

Shaping an Islamic Identity: Religion, Islamism, and the State in Central Asia

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The vast majority of Central Asians consider Islam to be part of their social identity — as it has been for centuries. Yet seventy years of official Soviet atheism decimated Islamic institutions of learning, leaving both imams and the population largely unfamiliar with traditional Islamic teachings. There is now a struggle within the five formerly Soviet republics of Central Asia between Islamists and governments to reconstruct an Islam and to capture the allegiance of the populace. Central Asia is not now engaged in a clash of its Islamic civilization with a Christian West or an Orthodox North — and far less a Confucian East. Rather, it is struggling to construct its own Islamic identity (or identities) on the foundation of a glorious ancient past, a harsh recent past, and a bleak economic and political future. This paper discusses the different aspects of religion in Central Asia (including Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school, Sufism, Shi'ism, "popular Islam," and Islamism), and describes political efforts to control (or "manage") religion — particularly the "Islamist threat." Such governmental efforts, however, appear to be exacerbating the very Islamist threat that they seek to contain.

The first thing you notice is how much poorer people have become. . . . The other noticeable change is that people have become more religious. People that I knew three years ago, who didn't want to even hear about Islam, now walk around with little prayer books in their hands. (former Tashkent University student in 2003 after having been out of the country for three years (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2003:21).

Before I was afraid to say anything to you, but now on the contrary I want to let everybody know what is really going on in Uzbekistan. I would rather live under Islamists than under these 'democrats.' I used to be afraid of the words Hizb-ut-Tahrir or IMU,¹ but now when the police beat me and humiliate me, 'I think I'm ready to kill them all myself.' (Unemployed man in Tashkent in 2003 (ICG 2003:21-22)).

Islam first arrived in Central Asia in the mid-seventh century, shortly after the death of Mohammed. By the early eighth century it was the dominant religion, at least for the elites, through most of the region (Christian 1998, Foltz

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¹ Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

1999, Haghayeghi 1996, Soucek 2000). By the ninth century, Bukhara, in present-day Uzbekistan, had become one of Islam's leading centers of learning and culture.² Though the influence of Islam in Central Asia has waxed and waned over the past 1200 years, it has left a deep and indelible impression on its peoples and culture.³ Prior to the rise of the Soviet Union, the madrasas (religious schools) and mosques of Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, and other cities, towns, and villages were the dominant forces shaping the culture and social identity of the people.

During 70 years of Soviet rule, the Islamic mosques and madrasas that had previously thrived in Central Asia were closed, destroyed, or converted into museums or factories (Ro'i 2000; Haghayeghi 1996:1-70; Bennigsen and Wimbush 1986). By 1989, only one madrasa, in Bukhara, was in operation anywhere in the Soviet Union. Imams were persecuted and many were executed. Islamic literature was carefully controlled by the state, and only a pale, state-controlled "official" Islam was permitted to exist legally, though an underground (or "parallel") Islam continued. When independence came to the five formerly Soviet Republics of Central Asia in 1991, most Muslims possessed only a rudimentary knowledge of Islamic teachings. "[M]ost Kazakhs had little knowledge of Islam at independence" (Olcott 2002:211). An early post-Soviet traveler in the region described the people of Bukhara, the former center of Islamic learning of Central Asia, as having forgotten religion (Thubron 1994:75-76). According to a Kyrgyz scholar, the clergy are generally uneducated and only a few have a command of Arabic or understand the *hadith* (Tabyshalieva 2000:30). In Turkmenistan, teachers and imams had been "hobbled" by Soviet control, and at the arrival of independence, knowledge of Islam was somewhere between weak and non-existent (Safronov 2000:84-85). "[T]he vast majority of Central Asians, especially those below the age of sixty, often lack any acquaintance with even the most basic tenets of Muslim belief and practice" (Shaharani 1995:279). According to Ahmed Rashid, when "independence finally came, in 1991, the Central Asians, ideologically speaking, were still back in the 1920s. The crisis in Central Asia today is directly related to this stunted political and ideological growth, which the Communists ensured by their actions in 1923 and afterwards" (Rashid 2002:35).

² In Bukhara, Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari compiled the first great version of the *hadith* (the text of importance second only to that of the Holy *Qur'an*), and his tomb outside Samarkand remains a pilgrimage site for Muslims from around the world. One of the world's leading philosophers and scientists of the eleventh century, Avicenna (ibn Sina), also worked in Bukhara. Bahauddin Naqshband, the fourteenth century founder of the Naqshbandiyya, one of the most influential Sufi orders, taught in Bukhara, which at its peak housed one of the world's most extensive libraries of Arabic, Persian, and Greek manuscripts.

³ The most serious blow to Islam was delivered by Genghis Khan's warriors in the thirteenth century. But the Islam of Central Asia ultimately swallowed the invading armies and they too became Muslims.

ISLAM AS IDENTITY

Although the Soviet Union was largely successful in destroying Islamic learning and the knowledge of Islamic teachings, it did not eliminate the majority of the population's self-perception as having an Islamic identity. According to Martha Brill Olcott, "the consciousness of having an Islamic heritage was one of the elements which for the Central Asians continued to define their identities — even if a particular individual knew almost nothing about religion and observed none of its tenets" (Olcott 1995b:21). Being a "Muslim" is widely understood as constituting an integral part of the identity of the majority of Central Asia's population. "Virtually all indigenous Central Asians consider themselves Muslim, although a large number of Central Asians have only a vague idea about what that implies. Most Central Asians simply observe that being Muslim distinguishes them from [Christians] and that to be a Muslim means to live in their traditional style and to practice rituals related to their beliefs" (Gleason 1997:42). In Tajikistan, "Islam remains the core element of people's cultural, civilizational, and ethnic self-identification" (Olimova 2000:63). "Despite the Bolsheviks' success in eradicating illiteracy and their methodical efforts to stamp out religion, Islam remained one of the chief indicators of the Turkmen's social self-identification" (Safronov 2000:79). Islam has been found to define "every facet" of the believer's life (Haghayeghi 1996:39). Their Muslim names and their traditional Islamic practices "are an integral part of Kazakh identity" (Olcott 2002:209). The Muslims of the region think of Islam as being a part of their social identity in a way similar to how they conceive of their ethnicity, family, and mother tongue. But what Islam itself *means* is nevertheless susceptible to education, interpretation, and propaganda. Thus, this deeply rooted Islamic identity is like a vessel whose content remains to be filled.⁴

In his widely discussed article, "The Clash of Civilizations?," Professor Samuel Huntington divides the world "among seven or eight major civilizations" (Huntington 1993:25). He places Central Asia within the "Islamic civilization" and foresees rising tensions between the Muslims of the region and the Orthodox Russians to the north (Huntington 1993:33). Thus far, however, Huntington's observations with respect to Central Asia have not proved to be prescient. Indeed, they were already incorrect at the time he wrote. Between 1989, as the Soviet Union began its collapse, and 1993, when he wrote his famous article, tensions in Central Asia were not principally between Russians and

⁴ In some ways the situation in Central Asia resembles Albania, as described by a spokesman for the Islamic Relief Agency, who suggested that the population of that land was "ignorant of their faith, aware that they were Muslims but not knowing what this actually meant. The country's Muslims, he said, were like a dry sponge, ready to soak up anything given to them" (ICG 2001b:4).

Muslims, but among Muslims.⁵ In contrast with Professor Huntington's perspective, Professor David Laitin has suggested, with regard to the now-independent Republics of the former Soviet Union, that there is an ongoing process of "identities in formation" that will be "constructed from the available repertoire . . ." (Laitin 1998:17). Although the focus of Laitin's empirical research is on language,⁶ the dynamic factors involved in identity formation appear to be far more useful for understanding Central Asia's conflicts than are the relatively stagnant and confrontational lines between civilizations proposed by Huntington. While Laitin does not probe the issue of how different interpretations of religion might compete to fill a void, he does propose a dynamic model where identities will be formed and where actors will make choices based upon the range of available options. "This face of culture reveals identities as constructed and reconstructed as social opportunities change" (Laitin 1998:20).

Probably the most dramatic issue facing Islam in Central Asia is whether its population will be swayed by the Islamist movements that have become increasingly salient in the region since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.⁷ Because of the geo-strategic importance of the region (with its huge oil and natural gas reserves), and because of the active Islamist efforts to propagandize a population not deeply versed in Islamic teachings, the Pakistani observer Ahmed Rashid has been prompted to assert that Central Asia is "almost certain to become the new global battleground" (Rashid 2002:4). The governments of Central Asia agree that Islamist propaganda and actions pose a serious threat to their regimes, and have undertaken their own to shape a new "official" Islam that is amenable to governmental pressure and to suppress Islamism.

After providing a short background on Central Asia, this paper will identify several of the forces and factors that are at issue in the process of shaping Islam, including the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, Sufism, Shi'ism, and some of the principal Islamist movements. The paper will then discuss the principal state

⁵ The salient examples include the bloody fighting between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Osh, Kyrgyzstan; the civil war in Tajikistan; the fighting between the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and security forces in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; and the widespread arrests of alleged Islamists by the governments of the region.

⁶ The Russian language was the official language of the Soviet Union, including the four countries that are the focus of Laitin's research: Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. Each of the four countries has now adopted officially the local or "titular" language (Estonian, Latvian, Ukrainian, and Kazakh respectively). Laitin examines how those whose native language was Russian have adapted to the changed language environment, and makes predictions based upon a number of factors. Laitin's study is rich and probative, both empirically and theoretically.

⁷ "Islamism" and "Islamist," which are not altogether satisfactory terms, will be used here to identify individuals and groups that use the language, history, and symbols of Islam to further their goal of establishing a theocratic state (or caliphate) governed by the Islamic law of *Shariah*. Islamists vary among themselves on the best tactics for achieving the theocratic government.

mechanisms for "managing" religion and eliminating Islamism, and conclude by questioning whether the governments' methods are more likely to exacerbate than eliminate the dangers they see.

THE LAND, THE PEOPLE, AND THE RELIGIONS OF CENTRAL ASIA

The combined area of the five Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan is approximately equivalent to that of continental Europe west of Russia. The vast, landlocked region is surrounded by the states of Russia, China, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Caucasus. Its principal geographical features are the enormous Tien Shan and Pamir mountain ranges (whose altitudes dwarf the Rocky Mountains and Swiss Alps) on its east and southeast, the vast Kyzyl-Kum and Kara-Kum deserts that stretch between the eastern mountains and the Aral and Caspian seas on the west, the Russian steppes on the North, and the Hindu Kush of Afghanistan and Elburz mountains of Iran on the south. Although mostly desert, it is watered by two historic rivers — the Amu Darya (the fabled Oxus River of classical times) and the Syr Darya — which descend from the Tien Shan and Pamir mountains and which have played a role in Central Asia akin to that of the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia.

The current international boundaries among the five Central Asian States were originally drawn as internal U.S.S.R. administrative boundaries during the 1920s and 1930s, but they conform neither to obvious geographical nor to ethnic divisions (Soucek 2000:222-24). For example, the most fertile area of Central Asia — both for agriculture and religion — is the densely populated Ferghana Valley. The valley is divided in a crazy-quilt fashion among Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan. Citizens of Kyrgyzstan who live in the Ferghana are mostly Uzbek, but are now separated from members of their families and clans by a patrolled international border that is enforced by armed guards and is laced with landmines.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Central Asia's population was between 55 and 60 million people.⁸ Uzbekistan (25,563,441) is the most populous, followed by Kazakhstan (16,741,519). The remaining three countries have populations between four and a half and seven million people (Kyrgyz Republic 4,822,166, Tajikistan 6,719,567, Turkmenistan 4,688,963). More than most areas of the world, Central Asia has been settled and overrun by wave after wave of armies, nomads, missionaries, and merchants, including the pre-Islamic Sogdians, the Kōk Turks, Arabs, Persians, Karakhanids, Uzbeks, Mongols,

⁸ The following estimates from July 2002 are offered to provide a general idea of numbers and percentages. They are taken from the CIA World Factbook:2002. Comparative figures for 1994-95 can be found at Soucek:2000:331-37.

Chinese, Tatars, Russians, and others (Haghighi 1996:165-206). These waves of overlapping civilizations have left populations that are far more interrelated than might be imagined, even by inhabitants of the lands, resulting in an engaging weave of ethnicities, languages, and cultures.

Approximately 80 percent of the Central Asian population is of mixed Turkic ethnicity, including Uzbeks, Kazakhs/Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Karakalpaks, and Uighurs (from China). The remainder of the population is mostly Slavic (arriving in the wake of the Russian conquests of the nineteenth century), and Tajik (of Persian ancestry). There are numerous other small population enclaves, including, for example, small pockets of Jews in Bukhara, Tashkent, and Almaty, and Koreans (who were forcibly deported from Sakhalin Island by Stalin in the 1930s). After a hundred years of domination by Russia and the Soviet Union, the lingua franca of the present-day elite is Russian, though the majority of the populations speak varieties of Turkic languages (principally Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen) and Farsi. While the names of the five countries generally reflect the largest ethnic group of the respective states, these ethnic names are somewhat arbitrary (especially the differentiation between Kazakhs and Kyrgyz) and clans within ethnic groups remain important characteristics of the populations.

Central Asians typically correlate their ethnic identities with their religious identities. Thus it is commonly assumed that Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks are Muslims, and that Russians are Orthodox. Assuming for a moment these commonly perceived ethnic and religious equivalences, the Muslim population of four of the five countries is between 75 and 88 percent, while in the fifth, Kazakhstan, the population is roughly half Muslim and half Orthodox. Of course, after seventy years of official atheism, ethnicity does not necessarily translate into the holding of any specific religious beliefs or the practice of any religious ritual.

In addition to Islam, which will be discussed more fully in the following section, there is a sizable Russian Orthodox population, particularly in the larger cities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan, the first region of Central Asia to be incorporated into the Russian Empire (and which shares a border with Russia comparable to that of Canada's shared border with the United States), has an Orthodox population that is only slightly less than that of its Muslim population. While Orthodoxy has a definite presence in many of the larger cities, it principally sees its role as ministering to those of its faith. Unlike other Christian groups in Central Asia, the Russian Orthodox Church does not engage in active proselytism. On a much smaller scale, there are many small Christian groups, typically with American affiliations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and a range of Baptist and Pentecostal groups. Central Asian governments, particularly in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (especially at the local level), have frequently been unsympathetic to Christian missionaries and their converts, and often harass and arrest them.

Although the small numbers of these Christian groups have been increasing, their successes are at best mixed both in keeping converts and in staying out of prison.

FORCES AND FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ISLAMIC IDENTITY

There are several different forces and factors that provide the raw material for the future shaping of Islam in Central Asia. Among these are: (i) the traditional and indigenous Islam shaped by Hanafi teachings, Sufi *tariqas*,⁹ and some folk practices; (ii) Shi'ism; (iii) post-1991 foreign influences; and (iv) Islamist movements.

(i) *The traditional and predominant (Sunni-Sufi) Islam of Central Asia*

The prevailing fabric of religion in Central Asia has long consisted of a weave of Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school, several varieties of Sufism, and some popular folk practices. While it might be imagined that these aspects are inconsistent with each other, or even contrary to Islam, they nevertheless are part of the fabric as it is lived and practiced today. It would be a mistake to assume, for example, that Sunni imams and Sufi pirs are antagonistic to each other, or that they consider pilgrimages to sacred grottoes as heretical. For many Central Asians, religious figures who have mastered both Hanafi teachings and Sufi practices may be particularly admired (Roy 2000:144, 148). Four strands of this predominant form of Sunni-Sufism will be described below.

(a) *Hanafi*

The traditional religious orientation of Muslims of Central Asia is most frequently described as being that of Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school (*madhab*) of interpretation (*fiqh*), the oldest of the four schools of interpretation (Soucek 2000:34; Haghayeghi 1996:80; Roy 2000:143; Olimova 2000:59).¹⁰ The Hanafi school is widely influential throughout the Middle East, but it has a particularly strong following in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Indian subcontinent, all of which have been influenced by scholars writing in the Persian language.¹¹ Close Central Asian spiritual ties to the Indian subcontinent, including the region that encompasses modern-day Pakistan, extend back several hundred

⁹ *Tariqa* means either "path" or "brotherhood," depending on the context.

¹⁰ The four principal schools of *fiqh* of Sunni Islam are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali.

¹¹ It should be underscored that the Persian (or Farsi) writings that have been influential in Central Asia have not been Shi'ite, but Sunni Hanafi. Shi'ism did not become predominant in Persia until the sixteenth century, long after the basic traditions of Central Asia were established.

years. In the sixteenth century, the great political and military leader from the Ferghana Valley, Babur, led a small band of soldiers into India and established what came to be known as the Mughal Empire. The Mughals (Persian for "Mongol") ruled most of India until the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century and left a brilliant opus of architecture, literature, and art. In recent times, the principal external focus for learning and exchanges for the Sunnis of Central Asia has been on the Indian subcontinent. "It was not from Mecca, and even less from Mashad or Qum, that the *ulemas* of Central Asia obtained their books, but from Lahore, Bombay and Delhi" (Roy 2000:145). Thus it is not simply Hanafi Islam, but Hanafi Islam deeply influenced by Persian scholarship and the Islam of the Indian subcontinent. The principal Islamic texts that were influential in Central Asia in the twentieth century were written or compiled in Persian in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, meaning that Central Asian *ulema* who speak Farsi have had privileged access to the most influential writings (Roy 2000:146). During Soviet times, there was a severe restriction on importing literature, operating mosques, and teaching — which led to a virtual seventy-year freeze on knowledge of developments in Islam.¹²

While the focus for external exchanges was on the subcontinent, the centers for study within Central Asia were the madrasas of Samarkand and Bukhara (Roy 2000:143). The Hanafi school, as taught and practiced in Central Asia, first, suggests that belief in Islam is more important than adhering to practices; second, is more concerned with practical devotion rather than strict adherence to practice (e.g., it is perfectly acceptable to read the *Qur'an* in languages other than Arabic); third, emphasizes the consent of the community and private opinion over strict adherence to the *sunnah*; fourth, is relatively tolerant in terms of punishments, divorce, almsgiving, and is less discriminatory toward women; and fifth, understands differences of opinion as an aspect of divine mercy rather than as a deviation from an absolute truth (Haghighy 1996:80-81). Thus, the Islam of Central Asia may be characterized as traditional, open to mysticism, and philosophical in nature. In practice, it has been conventionally deferential to political authorities, and has shown little sympathy for radical Islamist movements.

¹² Although there were indigenous Central Asian connections to the nineteenth-century reform movement of Jadidism, the rise of Soviet Communism essentially suppressed the limited knowledge of such movements and prevented meaningful communication with the outside world about reforms in the twentieth century (Roy 2000:146). Writers have different viewpoints on the historical influence of Jadidism in Central Asia, from having almost no impact to having been very important before being suppressed finally by Stalin. Rashid, for example, sees it as a movement that swept through Central Asia (Rashid 2002:30). The most serious study (Khalid 1998) argues that, contrary to other reports, Jadidism in Central Asia was to a large extent indigenous rather than derived from the outside.

(b) *Sufism*

A second important strand of the prevailing Islam in Central Asia is Sufism (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985). "The orthodox Sunni culture of Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent cannot be understood without its Sufi dimension" (Roy 2000:145). Although the music, chanting, and dancing of Sufis is often considered heretical by Muslims outside Central Asia, it has been argued that this musical dimension is what made it particularly appealing to nomadic tribes (Safronov 2000:75). Of the four most influential Sufi *tariqas* practiced in Central Asia, three are indigenous. The most famous Central Asian *tariqa*, which has since spread throughout the world — including to the United States — is the Naqshbandiyya (fourteenth century) (Schimmel 1975:363-67; Haghayeghi 1996:82; Olimova 2000:59). The two other principal Central Asian forms are the Yasawiyya (twelfth century) and the Kubraviyya (early thirteenth century) (Schimmel 1975:254-58). The remaining form, which is not indigenous to Central Asia but which is of importance second only to that of the Naqshbandiyya, is the Qadiriyya, which originated in Baghdad (Ro'i 2000:385-86). The Sufis have had an important influence not only on the practice of Islam, but also on its original propagation. "The Islamization of the Kyrgyz was carried out almost exclusively by the Sufi missionaries . . ." (Haghayeghi 1996:76-77). The tombs of the Central Asian founders of the Sufi *tariqas* are among the most prominent pilgrimage places for the Muslims of Central Asia (Roy 2000:147-49). The tomb of Naqshband is generally considered by Central Asians as one of the most sacred sites outside Mecca and Medina.

The dividing lines among Sufi orders are not well defined. The different practices have, over time, blended in such a way that it is often more instructive to understand the families who lead the movements rather than the strict lineage of the *tariqas*. "By the early twentieth century, the link with the original orders was recognisable only with difficulty in Central Asia, traditional sufism having been superseded rather by 'ishanism', with each *ishan* of repute becoming the founder of a separate order" (Ro'i 2000:386). Typically they "preached asceticism and abstinence, which, together with contemplation, were designed to bring man closer to God. In many respects their beliefs and practices were essentially animistic rather than Islamic in origin, tracing back to the rituals of ancient local cults" (Ro'i 2000:386-87). These pre-Islamic origins of Sufi practices are but one example of the incorporation of popular practices into the faith.

(c) "Popular" Islam

Another strand of Islam in Central Asia may be referred to as "popular Islam." It is perceived generally as *not* inconsistent with the Islam taught in the madrasas or practiced by Sufis. This popular Islam is observed most readily in the

pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) that people take to shrines (*mazars*). The most popular pilgrimages are to the tombs of revered Sufi masters that "developed into famous shrines and objects of veneration and pilgrimage of the Muslim faithful spanning the entire spectrum of society, from rulers and those powerful and wealthy to the common folk, all bound by similar human craving for a more immediate and recognizable intercessor" (Soucek 2000:38). Visiting tombs and shrines was a practice that apparently extended back to pre-Islamic times (Soucek 2000:38; Safronov 2000:74). Many consider it prestigious to be buried near a venerated figure (Soucek 2000:246).

Perhaps the most popular pilgrimage destination, Solomon's Mountain in the city of Osh, Kyrgyzstan, contains several *mazars* such as caves, springs, and trees that are believed to help cure illnesses or infertility. Some trees are bedecked with written invocations for cures and requests for material blessings. This popular Islam is not doctrinal and is handed down by families and traditions. "There was no canonization process, but Muslim saints were admitted — or believed by the masses — to perform *karamat*, a concept half-way between miracle and blessing bestowed by God . . ." (Soucek 2000:38). Worship at springs, trees, and grottoes is practiced (Ro'i 2000:363-64).

The cult of ancestors and veneration of holy places in Kyrgyzstan are important spiritual matters. . . . Around bushes and trees, on rocks and near caves, one may see sticks stuck into the ground with colorful pieces of cloth tied to them; these have been left by pilgrims as reminders of their prayers. . . . The most popular [*mazars*] are hot and medicinal springs. Pilgrims often travel great distances to obtain a blessing, fulfill a vow, cure a sick child or seek a remedy for infertility. (Tabyshalieva 2000:27)

Much of this popular Islam has its roots in pre-Islamic practices, which left an enduring legacy not only on religious beliefs but also on the social structure;

The Turkmen society remains to this day based largely on neighbor and commune relations; clan and tribal solidarity; influence of the *yashuli* (elders); worship of holy sites, and belief in magic, superstitions, and rituals reminiscent of witchcraft. (Safronov 2000:74)

Some practices can be linked to Shamanism (Tabyshalieva 2000:33; Ro'i 2000:364). Local customs and traditions related to funerals and wedding ceremonies have been grafted into popular Islam.

(d) "Settled" versus "nomadic" variations

An important aspect of the prevailing Islam in Central Asia, though it is not doctrinal, is the variations in religiosity that have been linked to the nomadic versus settled patterns of the different ethnic groups. The first major groups to have been Islamicized after the Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries were the Uzbeks and Tajiks. Many of the more nomadic peoples, particularly the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Turkmens, did not convert to Islam until

as late as the eighteenth century (Roy 2000:143-44). There is a relatively higher correlation of religiosity with Uzbek ethnicity than there is for religiosity with Kazakh ethnicity. In fact, it is typical for the chief Muftis of Central Asian countries to be Uzbeks, even outside Uzbekistan. "The influence of the Uzbek-Tajik *ulemas* over Central Asia as a whole can still be seen today: the three muftis of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are either Uzbeks or come from sedentary areas that are very Uzbekised" (Roy 2000:144).¹³

(ii) *Islamist movements*

The most salient current issue pertaining to Islam in Central Asia is the role of radical Islamist groups and the reactions of governments to them. Although there are several Islamist groups that have been active in the region, the three most influential and the three that best illustrate the scope of the issue are: first, the Islamic Renaissance Party (sometimes translated as the Islamic Rebirth Party), second, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and third, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir.¹⁴

(a) *Islamic Renaissance Party*

The Islamic Renaissance Party was originally established in June 1990, in the last few months of the Soviet Union, as a pan-U.S.S.R. Islamic movement (Roy 2000:154-56; Rashid 2002:95-114). It denounced "official" Islam, called for social justice, and for the opening of Islamic schools.¹⁵ With the breakup of the Soviet Union, its adherents dropped their pan-national unifying ideology and split into separate parties in the different countries, one of which ultimately formed itself into Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). The Tajikistan IRP, which once received material and logistical support from the Taliban of Afghanistan, was a party in the bloody Tajik civil wars of the 1990s. With the peace agreement of 1997, the IRP was recognized as a political party, though it has been able to elicit only very low popular support in elections (Olimova 2000:68). The IRP presents Central Asia with one model for responding to Islamism: incorporation of the Islamists into the political process, which may

¹³ Since the time Roy made this observation, the Uzbek Mufti of Kyrgyzstan has been replaced by another ethnic Uzbek.

¹⁴ Some of the less prominent groups have been known as Tabligh (Mission); Uzun Sokol (Long Beard); Adolat Uyushmasi (Justice Society); Islam Lashkarlari (Warriors of Islam); Tovba (Repentance); and Nur (Ray of Light). "Such groups are small by comparison with the much wider social base for the members of which Islamism is increasingly an ideology but not yet a battle cry" (ICG 2001a:18).

¹⁵ For the meaning of "official Islam," see below.

lead to their de-radicalization or political collapse — which may be exactly what is happening in Tajikistan.

(b) *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)*

Although the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was only one of several groups established in Uzbekistan in the 1990s to promote Islamist doctrines, by 2000 it had become the most prominent in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan — if not all of Central Asia (Rashid 2002:137-55). It explicitly called for the establishment of an Islamic state and the overthrow of Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov. The IMU was created in the late 1990s by a charismatic young leader in his early thirties who used the *nom de guerre* of Juma Namangani. Namangani acquired the reputation of a brave and skilled fighter alongside the IRP in the Tajik civil war. Between 1999 and 2001, the IMU conducted a number of sensational raids and kidnappings in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and it has been widely accused of responsibility for bombings of government buildings in Tashkent in 1999 (ICG 2001a:5-6). Between 1997 and November 2001, the IMU was based in Afghanistan and used that location to traffic in drugs in order to finance its operations. It became a magnet drawing hundreds of militants to its camps from throughout Central Asia. It is now widely assumed that Namangani was killed in northern Afghanistan during U.S. bombing raids in November 2001, and that the IMU has been severely disrupted. Whether it has been destroyed or whether it will rise again is not now known. Even if the IMU itself has been eliminated, it nevertheless provides a model for a strand of radical Islamism in Central Asia that is willing to employ violence to kidnap and kill civilians and security service personnel in order to advance its cause. While pockets of IMU cells continue, it will take some time before it is known whether it will be able to reconstitute itself as a serious force.

(c) *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Freedom Party) is one of the most difficult Islamist groups to characterize (Rashid 2002:115-36; ICG 2002:6-12). It was founded in Saudi Arabia and Jordan in 1953 for the express purpose of recreating a pan-Islamic caliphate operating according to the *Shariah*, which it proposes to accomplish without the use of violence. "The group's main tenets [are] the just distribution of resources, profits, and property, just governance, the elimination of corruption and the common 'brotherhood' of the entire Muslim world . . ." (ICG 2002:10). Although it criticizes severely the corruption of the governments of Central Asia, as well as the purportedly anti-Islamic actions of western governments, it offers no programs on how it would accomplish its goals of promoting economic development and religious education if it were actually to

acquire the power it seeks.¹⁶ Thus, its “aims are probably the most esoteric and anachronistic of all the radical Islamic movements in the world today” (Rashid 2002:115). Hizb-ut-Tahrir has attempted, with some limited success, to contrast its own incorruptibility with the corruption of governments (ICG 2002:10). It advances its cause by distributing provocative literature that, although not explicitly calling for violence, nevertheless portrays the countries of the region as corrupt and calls for their overthrow. While not proposing physical violence, its rhetoric is nevertheless extremely violent, particularly in its attacks on the West and Jews.

(iii) *Shi'ism*

There are several Shi'ite communities in Central Asia, the largest of which consists of three to four hundred thousand Ismailis (or “Seveners”) who live in the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan. The Seveners are followers of the Aga Khan and, like the Ahmadis and Bahá'ís, are often seen as heretical by other Muslims. Elsewhere, the Twelver Shi'ites of Central Asia are considered to be ethnically Persian and now include a few thousand people living principally in some major cities of modern-day Uzbekistan (Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent), though other Twelvers live in Turkmenistan (Roy 2000:143). As a general rule, the Shi'ism of modern Iran has had little practical influence on Central Asia outside of its own limited population (Roy 2000:160).

(iv) *Attempted foreign influence*

Immediately after independence in 1991, some majority-Muslims states — most notably Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey — financed projects in Central Asia in order to influence the form that Islam would take in the region. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia made perhaps the first attempts to promote its own *Wahhabism* by building mosques throughout the region, subsidizing pilgrims on the *Hajj*, distributing copies of the *Qu'ran* and other literature, and subsidizing education (Olcott 1995a:33; Safronov 2000:86).¹⁷ Although the amount of contributions has not been disclosed, it has been said that “Saudi money began

¹⁶ Corruption is indeed endemic in the Central Asian States. Indeed, it has been observed that they are governed now less by ideology than by corruption (Soucek 2000:254-61).

¹⁷ The formerly atheist leaders of Central Asia, who have a great fear of Islamism, use the term “Wahhabist” as a pejorative term to describe indiscriminately radical and Islamist movements. For example, the Uzbek “government uses *Wahhabi* to undermine all Muslim believers by associating them with the Wahhabis’ record of extremism. Such mislabeling, whilst demonstrating the lack of real knowledge about Islam amongst the ruling elites, enables them to suppress all Islamic activity merely by naming it Wahhabi” (Rashid 2002:46). For some incomprehensible reason, the governments often accepted Saudi mosques, schools, and religious literature at the same time as they were verbally assaulting Wahhabism.

to flow from 1989 onwards . . ." (Roy 2000:153). Turkey, although officially and formally a secular state, also subsidized religious education as a part of its effort to expand its own influence among the predominantly Turkic populations of Central Asia. Turkey has constructed schools, many of which provide religious instruction (Roy 2000:160). Iran engaged in a few smaller acts to promote Shi'ism, particularly in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, but abandoned the efforts when they proved unfruitful (Roy 2000:124, 160; Sagdeev 2000b:20; Rashid 2002:102; Jalili 1999:1-7).

STATE REGULATION AND CONTROL OF RELIGION

Of the five current presidents of Central Asian countries, four were high Communist Party officials under the Soviet regime and they initially opposed the breakup of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ All have now abandoned their former atheism and have embraced Islam personally and on behalf of their countries. The "current generation of political leaders in Central Asia has not been shy about their Muslim identity. Whether it reflects their genuine beliefs or not, many leaders have been politically savvy enough to understand the value of displaying their spiritual side" (Sagdeev 2000b:11). A symbol of this transformation can be found in the example of President Karimov of Uzbekistan, the former First Secretary of the atheist Communist Party, who took his presidential oath in 1992 on the *Qur'an* and then went on a pilgrimage to Mecca (Soucek 2000:311). The five countries have become members of the Organization of Islamic Conference.

The states vary in how they regulate religious activities. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are, for example, more restrictive of religious activities (both of Islamic and of other religions) than the others. Kyrgyzstan is generally regarded as the most liberal, though it appears to be moving in the direction of its neighbors. Tajikistan is the only state that permits an Islamist party to participate in politics, though this "accommodation" was achieved only after a bloody civil war. Although these varying approaches differentiate the states from each other, the outside observer is perhaps more likely to be impressed by the similarities rather than differences in how they regulate and manage religion.

Each state follows, albeit to varying degrees, a modified Soviet model of state regulation of religion.¹⁹ Indeed, a telling legacy of the recent past has been an

¹⁸ They apparently believed, at least initially, that they would continue to have greater power in their entrenched positions under the old regime than in the uncertain future of independence. For a series of discussions of the early years of transition from the Soviet Union to the new Republics, see Bremmer and Taras 1997. The only one of the five current presidents who was not a Communist Party official, Askar Akaev (now president of the Kyrgyz Republic), was a physicist trained in Leningrad, though he was a member of the Communist Party.

¹⁹ Prior to *perestroika*, Soviet laws on religion were designed to supervise and control religious activity (Roy 2000; Anderson 1994; Ramet 1987; Ramet 1993).

enduring Soviet mentality (Roy 2000:xv). Thus, to government officials, religion is often seen not as the expression of beliefs, values, and practices related to the divine, but as an instrument for social control; it is less a right to be protected by a constitutional order than an activity to be supervised by the state. There are three interrelated aspects of state management of religious activities that continue to follow the Soviet model: (i) laws and institutions designed to control religion; (ii) promotion of an "official" Islam; and (iii) suppression of dissidents, particularly Islamists.

(i) *Constitutions, laws, and State Committees on Religious Affairs*

As was the case with the Soviet Union, each of the states has adopted a Constitution that provides expressly for the protection of human rights (Kazakhstan 1995; Kyrgyzstan 1996; Tajikistan 1994; Turkmenistan 1992; and Uzbekistan 1992). With regard to religion and belief in the Constitutions, all guarantee the fundamental rights for freedom of religion and conscience,²⁰ and all declare themselves to be secular states or states that separate religion and state.²¹ The Constitutions explicitly: prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion;²² prohibit incitement of hostility on the basis of religion;²³ protect non-belief;²⁴ and prohibit political parties formed on the basis of religion.²⁵ In addition, most of the states have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the European Convention for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Though these rights and standards are expressed in Constitutions and International Covenants, none of the states has a truly independent judiciary or a free political system, which means that the terms of the Constitutions are freely used and interpreted as political rhetoric by government officials and the political opposition alike.²⁶ While it is definitely easier to practice religion now

²⁰ KG article 16; KZ article 22; TJ article 26; TM article 11; UZ article 18.

²¹ KG article 8; KZ article 1; TJ articles 1, 8, 100; TM article 11; UZ article 61.

²² KG article 15; KZ article 14; TM article 17; UZ article 18.

²³ KZ articles 5, 20; TJ article 8; TM article 28; UZ article 13.

²⁴ TJ article 26; TM article 11; UZ article 31.

²⁵ KG article 8; TM article 28; UZ article 57. Tajikistan is the only state to allow religious parties to be represented in parliament.

²⁶ A rare, but important exception to this general rule was an April 2002 advisory ruling by the Constitutional Court of Kazakhstan, which held that some recent parliamentary amendments to the Kazakh religion law were unconstitutional. The President of Kazakhstan did not sign the amendments into law.

than during Soviet times, the ability to do so derives more from the forbearance of the executive power than as a matter of right, guaranteed by an independent judiciary or a vibrant legislative branch.

During the years of *perestroika*, and immediately following, the legislatures of Central Asia (as elsewhere in the Soviet sphere), enacted progressive statutes on freedom of religion and belief that generally followed and often exceeded international standards (Trojanovsky 1991). The statutes guaranteed the freedom of religion and belief against government intervention, and it became relatively easy for religious organizations to register with the state and thereby obtain "legal personality." Legal personality permitted religious organizations to own, rent, and sell real estate; to open bank accounts; to enter into contracts for goods and services; and sometimes to obtain benefits from the state such as tax-exempt status. As the decade of the 1990s progressed, however, most of the Republics of the former Soviet Union, including those in Central Asia, began to return to the Soviet-era form of regulation of religion.²⁷

Since 1991, the *perestroika*-era laws have been repealed, amended, or altered by executive decree. The states now exercise legal controls over religion through laws (including statutes, provisions of codes, regulations, and decrees) and through state offices with responsibilities for enforcing the laws. The legal regimes follow a similar format. There is a general law on religion, with a title such as "Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations." The basic law is supplemented by other laws in the civil code and criminal codes, and there are decrees and regulations issued by the President or executive officials that interpret (and sometimes ignore) the statutory law. These laws typically establish procedures for registering religious groups and for state supervision over them. Each state also has a Committee on Religious Affairs created by the religion laws, whose progenitors were similarly named Soviet-era committees. Some states, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, require all religious groups to register with the state, and the failure to do so subjects religious groups to the penalties of the criminal law, which is particularly unfair when the state refuses their repeated requests for registration. Other states do not require religious organizations to register, but restrict their range of activity if they do not. Turkmenistan has the most draconian laws. In that country, religion is effectively under the complete control of the state, including the appointment and payment of the clergy. All religions except state-approved Islam and Russian Orthodoxy are in effect prohibited (Sagdeev 2000b:11). Throughout the region,

²⁷ The three Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are exceptions to this general rule followed by the other twelve former Republics of the Soviet Union, though they too have followed an uneven path. Most of the formerly communist states of Central and Eastern Europe have had experiences more closely approximating those of the three Baltic States.

albeit in varying degrees, the registration laws are applied in inconsistent ways and often are used to harass unpopular groups.²⁸

(ii) *Promotion of an "official" Islam (in opposition to "parallel Islam")*

As mentioned above, the Soviet Union sponsored an "official" Islam by controlling the ever-dwindling number of schools and madrasas, and it manipulated the appointment of imams and muftis. Although official atheism has been repudiated, and state-control has lessened, governments continue to play a significant role in Islamic activities. They are all now promoting, in somewhat different ways, a new "official" Islam that is politically supportive of the interests of the state.

The most significant change has been state financial support for the construction and repair of mosques and madrasas. Many sixteenth-century madrasas of Bukhara have been restored and reopened, while new mosques and madrasas have been built throughout the region. For example, the Naqshbandi mosque and tomb outside Bukhara, which had been closed to the public and converted into a silk factory during Soviet times, has been restored and is now a venerated pilgrimage site. In addition to the mosques and madrasas, some states have established Islamic institutes (such as President Karimov's "Islamic University" in Uzbekistan), subsidized the *Hajj*, promoted religious education in state schools, and distributed Islamic literature, including the *Qur'an*.

Sunni Islam, as traditionally practiced in Russia and Central Asia, did not have a formal hierarchical structure above the level of the mosque. However, beginning during the reign of Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century, the Russian State (and later the Soviet Union) influenced the direction of Islamic affairs through the establishment of muftiates (or "muftiyyas" or "Spiritual Boards of Muslims") to supervise Islamic activities.²⁹ These muftiates became the "primary link" between the state and Muslims — and both sides ultimately developed a continuing interest in perpetuating the relationship (Ro'i 2000:120). Central Asian State officials, generally outside of public view, have continued the longstanding practice of manipulating the appointment of the muftiates. The exact role of the state in appointing and controlling the official muftis and the governing boards has not been transparent, and Muslims have had, and continue to have, ambivalent attitudes towards this "official" Islam.³⁰ With the end of Communism, each state created its own muftiate.

²⁸ Updated reports on religious freedom abuses are published each fall in the U.S. State Department's *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*, available at www.state.gov.

²⁹ During Soviet times, muftiyyas with different geographical responsibilities were established in Ufa (Bashkortostan), Tbilisi, Tashkent, Baku, and Buinaksk (Ro'i 2000:100-07). With the collapse of Communism, the Soviet muftiate in Tashkent lost its central authority, and separate muftiates were established in each state.

³⁰ During the worst of Soviet times, when there was only one madrasa in the entire Soviet Union, the

The five current muftiates of Central Asia typically are responsible for coordinating the activities of official Islam at the mosque level as well as supervising religious education at the madrasas. The nature of the relationship between the state and the muftiates is not governed by written law. Officially, there is often a denial of any political control or influence by the state over the muftiate.³¹ It is nevertheless quite clear that Central Asian governments typically treat the muftis as offices that are subject to state control. Roy describes these systems in uncompromising language: "The new national clergies in the Muslim Republics are controlled by the state" (Roy 2000:158). The muftiate and approved clergy will sometimes be given messages that should be incorporated into Friday sermons, including the unsubtle message of which candidates to support in elections. The degree of state interference into the operations of Islam varies. For practical purposes, "the Uzbek government has succeeded in reestablishing control over the official Islamic clergy" (Polat 2000:50). Muftis who no longer are acceptable to the state can be ousted, as occurred in Kyrgyzstan in August 2002, and as has also occurred in Uzbekistan.

In reaction to "official" Islam, there has been a long tradition of some mosques and imams operating separately from the state-approved muftiates. Although it is most commonly termed "parallel Islam," it is called by other names as well.³² Depending on the degree of state authoritarianism and the degree of cooperation of local authorities, parallel Islam sometimes has operated quite openly and, at other times, has been completely clandestine. In some Central Asian States, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, parallel Islam is illegal and imams of unregistered mosques can be arrested and imprisoned for violating the criminal law. But these are the more extreme countries. In the other states, the divisions between official and parallel Islam should not be exaggerated. Usually, the "state does not try to control these small mosques" (Roy 2000:159). In many places, the official and parallel imams will be in close communication with each other and they will often have personal or family ties. It is possible for clergy to move from being official, to parallel, to official again. The population is certainly aware of official Islam and is suspicious of it (Rashid 2002:55). The more that governments attempt to control official Islam, the less credible it will seem to the population. Depending on regional interests and

graduates of the madrasas were often considered to be "red mullahs" whose true loyalty was to the Communist state and not the religion of Islam (Polat 2000:42).

³¹ This author spoke with a chief Mufti of a Central Asian State who denied that the state had any influence over the muftiate. A few months later, after he was ousted by a vote of the Board of Ulema, he alleged that his removal had been a political decision orchestrated by the state Commission on Religious Affairs.

³² Other terms are "unofficial", "underground", "informal", and "non-establishment" Islam.

needs, the imams are fully capable of organizing themselves along regional lines rather than along official-versus-parallel lines (Roy 2000:159).

(iii) *Suppression of suspected dissidents*

The States of Central Asia are, furthermore, returning to Soviet attitudes by adopting increasingly authoritarian measures to control or suppress religious activity. As stated above, the recent trend has been to amend laws and to issue decrees and regulations that place religious organizations under greater political control. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have clamped down severely on Islamic groups that are not registered with the state. "The government [of Uzbekistan] distinguished sharply between those who belonged to mosques and schools subordinate to the semi-official religious administration established during Soviet times, and virtually all others. The latter were treated as enemies of the state regardless of how moderate or apolitical their beliefs and activities might be" (ICG 2001a:4). The number of religious-related prisoners is not known, but it is commonly assumed to be more than 2,000. Non-traditional religions, particularly Christian evangelical religions, are harassed and their leaders have been incarcerated on what appear to be contrived allegations.³³

CONCLUSION: CLASHING OR CONSTRUCTING?

The recent struggles within Central Asia have not consisted of conflicts between civilizations, but conflicts within a civilization that is redefining itself. The most salient conflict has been between Islamists and the states that are attempting to suppress them. Although the governments and the muftiates of Central Asia apparently consider the Islamists to be a dangerous and an imminent threat, these assessments are not shared by most outside observers.³⁴ To the contrary, most informed outside observers seem to believe that although Islamists are very serious and are making concerted efforts to gain public sympathy, they have thus far failed to elicit any widespread popular support among an essentially tolerant population. These analysts nevertheless believe that the most powerful recruiting tool of the Islamists is the actions of the governments themselves.³⁵

³³ Small Christian groups have frequently been subjected to harassment by both governments and local Muslim groups. Although these acts of intolerance are serious, and reveal a failure to provide full legal protections to the groups, they are numerically small compared to the struggles between Islamists and governments.

³⁴ Outside observers who are particularly alarmed about the significance of Islamist influence in Central Asia are Rashid 2002 and Lubin and Rubin 1999.

³⁵ On this point, Rashid, Lubin, and Rubin agree with most other outside analysts.

The outside analysts point to a number of factors in their analysis. Perhaps most importantly, the governments of the region are corrupt, both financially and politically. The population is naturally sympathetic to the Islamists' criticisms of governmental corruption. Although government clampdowns on Islamist movements may in fact be motivated by a genuine concern about the danger that these groups pose, the governments (while ignoring or denying their own responsibilities) overstate the Islamist threat and use it as a pretext to suppress a wide range of domestic dissidents and human rights activists. The use of sweeping arrests and imprisonments is having the counterproductive result of alienating and radicalizing the population.

In addition, the governments are failing to address the mounting economic and social needs of the population. While much of the population continues to be politically passive, its worsening economic conditions are causing it to become progressively more disenchanted and suspicious of the governments. All of these factors combine to make the population more sympathetic to the Islamists (ICG 2001a:23).³⁶ It is common to believe that Uzbekistan presents the most troubling case in this regard. In that country, the conditions favoring a growth in Islamism are greatest because of the relative religiosity of the population and the relative repressiveness of the government (ICG 2001a:18). The epigraphs at the beginning of this paper, albeit anecdotal, suggest exactly how minds can be changed.

While outside experts tend to agree on the basic points of this analysis, they disagree on such matters as the relative significance of different elements, the extent to which Islamism has already penetrated popular consciousness, and the imminence of the danger that Islamism poses to Central Asia's stability. The International Crisis Group, for example, argues that there is, as of now, a "lack of interest in political Islam on the part of the population" (ICG 2001a:1) and that there is no widespread support for Hizb-ut-Tahrir (ICG 2002:9).³⁷ Ahmed Rashid, however, sees Islamism as being relatively more influential and a more immediate threat to stability (Rashid 2002). The disagreements among outside observers on the danger to Central Asia from Islamist movements are due, however, not to different beliefs about the ultimate seriousness of the situation, but to their varying assessments of the current strength of Islamist movements, the resiliency of the Islamic populations of Central Asia, the counterproductive

³⁶ Portions of this viewpoint are apparently shared by Sheikh Muhammad Sodyk Muhammad Yusuf, the former chief Mufti of Uzbekistan, who was ousted by President Karimov. In August 2002, Sheikh Yusuf "expressed his concerns over the state's heavy-handed pressure on Islam, which he claims is leaving the population — 90 percent of which is Sunni Muslim — with no access to religious materials or opportunities to study their traditional religion. He warned that this lack of freedom and information could drive more people into the arms of the very outlawed Islamic groups that the authorities are seeking to wipe out." (Bukharbaeva 2002).

³⁷ People will be ready to support radicalism once it is believed to be effective, but that time has not yet arrived (ICG 2001a:17).

and reactionary security measures taken by the governments of Central Asia, and the willingness of the governments to end corruption and stimulate economic growth.

If Rashid's fear that Central Asia will be the next global battleground is well-founded, and if that battle will be fought over the type of Islam that will dominate Central Asia, it is critical that there be a much better understanding of the discussions, attitudes, and trends not only among the imams of the parallel and official mosques, but also among the population in the back alleys of Namangan, Ferghana, Osh, Uzgen, Nukus, Kulob, and Bukhara. Only after having acquired a sophisticated understanding of these dynamics in Central Asia, and having an intimate knowledge of the clans, families, and imams, can observers possibly hope to understand these issues. Although being Muslim is an important part of Central Asians' identities, the notion of what Muslims should believe or how they should act remains open. Whether the vessel of Islam will be filled by the Islamists, or whether it will continue in its "tolerant" mode (Rashid 2002:21), remains to be seen.

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