on equal footing with the Qur'an. (The state required Russian Orthodox priests to do the same in Turkmenistan's churches.) A 20-foot tall replica of *Ruhnama* erected in one of Ashgabat's central parks still opens and closes on the hour and is lit at night.

⁴⁷ Clement, *Learning to Become Turkmen*; Amieke Bouma, "Turkmenistan: Epics in Place of Historiography," *Jahrbücher Osteuropäischer Geschichte* 59, no. 4 (2011): 559-85.

⁴⁸ Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy, *Ruhnama: Reflections on the Spiritual Values of the Turkmen*, vol. I (Ashgabat, 2002), 242, 254.

⁴⁹ Türkmenbaşy, *Ruhnama*, vol I, 61, 202.

⁵⁰ Türkmenbaşy, *Ruhnama*, vol. II, 21.

⁵¹ Clement, *Learning to Become Turkmen*, 147-149.

With *Ruhnama*, Nyýazow guided society in post-Soviet spirituality to promote national unity among the many tribal and regional identities.⁵² The work told a Turkmen history reaching back to and relying on ancient legends and directing Turkmen in how to live well. All the myths, advice, and poetry aimed to ground the nation in a Turkmen morality and unite the citizenry in the project of the new nation. Nyýazow spelled this out in *Ruhnama*:

The Turkmen, whose moral realm was a vacuum, whose links with their ancestors were severed, whose origin was forgotten during the Soviet era should acquire national values once again. The basic feeling in the heart of the individual must be the feeling of national pride; the basic idea in the consciousness of the individual must be the idea of perceiving the world as a Turkmen national; the basic value in the morals of the individual must be Turkmen morals; his dignity must be national dignity; his spiritual belief should carry the characteristics of the Turkmen nation's belief. In short, the spiritual perspective of the individual must be shaped by national values...For only then can we continue our life as a nation-state.⁵³

The ubiquitous *Ruhnama* evolved into a reference book and became the main text in schools, displacing textbooks on history, social studies, and humanities.⁵⁴ Nyýazow placed himself in the role of a national father figure—in a society that reveres elders and venerates ancestors—and he

⁵² Victoria Clement, "Articulating National Identity in Turkmenistan: Inventing Tradition through Myth, Cult and Language," *Nations & Nationalism* 20 (2014), 546-562. See also, Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 2004 and Georg Paul Geiss, "Turkmen Tribalism," *Central Asian Survey* 18, no. 3 (1999), 347-57.

⁵³ Türkmenbaşy, *Ruhnama*, vol. I, 203.

⁵⁴ Clement, "Articulating National Identity in Turkmenistan," 546-562.

used *Ruhnama* for self-aggrandizement. This was just one aspect of the cult of personality that developed around the first president.⁵⁵ Critics consequently disparaged Nyýazow's writings. But what most failed to note was that Nyýazow sought to propagate a vision of the past and consequently to shape the future while marshalling the citizenry around a national, religious, and cultural identity. The goal was to create a strategically usable past and offer a morality to the Turkmen that bound them together as a nation, especially the post-Soviet youth, which he labelled the "Golden Century's Generation" [*Altyn Asyr Nesli*].⁵⁶

Ethnicity and State Control in Matters of Religion

Ruhnama played a role in several aspects of the relationship between the state and religion. From 1996 to 2003, Turkmenistan's Mufti was Nasrullah ibn-Ibadullah, an ethnic Uzbek from the northern city Dashoguz, who had received his training in Islamic studies in Uzbekistan and at the Cairo Islamic university of al-Azhar. He was the Mufti until 2003 when the government in Ashgabat sentenced him to twenty-two years in prison for treason following a closed trial.⁵⁷ The story of this Mufti is illustrative of two central issues surrounding religion in Turkmenistan: ethnicity and state control.

When the state replaced Mufti Ibadullah with the ethnic Turkmen cleric Kakageldi Wepaýew, it fueled rumors that Ibadullah was removed due to his ethnicity at a time when there was backlash against non-Turkmen more generally and the Uzbek minority specifically. Resentment of ethnic Uzbeks ran high following the 2002 attempt to assassinate President Nyýazow,

⁵⁵ Victoria Clement, "Pedagogy and Power," in *Globalization on the Margins*, 2 ed., I. Silova and S. Niyozov, eds. (Charlotte, NC: IAP, 2020), 505-526.

⁵⁶ Clement, *Learning to Become Turkmen*, 137-159.

⁵⁷ Antoine Blua, "Turkmenistan: Former Chief Mufti Sentenced To Prison For Reasons That Remain Unclear," *RFE/RL* (March 22, 2004), <https://www.rferl.org/a/1051995.html>

because the Turkmen government accused the Embassy of Uzbekistan of providing refuge to the coup leader.⁵⁸ This resentment prompted the leadership in Ashgabat to replace ethnic Uzbek imams with Turkmen clerics. According to Radio Free Europe, at the time, the “Ministry of National Security was concerned about an underground Uzbek organization operating in the Dashoguz region of northeastern Turkmenistan.”⁵⁹

In addition to removing the Mufti from his position, the state sentenced Ibadullah to prison because of his opposition to presidential controls over the Muslim community. At that time, the state obliged imams to champion the leadership’s ideas not only by exhibiting the president’s book, *Ruhnama*, in mosques next to the Qur’an, but also by quoting from it in orations. Ibadullah reportedly resisted the authority of the president by objecting to *Ruhnama*’s presence in mosques. The case of Ibadullah was particularly severe. But muftis and imams are subject to the whims of the state leadership, especially since they are civil servants.

⁵⁸ “Turkmenistan’s Attempted Coup: Repercussions and U.S. Concerns,” *CRS Report for Congress* (March 7, 2003),

https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20030307_RS21384_9d26c1c564f6d78976bcafd402c84a0d29b2b09e.pdf

⁵⁹ Turkmenistan’s former Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov, who remains imprisoned as the agitator of the November 2002 coup attempt, wrote in his memoirs that Ibadullah played a role in the plot. Vitaliy Ponomarev of the Central Asia Program for Russia’s Memorial human rights center reported that “The charges against him [Ibadullah] were described in the book published in Ashgabat under the name of Shikhmuradov. [Shikhmuradov] talked about his alleged contacts with conspirators and said that, allegedly, [Ibadullah] was planning to establish an Islamic party after deposing Niyazov.” See Antoine Blua, “Turkmenistan: Former Chief Mufti Sentenced To Prison For Reasons That Remain Unclear,” *RFE/RL* (March 22, 2004), <https://www.rferl.org/a/1051995.html>

Second Period of Independence: The Berdimuhamedow Epoch

Taking office immediately after Nyýazow's death, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (2007-present) quickly began to roll back public expressions of Nyýazow's personality cult. He pardoned the former Mufti Ibadullah, releasing him from prison early and making him an adviser at the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) (formerly the State Council for Religious Affairs) under the auspices of the office of the President.⁶⁰ Berdimuhamedow eliminated references to Türkmenbaşy in the national anthem, removed his photos from official buildings and schools, and slowly reduced the significance of *Ruhnama* until it was no longer read or referenced—although the 20-foot monument remained. At the start of the 2014 academic year, President Berdimuhamedow declared that universities would no longer require applicants to be tested on the content of *Ruhnama*.⁶¹ Instead, the new leader wrote his own books, which have become the predominant texts in the country. In these, the President continues to encourage traditional religious practices among Turkmen. For example, in *Happy Era of Arkadag*, he writes that “spirituality and adherence to the cultural values of the ancestors were always a distinctive feature of the Turkmen people.”⁶² He also goes to great lengths to describe Turkmen morality and link it to the nation-state. He writes that, “the morality of the citizens; moral perfection of society; and the moral values of the people...make up the national ideology.”⁶³

⁶⁰ “Pardoned Former Turkmen Mufti Gets New State Position,” *RFE/RL* (August 14, 2007), <https://www.rferl.org/a/1078148.html>

⁶¹ “Turkmenistan Is Finally Putting the ‘*Ruhnama*’ Behind Them,” *Chronicles of Turkmenistan* (August 6, 2014), accessed September 23, 2019, <https://en.hronikatm.com/2014/08/turkmenistan-is-finally-putting-the-ruhnama-behind-them/>

⁶² Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, *Happy Era of Arkadag* (Ashgbat: Turkmen State Publishing Service, 2017), 462.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 178, 292, 327.

The new president uses architecture as well as texts to endorse Turkmen Islam. Like Nyýazow, in 2009 Berdimuhamedow oversaw the inauguration of a mosque in his name: the Gurbanguly hajji mosque in Mary. The opening of the mosque included a *sadaka* meal, which the President attended. Today, more than a decade later, the atmosphere is more restrictive, and the state is suspicious of individuals who attend mosque regularly, though those performing local *zyýarat* and life-cycle rituals remain numerous.

Foreign Religious Influences

Until Turkmenistan's independence, like the rest of Central Asia's Muslim clerics, Turkmen ulama were trained in Tashkent or Bukhara. These Uzbek cities continue to attract candidates for religious careers. However, with the end of the Soviet system, Turkmen began travelling to other countries for training, including Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.⁶⁴ Still, of the more than two hundred imams working in the country in the 1990s, only a handful (20 to 30) had state permission to undertake Islamic schooling at foreign Islamic educational sites.⁶⁵ There are other Turkmen clergy who have traveled for training unofficially, but they do not receive a state salary and run the risk of punishment if they are caught preaching to an unregistered congregation. Currently, official clerics are trained in Turkmenistan and the state apparatus oversees their instruction.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ United Nations Human Rights Committee, *United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Initial Periodic Report Turkmenistan* (February 19, 2010), 24, <https://undocs.org/en/CCPR/C/TKM/1>

⁶⁵ Ponomarov, "Islam v sisteme," 86-96.

⁶⁶ In addition, in 1994, presidential decrees established two religious institutes in Ashgabat which the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate or "Diyanet" managed: a theological high-school and a Faculty of Theology (Ylahyýat Fakultesi). The Faculty of Theology offered its graduates two types of degrees: History and Religious Studies (*Mollalyk*). President Berdimuhamedow closed both by 2008. See Balci, 2018, 176. My own visit to the library of the Faculty in revealed that the students had access not only to religious materials, but also books on a wide variety of topics, including World History.

A handful of foreign groups established a presence in Turkmenistan after independence. For example, between 1997-98 the United Arab Emirates (UAE) built a mosque at the edge of Ashgabat. The chosen spot was near the cemetery of Mahmud-ishan in the western suburbs of the capital. Sponsored by Sheikh Khalifa ibn Zayid al-Nahayan it departed from the conservative approach of most mosques in the Ottoman style and appeals to the modern senses with a truncated pyramid topped with a dome framed by two 45-meter high minarets.⁶⁷ The mosque can hold up to 1,500 worshippers, but it was not well attended except for by students at the International Turkmen-Turkish University which was located across the street. In fact, an Arab presence in Turkmenistan is limited and Salafi Islam, in the vernacular called "Wahhabism," is the epitome of Turkmen conceptualization of foreign and unwelcome forms of Islam. More generally, "Wahhabism is a catch-all label used by regional officials about any form of Islam not sanctioned by the state."⁶⁸

Iran has sponsored a centrally located Cultural Center on the main street in Ashgabat for over twenty-five years. The Center offers classes in Persian, hosts a library with books and newspapers from Iran, and sponsors an annual Iranian Cultural Week. The Iranian embassy has aided in the restoration and maintenance of some Shi'a mosques, but in contrast to Turkish undertakings, does so without fanfare. The embassy was especially active in the 1990s, for example, in February 1997, organizing an exhibition of the Qur'an at the national library in Ashgabat.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ K. Kurbanov and R. Muradov, "Sovremennye mecheti Turkmenistana," *arkhitektura* 2,39 (2005): 29-33.

⁶⁸ Catherine Fitzpatrick, "Turkmenistan: Turkish Schools Closed Amid Concerns of Spread of Nurchilar Movement," *Eurasianet* (August 22, 2011), <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-turkish-schools-closed-amid-concerns-of-spread-of-nurchilar-movement>

⁶⁹ It was during my attendance at such events that I was introduced to ethnic Turkmen (Sunnis), who had left Iran and were seeking citizenship in Turkmenistan, many of whom now live in the U.S. See also, Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan*, 34-35.

Overall external influences have been limited, aside from individuals from Turkey, who have an advantage in that they share cultural, linguistic, and religious history with the Turkmen. In 1998, Turkey financed a centrally located 5,000-capacity mosque on Azady Street in Ashgabat, the Ertogrul Gazi Mosque or “Azady” mosque, in conjunction with a Turkish Cultural Center. Through the Center, the Turkish community held a variety of social events and marked holidays. Yet it was the network of schools that the Turkish community established around the country—indeed throughout the world—that made the greatest impression on Turkmen society.

Gülen Schools

In the early 1990s, when the governments of Turkey and Turkmenistan had declared themselves to represent “one nation—two states,” it was not surprising to see a pious Turkish community gain footing in Turkmenistan. Under the leadership of the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, these Turks established a network of high-quality schools rooted in Islamic culture and values. Coursework focused heavily on math and science in an effort to promote a version of Islamic culture compatible with the modern world.⁷⁰ While Turkish was an important language of instruction, several of the classes were taught in English. There were no formal classes in Islamic studies, but there were lessons in Ethics (*ahlak*) and Values (*terbiye*) and teachers imparted Islamic culture through discussions, films, and books in the dormitories.⁷¹ Members of the Gülen movement established these

⁷⁰ Bayram Balçi, “Fethullah Gülen’s missionary schools in central Asia and their role in the spreading of Turkism and Islam,” *Religion, State and Society*, 31, 2 (2003), 151-77.

⁷¹ Victoria Clement, “Central Asia’s Hizmet Schools,” in *The Muslim World and Politics in Transition*, Greg Barton, Paul Weller and Ihsan Yilmaz eds. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 154-167. There were also classes on Etiquette (*edep/vosptianie*) in Turkmen schools until they were replaced by *Ruhnama* lessons.

centers and ran the schools, and thus locals referred to them as the “Turkish schools.”⁷²

Turkish economic enterprises initially funded schools, the Turkish Cultural Center, and the Ertogrul Gazi Mosque. Turkish businessmen in Ashgabat contributed funds and materials to build the schools. Turkish language thrived throughout the country as the schools prospered and spread a Hanafi Sunni Islam with Sufi nuances. The community of Muslims involved in these schools embraced the teachings of Gülen and his spiritual leader Said Nursi (1877-1960), which promoted mystical currents that Sufi-inclined Turkmen readily embraced. Turkmen read Nursi’s work *Risale-i Nur* (*The Epistle of Light*) in a Turkmen-language translation.⁷³ The Turkmen-language daily *Zaman* was the mainstay of the Gülen movement’s media in Turkmenistan.⁷⁴ In the early 2000s, much to the dismay of the state leadership, which ran its own state-funded print-media, *Zaman* became Turkmenistan’s leading newspaper with the highest circulation rates in the country.

Due in part to good relations with the government in Turkey, which had a very public falling out with Gülen from 2013 onward,⁷⁵ and in part as a response to the Arab Spring, in August 2011 Turkmenistan’s government took control of and nationalized all of the Turkish schools except the high-school named for Turgut Özal and the International Turkmen-Turkish University (ITTU). In 2014, the state also nationalized ITTU and its buildings served as the foundation for the new International University for Humanities and Development (IUHD). The reasons for these measures

⁷² Victoria Clement, “Faith-based schools in post-Soviet Turkmenistan,” *European Education* 43 (Spring 2011), 76-92.

⁷³ Bayram Balci, *Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 52.

⁷⁴ *Zaman* was first a Turkish-language newspaper in Turkey but quickly spread around the world and appeared in a number of local languages.

⁷⁵ Catherine Putz, “Turkmenistan’s Gülenist Crackdown,” *The Diplomat* (June 10, 2017), <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/turkmenistans-gulenist-crackdown/>

stemmed from a combination of the Turkmen leadership's mistrust of external Islamic influences, a desire to promote Turkmen ethnic identity, and an alarming political atmosphere in Turkey involving the relationship between Gülenists and the Turkish state.

After Turkey's president accused Gülen's followers of fomenting the July 2016 coup attempt, Gülenists around the world found themselves in a precarious position. Most Turkish Gülenists had left Turkmenistan in the mid-2010s. Since the coup attempt in Turkey, though, Turkmenistan's security services have been detaining and arresting Turkmen who were involved with the Turkish schools.⁷⁶ Some of these individuals have died in prison.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Nick Ashdown, "The Fate of Turkmenistan's Gülenists," *The Diplomat* (September 3, 2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/the-fate-of-turkmenistans-gulenists/>

⁷⁷ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2020 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: USIRF, 2020), 44-45.

Legal Status of Religion

Turkmenistan's secular nature is grounded in its constitution, which addresses religious matters explicitly. However, this does not mean, in practice, that the state is detached from issues of religion. Indeed, the government is intimately involved in religious life, regulating religion. Similar to what is found in several Central Asian countries, the Turkmen model distinguishes between traditional and non-traditional religious practices, and the state leadership actively promotes the traditional, specifically privileging traditional Islam.⁷⁸

Constitutional Provisions

On September 14, 2016, President Berdimuhamedow signed a new constitution into law, which did not differ dramatically from earlier constitutions regarding religion. Article 18 packs a lot of information, some of which is reflected in societal experience and some that is not borne out. This section of the document guarantees freedom of religion and belief, and equality before the law. Article 18 further mandates that religious organizations will be separate from the state and prohibits their interference in state affairs and their carrying out the state functions. However, Article 18 does not prevent the state from encroaching on the religious institutions. In fact, the state is intimately involved in the administration of religious activities and the institutions that organize worship.

In addition, Article 18 proclaims that the public education system is separate from religious organizations and is secular. Aside from basic introduction

⁷⁸ Cornell, Starr, and Tucker, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, 65.

to religious texts in some state mosques and churches of the Russian Orthodox Church, formal religious education is almost completely banned. The single exception is the tiny theological section of the Turkmen State University's History Faculty which is officially approved to train imams in Sunni Islam. Turkmenistan's citizens are not allowed to travel abroad for religious education, though some do so unofficially.

Equality among citizens regardless of nationality, race, gender, language, religion, or political stance is guaranteed in Article 28. Article 41 secures the right to profess any religion or none, to express and disseminate beliefs related to religion, to participate in religious observances, rituals, and ceremonies. This provision on dissemination would seem to make allowances for proselytization. In fact, evangelization is not allowed, and people who engage in propagating religion find themselves in trouble with the state. Trouble sometimes means losing a job, but individuals accused of criminal religious offenses typically are arrested and tried in closed courts.⁷⁹ Religious communities are not allowed to organize formal lectures, classes, or training programs. There are no foreigners working officially as missionaries in Turkmenistan.

Article 42 states that everyone shall be guaranteed the freedom of opinion and expression. No one can be forced to express his/her opinions or beliefs or renounce them. Citizens also have the right to search freely for information and to receive information, if it is not a state or other secret protected by law. This article's promises are unobtainable in Turkmenistan where it is not easy to find information, the state blocks basic internet sites, and many categories of information are classified as state secrets. The guarantees of freedom of assembly (including rallies and demonstrations)

⁷⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2019 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: USIRF, 2019), 116, 120,

<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. No accurate numbers of prisoners are available as the government in Turkmenistan does not disclose such information.

in Article 43 are not limited to religious activity and imply that citizens may gather to worship freely or perhaps even protest. While these constitutional articles ensure basic rights in theory, they are not always realized in practice. Certainly, opposition press and international watchdog groups like *Forum 18* would take issue with these stated freedoms as they frequently report violations of these rights.

The Constitution defines the country as secular and sets up basic parameters for the state and society, but it is the Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations that regulates daily experiences. On April 11, 2016 a new Law on Religion replaced the 2003 Law on Religion that existed under President Nyýazow. The new law opens with a preamble stating,

This law is based on the fact that Turkmenistan, as a democratic, legal and secular state, guaranteeing freedom of religions and faiths, ensures the equality of every single person regardless of their religious beliefs, recognizes the historical role of Islam in the development of culture and spiritual life of the people, respects other religions, recognizes the importance of interfaith harmony, religious tolerance and respect for the religious beliefs of citizens.⁸⁰

While there is no official religion in Turkmenistan, the 2016 Law on Religion affords special significance to Islam, underscoring its important place in the lives of the Turkmen people and the state's interest in promoting it.

⁸⁰ "Türkmenistanyň Kanuny: Dine uýmak erkinligi we dini guramalar hakynda," Türkmenistanyň Mejlisiniň Maglumatlary, 2016 ý., № 1, 50-nji madda (Türkmenistanyň 20.10.2018 ý. № 82-VI we 02.03.2019 ý. № 126-VI Kanunlary esasynda girizilen üýtgetmeler bilen), 1.

Registration of Religious Associations

In Turkmenistan, religious associations may gather only if they are registered with the state. According to Article 13 of the Law on Religion, in order to register, a group must have 50 adult members and each one must submit their name, address, and date of birth with the registration application.⁸¹ These applications must be submitted to the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR).⁸² Applications then move to the Ministry of Justice. They must be approved by the Justice Minister, the First Deputies of the Justice Minister, the Foreign Minister, the General Prosecutor, the Ministry of State Security, the Interior Minister, and the Deputy Head of the State Service for Registering Foreign Citizens. Registration applications are frequently denied for arbitrary reasons such as grammatical errors in the paperwork or the whims of bureaucrats.⁸³ Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists are especially targeted. For example, in June 2018, a chief judge in the city of Türkmenbashi denounced all Jehovah's Witnesses as "traitors."⁸⁴ Since the

⁸¹ Felix Corley and John Kinahan, "Turkmenistan: Religious freedom survey, January 2017" *Forum 18* (January 6, 2017), http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244 - During the Nyýazow years, registration required a minimum of 500 members, a much more challenging number to reach.

⁸² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2019 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: USIRF, 2019), 116, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf> - SCROEERIR is sometimes translated as Commission for Work with Religious Organizations and Expert Analysis of Resources with Religious Information, Published and Printed Production (CWRO).

⁸³ Corley and Kinahan, "Turkmenistan," http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244

⁸⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2019 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: USIRF, 2019), 120, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

ratification of the new Constitution in 2016, only eight applications by religious groups have passed the registration process.⁸⁵

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, as of January 2018 there were 131 registered religious organizations, including 108 Muslim (103 Sunni and five Shi'a), 12 Orthodox Christian, and 11 others.⁸⁶ The others include Baha'i, which has a community of 300-400 active practitioners who gather at meeting houses in Ashgabat. There are a few Protestant communities, such as Baptists, and one each affiliated with the Greater Grace Organization, Seventh Day Adventists, and The Word of Life. "Others" also includes Catholics who do not have a church, but who are able to rent a house in Ashgabat in which they have assembled a chapel. The Catholic Church in Turkmenistan numbers approximately 200. Its clergy conducts masses in English and Russian and is beginning to use a little Turkmen during the rosary, in bible meetings with children, and sometimes when reading the liturgy. The number of Russian Orthodox adherents is significantly higher, perhaps a few thousand, but the number continues to decrease because of the steady emigration of the Russian-speaking population. Today, throughout the country, there are twelve registered churches associated with the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church. The state does not interfere with them as much as other groups since the authorities in Turkmenistan recognize it as a "historical" religion. All houses of worship, however, are affected by the law prohibiting importation of religious materials into the country since they cannot bring in any texts or icons for their worshippers.

⁸⁵ "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review – A/HRC/39/3," United Nations, (July 16, 2018), 8, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/207/39/PDF/G1820739.pdf?OpenElement>

⁸⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2019 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: USIRF, 2019), 118, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

Article 16 of the Law on Religion forbids the activity of unregistered religious organizations within Turkmenistan. Violations are handled according to Article 76 of the 2014 Administrative Code. Among other things, the Code restricts the importation of foreign literature. Part 1 of Article 76 punishes "violation of the procedure established by law for conducting religious rites and rituals, the carrying out of charitable or other activity, as well as the production, import, export and distribution of literature and other materials of religious content and objects of religious significance" with hefty fines.⁸⁷

Due to the heavy restrictions on the importation of literature and the state's strictures on religious discourse, including Islamic discourse, it is difficult to purchase a Qur'an in Turkmenistan. Still, most households possess one that has been handed down, or more likely, purchased during the early 1990s when such texts were readily available.

⁸⁷ Felix Corley and John Kinahan, Turkmenistan: Religious freedom survey, January 2017" *Forum 18* (January 6, 2017), http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244

Religious Institutions

While Turkmenistan's government makes small allowances for a limited number of non-Muslim religious groups, it favors Islam. For example, it provides both real and symbolic, administrative and financial support to the Muftiate. Headed by the Mufti, or chief cleric, this office coordinates religious activity throughout the country and oversees Islamic clergy, all of whom are appointed by the state. Under President Nyýazow, the Muftiate consisted of nine people, among these were the Mufti, two members of the Shi'a community—one each from Mary and Dashoguz—and one each from the five administrative regions (*weláyat*) and the city of Ashgabat. Another six people took part in bi-monthly meetings without the right to vote.⁸⁸ The make-up of the Muftiate under President Berdimuhamedow is unclear. Clergy are unable to grant audiences with foreigners and information about the institution is difficult to find.

Ashgabat founded Turkmenistan's Muftiate shortly after independence; in Soviet times this institution had resided in Uzbekistan and was responsible for all of Central Asia. Today, the Ministry of Justice appoints the Mufti and senior Muftiate officials, who are also members of the SCROEERIR and are responsible for oversight of activities among all religious communities.

The Mufti is in a position of authority over other religious organizations though his leadership of SCROEEIR. SCROEERIR is responsible for helping registered religious organizations work with government agencies, explaining the law to representatives of religious organizations, monitoring the activities of religious organizations to ensure they comply with the law,

⁸⁸ Ponomarov, "Islam v sisteme," 95.

assisting with the translation and publication of religious literature, and promoting understanding and tolerance among different religious organizations. The law states SCROEERIR must approve all individuals appointed as leaders of religious organizations, although the law does not specify the procedures for obtaining the consent of SCROERRIR.⁸⁹

In each of the country's *welajats*, the main spiritual personage is the "imam of the *welajat*." In this highly centralized society, *welajat* imams carry out only a few financial and personnel matters.⁹⁰ The Mufti selects the *welajat* imams, the imams in turn choose the local mollas and assign them to mosques. All formally recognized clergy in Turkmenistan are civil servants and receive a state salary. Thus, all selections are open to the scrutiny of the security services. This means that the state, in all of its manifestations, has control over sermons. One obvious display of this control is the presence of surveillance equipment in mosques. Most notable are the Friday prayer services in mosques, which are designed to communicate state ideas and end with a prayer for the president's well-being.⁹¹ Some citizens even reported that after attending the Friday prayers at the mosque in the western city of Balkanabat, police questioned them about their faith with respect to their loyalty to the state, asking "Who is more important, Allah or the President?"⁹² Secular state authorities, not the clergy, have the final say over how religion is observed in Turkmenistan.

At the end of August 2019, the government in Ashgabat dismissed Mufti Serýayew. It then gathered Turkmenistan's religious leaders and elders to formally appoint Lebab *welajet* imam, Yalkab Hojaguliyew, the new Mufti

⁸⁹ U.S. Department of State, *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkmenistan*, 3-4, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkmenistan/>

⁹⁰ Ponomarov, "Islam v sisteme," 95.

⁹¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2019 Annual Report*, 120, <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>.

⁹² Felix Corley, "Turkmenistan: In Ramadan, Muslims fear 'extremism' accusations," *Forum 18* (May 28, 2019), www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2481

of Turkmenistan. The Ahal *welayet* imam, Ishanguliyew, moved to Lebap to replace Hojaguliyew, and the head imam of the Göktepe *etrap* (district) relocated to the Ahal *welayet*. In short, there was a shuffle which the government described as “following the traditions of rotation.”⁹³ Such rotations take place frequently among Turkmenistan’s civil servants, especially those with visibility, to prevent them from accumulating personal power. Despite the claim to uphold a secular system in which religious and state institutions are separate, examples of state interference in religious matters abound.

⁹³ “V stolitse proshlo soveshchanie sviashchennosluzhitelei,” *Turkmenistan segodnia* (August 30, 2019), <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/articles.aspx&article19362&cat15>; “New mufti elected in Turkmenistan,” *Chronicles of Turkmenistan* (August 31, 2019), <https://en.hronikatm.com/2019/08/new-mufti-elected-in-turkmenistan/> - The post-Soviet government in Turkmenistan regularly dismisses officials from office (often due to alleged corruption) and rotates bureaucrats to prevent them from accumulating influence. Even more recently, the news about the Muftiate involves a crackdown on its leadership for corruption connected to the hajj. The individuals, along with high level employees from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stand accused of allowing 380 pilgrims to travel to Saudi Arabia; more than double the 160 that the president had authorized. At the fall meeting of Turkmenistan’s Cabinet of Ministers, Attorney General Atdayev announced that “in our society with crime, and especially with bribery, an irreconcilable struggle is being waged.” The President lamented the “regrettable” corruption and bribery, noting that the state would continue to struggle against it. He also underscored that the government supports the activities of religious structures, with such activities as the construction of mosques and the annual Hajj pilgrimage “under constant control.” See, “Employees of the Office of the Mufti, former Ministry of Trade and CEO of Turkmenbashi Complex of Oil Refineries arrested for corruption in Turkmenistan,” *Chronicles of Turkmenistan* (September 15, 2019), <https://en.hronikatm.com/2019/09/employees-of-the-office-of-the-mufti-former-ministry-of-trade-and-ceo-of-turkmenbashi-complex-of-oil-refineries-arrested-for-corruption-in-turkmenistan/> - “Itogi rasvitiia Turkmenistana za ianvar’ -avgust rassmotreny na rasshirennom zasedanii Pravitel’sva,” *Turkmenistan segodnia* (September 13, 2019), <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/articles.aspx&article19593&cat11>

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the relationship between state, religion, and society in Turkmenistan, highlighting the model of secular governance the state observes even as it embraces Islam as part of national identity. The paper has found that while the Turkmen model shares characteristics with other countries, it is distinctive. For example, Turkmenistan is a culturally homogenous country, unlike neighboring Kazakhstan or Afghanistan. Yet, there are non-Muslims living in Turkmenistan who are particularly affected by the restrictive Law on Religion. Foreign Islamists established the best quality schools in the post-Soviet era. At the same time, the state-sponsored education system is nearly void of religiosity. This country is fraught with contradictions that make it fascinating yet challenging to analyze.

Turkmenistan's population is largely Sunni Muslim and the state accommodates a local form of Islam. Therefore, this study has focused primarily on Islamic practices. In contrast to what has often been assumed about the Turkmen, they are not lax or "bad" Muslims, but rather live in a complex environment. There is an ongoing tension between their Muslimness and their secular state. There are groups in society that would like to see more religiosity, while at the same time, the elites and the majority of citizens value the secular system. To that end, the state endeavors to maintain control over public expressions of faith. It limits worship through its system of registration and the involvement of the security services in monitoring believers in mosques. Yet, the state advocates a Turkmen form of Islam that is tightly linked to the national identity and buttresses the nation-building project.

An additional contradiction is that while the government's stated aim is to secure stability, it encourages traditional religious practices, over which it has less control. Tolerance of Sufi practices and shrine worship (*zyýarat*) is high. At the same time there is a fear of extremism and suspicion of foreign influences. The Turkish Gülen community established a presence in Turkmenistan in the 1990s, but more recently the government drove most of it out. Today foreign influences in Turkmenistan are minimal. The Soufan Center estimates that approximately 400 of Turkmenistan's citizens have gone to Iraq or Syria as jihadis.⁹⁴ Yet, the government in Ashgabat does not acknowledge such assessments. It does, however, preach against fervor or "Wahhabism," which it equates with any commitment to faith that might contradict the state's power.

Precautions against extremism and efforts to prevent political dissent hinder all religious practices in Turkmenistan. Although a major role of the 2016 Constitution is to firmly establish a divide between state and religion, the 2016 Law on Religion lends itself to shoring up the state through the promotion of a culturally specific Islam. At the same time that religion is perceived as a threat to the country's secular heritage, it is a force the state promotes.

Human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, are prominent in Turkmenistan's new 2016 Constitution, with an "expanded section on human rights and fundamental freedoms."⁹⁵ However, these freedoms are not fully realized in everyday life. Turkmenistan's delegation to the United Nations asserts that the country's authorities are working to ensure the right to freedom of religion by means of regular communication and interaction

⁹⁴ Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (New York: The Soufan Center, 2017), 13.

⁹⁵ Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Turkmenistan* (New York: United Nations, 2018), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/207/39/PDF/G1820739.pdf?OpenElement>, 2.

with the representatives of religious organizations (including churches).⁹⁶ Yet, minority Christian groups find it difficult to register as religious organizations, while Turkmenistan's Muslims increasingly fear that they will be labeled extremists or Wahhabi if they are "too" religious even though Islam is engrained in local culture. In short, Turkmenistan is a country where Islam remains important both as a form of worship and as a political instrument.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

Author Bio

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