

**Islamist Challenge Authoritarian Response: Politics and Policies towards Islamism in  
Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the Post-Soviet Era**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the two Central Asian states of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have faced varying challenges with Islamism, the political manifestation of Islam. Likewise, both countries have enacted very different responses to this challenge to their secular, authoritarian rule. Kazakhstan has only faced a modest Islamist challenge, yet in response has engaged in widespread limitation of religious freedom. Uzbekistan has faced several robust Islamist challenges, so has engaged in a brutal campaign to crush Islamist opposition, including the use of torture. This paper traces the development of government policies towards Islamism, finding that while motivations for anti-Islamist policies are similar, the level of threat varies, leading to very different state responses. Using theories of religious freedom in transitional societies, this paper will further show how the two countries' governments negotiate the role of Islam, with both states using state Muslim Boards to build a dichotomy between proper national Islam and Islamism. Such definitions allow the governments an easy opportunity to target those outside the state definitions of legal Islamic practice, building a state threat that can be exploited to ensure the control of the authoritarian leaders. That both states use such rigid, state sanctioned definitions of Islam demonstrates how both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan view Islamism as a threat to state security and image, even as they exploit this threat for their own profit.

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Since gaining their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have negotiated the role of Islam in their societies. While the Soviet Union severely proscribed religious practice, after independence Islam became a potent force in these two countries. Both countries are majority Muslim, albeit with strictly secular governments. Nursultan Nazarbayev, president of Kazakhstan, and his Uzbekistani contemporary Islam Karimov are open to Islam, but they limit expression of the faith to state controlled Muslim Boards. The state's main concern is Islamism, politically motivated Islamic activity, seeing it as a threat to regime security and image. Ostensibly, restrictions on Islam are in place to protect against Islamist extremism, yet anti-Islamist policies do less to counter terrorism than to oppress individual Muslims and prevent Islam from becoming a political force.

In both countries, Islam is organized through state sponsored Hanafi Muslim Boards, which determine the legality of Islamic practice. Islamic activity outside these organizations is proscribed in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and the main target of such banning is Islam interpreted by the state as political. The motivations for both countries to ban and counter independent Islam and Islamism are numerous, as there simply is no advantage for either state to allow Islamic plurality. Though both combat Islamism, they do so very differently, with Uzbekistan taking a far more violent approach than Kazakhstan. The origins of this divide lie in the fact that Uzbekistan faced a direct Islamist challenge early in his regime, where Nazarbayev did not. Karimov has thus made control of Islam a key part of Karimov's regime, through a brutal, internationally condemned campaign against Islamism. Nazarbayev has never faced a sustained Islamist opposition, so he has not gone to the same lengths in combatting Islamists as Karimov. He has in fact called his country a haven of religious pluralism and tolerance in Eurasia.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of policy, however, Nazarbayev regards Islamism as a threat, and in the

past decade Kazakhstan has built an atmosphere of quiet repression of unsanctioned Muslims.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of the persecution of Islamism, both states also severely limit the practice of other religions, so religious plurality as a whole is considered detrimental to both states' governments.

A comparative study between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is important because as Islamism remains a salient opposition force throughout the Muslim world, Central Asia is often left unexamined in terms of its Islamic development. Of the five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the best for a comparative study of policies on Islam in Central Asia. Comparing the two strongest countries in Central Asia will show how these states have used their greater resources to manage Islam and Islamism. Both states are also remarkably stable; they are the only two in all the post-Soviet countries to have the same president since independence. This fact makes studying the two countries much easier, as there is no change in policy from changing regimes, simply the same regime reacting to internal or external events. They are also states with considerable international exposure and are linked with China, Russia, and the United States in the global war against Islamist terrorism. Finally, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan present a unique contrast, as their more than two decades of independence have taken distinct, but parallel routes in controlling Islamism. While all Central Asian countries present interesting contrasts in security policies and religious freedom, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the best for the purposes of this paper. Kyrgyzstan represents an interesting case study in policies towards Islamism, yet its fractious ethnic issues eclipse the importance of Islamism. Tajikistan is likewise difficult to engage in direct comparative study, as it alone among Central Asian countries has endured a civil war, which complicates comparative research. The arcane personality cults that have dominated Turkmenistan prevent solid research on Islam and Islamism in that country, making serious study difficult. Policies against Islamism will continue

in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as recent events in the Middle East and the threat of a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan demonstrate that Islamism remains a challenge.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have built similar, but divergent policies towards Islamism in their countries, based on the varying perceived challenges it represents towards either government. This paper will show both states treat Islamism as a security issue affecting regime image and power, even as they apply a broad definition to Islamism. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan single out Islamists or heterodox Muslims because it represents the most cohesive religious opposition to the state and they define how the two states interpret the role of Islam in their country. It will trace the events related to Islamism in both countries since independence and show the perceived challenges each country felt. The paper will compare policies on Islamism in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and explain the different factors in the establishment of these policies, paying particular attention to why Uzbekistan has become more violent in controlling religion, while Kazakhstan has so far not. Lastly, it will show that both states limit religious freedom as general policy, not simply as a means to control terrorism.

My comparison of the policies on Islamism in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will proceed as follows: I will discuss relevant theories on religious freedom and political Islam and after a literature review incorporating the relevant authors and major works that have influenced my research. Following this section, I will briefly detail the history of Islam in the Soviet period, leading to a discussion of the advent of Islamism and developments of political Islam in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan following independence in 1991. I then examine events in Uzbekistan leading to the Andijan Massacre in 2005 and subsequent anti-extremism laws in Kazakhstan, and the events up to the current date. Following this discussion of the events and policies towards Islamism in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, I analyze and compare the two

countries, using the theories I have described earlier. This section will also analyze the motivations and rationale for Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani leaders in their activities against Islamism. I will conclude with a discussion on the future of Islamism in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and predict how the government will evolve their responses to the continuing presence of Islamists.

### **Theoretical Background**

In order to understand the relationship of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with Islamism, it is first necessary to understand how the two countries' regimes developed their attitudes toward religion during and after the Soviet period and understand the nature of Islamism itself. Religious politics in transitional societies are generally very different from those of stable societies, especially when the transition is from a political structure hostile to religion. John Anderson, in his book *Religious Liberty in Transitional Societies*, explores the issues of religious freedom and transitional politics through four key questions which I will use as theoretical background to guide my own arguments in exploring Islamism in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. For my approach to Islamism, I will examine a broad set of research, incorporating a variety of scholars who have sought to define Islamism, even while recognizing the difficulties of doing so.

John Anderson compared the circumstances in which the Russian and Kyrgyzstani parliaments drafted laws on religion and society. Governments of both countries wanted to incorporate religion into their new countries after imposed Soviet secularism, but they still debated how strong religious institutions should be and what religions to allow in society.<sup>3</sup> "In both of these countries, the discussion of new regulatory frameworks for religious institutions revolved around the issues of stability, vulnerability, unfair competition, a desire for order, and questions of national identity."<sup>4</sup> To Anderson, this question of religious freedom raises essential

questions of transitions.<sup>5</sup> The issue of religion is inherently complicated and for transitional states religious liberty is not always advantageous to regime security.<sup>6</sup> Troubling to weak, transitional states, religion can develop into an alternate power source separate from governmental authority. Further, the presence of new religions can upset popular sentiment, which is already fragile due to the very nature of transition.<sup>7</sup> He points to the mixed reception of liberal democracy in Russia as a major factor in his research, as instead of welcoming a pluralistic religious landscape many Russians rejected this foundation of democracy.<sup>8</sup> Anderson further argues that for transitional societies, questions of stability are of greater importance than questions of pluralism as they need to quickly create a basis for power.<sup>9</sup>

According to Anderson's theory, transitional states advocate for the advancement and protection of 'traditional' religions in order to achieve a measure of stability and popular support.<sup>10</sup> In his Kyrgyzstani and Russian examples, he points out that both states sought to harness the power of Islam and Orthodox Christianity, and thus privileged these religions in their legal frameworks.<sup>11</sup> This privilege, however, often came at the expense of other religions.<sup>12</sup> To understand these interactions between the state and religion, he provides us with several questions as to how the state manages religion.

1. To what extent has the traditionally dominant religious community (or communities) sought or been granted some form of formal legal or constitutional 'privilege' or 'recognition'?
2. To what extent has this entailed or been accompanied by, the placing of legal or administrative restrictions on the rights of other religious communities?
3. Which actors or individuals have been arguing for 'privilege' or 'recognition' and/or discrimination, and what arguments have they used to justify their claims?

4. What factors or explanatory models might help to explain the differences?<sup>13</sup>

These questions will guide my analysis, as the privileging of Hanafi Muslim Boards in Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani policies shows the way the two countries control religion through the promotion of certain religious traditions. I will use Anderson's questions to analyze why one form of Islam, the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam is privileged and how this privilege is used to control Muslims. Hanafi Islam is portrayed as the national form of Islam, which corresponds with the state's image. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have selected this mainstream form of Islam that is closely connected to the state and proscribed Islamic practices outside this form. Anderson also grounds my own observations that religion is not just an issue of state security against terrorism or extremism for Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but rather an issue of regime security and regime definitions of the state.

In order to analyze the state definitions of Islamism, which is variably equated with terrorism, I use several sources to define the nature of Islamism from an academic point of view. The first major issue is to define Islamism. This has been a contentious issue for decades, and this paper will not argue for or against existing definitions of this political phenomenon. Rather, I will use Frederic Volpi's definition of Islamism, found in his compendium *Political Islam: A Critical Reader*, as a guiding definition to aid in my scholarly understanding of what actually constitutes Islamism. The definition is as follows:

Islamism refers to the political dynamics generated by the activities of those people who believe that Islam as a body of faith has something crucial to say about how society should be organized, and who seek to implement this idea as a matter of priority.<sup>14</sup>

This definition accounts for both the people and their ideas, and accurately demonstrates that Islamism is as much a social formation as it is a political order. Political Islam can be more generally defined as a “construct that refers to what individuals in a particular socio-historical context think about the political and religious.”<sup>15</sup> The variables using this definition is to what extent “the people who believe that Islam as a body of faith has *something* crucial to say” in regard to Islam above other sociopolitical constructs, and how far are they willing to go in implementing this. For example, a moderate Islamist might believe Islam has *something* crucial to say, but is willing to allow for other social or political viewpoints to speak as well, whereas an extreme Islamist might believe that Islam has *everything* to say about how society should be organized, with no or limited allowance for other ideologies. A radical Islamist would then be someone who would actively seek to destroy or to remove competing ideologies, and implements these ideas in a violent manner. In the context of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, all manifestations of Islamism are illegal, and furthermore the accusation of Islamism is roundly used against those who simply practice Islam outside the state approved Muslim Boards.

While the above is an effective working definition, all definitions for something as debated as Islamism faces difficulties. Peter Mandaville, in his book *Global Political Islam*, admits the impossibility of a *single* theory to account for political Islam.<sup>16</sup> Both Mandaville and Voldi define Political Islam and Islamism in the same terms, though for this paper only the former will be used as it implies a broader definition. In addition to these two oft discussed terms, Mandaville also describes ‘Muslim politics,’ which does not involve the combination of Islam and politics.<sup>17</sup> Rather, Mandaville uses this term to describe the political trends among Muslims themselves; this is an important distinction, as the Muslim populations of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are Islamic in faith, but not necessarily Islamist in their political orientation.

It is important to be cautious in discussing Islamism in the context of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, especially considering the propaganda and rhetoric of the two countries' governments. Both countries describe Islamic groups and practice outside their defined norms as being radical, often using the term *Wahhabilyar*, a Turkic rendering of Wahhabist. This term is used to link Islamist foes to the extreme Islamist movement of Saudi Arabia, but has no practical connection to the ideology. Terms such as *Wahhabilyar* and extremist as used by the governments should not necessarily be connected to the actual definitions established earlier in this chapter. Rather, they are politically motivated terms to castigate any form of Islamism or independent Islamic practice. I will discuss motivations for such labelling later in the paper, but it is important here to note the differences with the actual academic definitions of political Islam and Islamism in all their forms and the terms used by the governments.

### **Literature Review**

In addition to theoretical works, this paper will make substantive use of the current and past academic research into Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and the impact of Islam and Islamism in the post-Soviet period. Uzbekistan is the main focus of academic researchers of Islam and Central Asia. Unfortunately, research into Kazakhstan focuses more on economic and ethnic issues, rather than issues of Islam and Islamism. Research immediately after independence focused on the latter years of the Soviet period, exploring the relation between the fall of the state, the Soviet Afghan war, and Islam.<sup>18</sup> Others traced the beginning of independence, with Martha Brill Olcott discussing the national question in Central Asia along with Islam.<sup>19</sup> Much of the debate on Central Asian Islam centered on how the Central Asian states would align themselves in terms of Islam.<sup>20</sup> The outlook of some researchers into Central Asia was negative, as scholars pointed to the growing impact of Islamic fundamentalism as a result of Soviet

atheism.<sup>21</sup> There was not an identified security threat in many researchers' observations of Central Asia at this point, and concern over Islamism was mostly over whether Central Asian states would come under the umbrella of Islamist states.

The terrorist attacks on New York on 9/11/2001 changed the nature of research into Central Asia as a whole.<sup>22</sup> Central Asia came in sharp focus in the subsequent NATO war in Afghanistan. Literature now became much more intense on the security question in Central Asia and how the battle with terrorism in Central Asia might impact the war in Afghanistan. Western, Russian and Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani scholars wrote extensively on the security implications of the terrorist groups in Central Asia, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, as well as nonviolent Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT).<sup>23</sup> Some Western thinkers regarded positively the anti-Islamist tendencies of the Central Asian states, taking the regime's Islamism as terrorism argument at face value and writing onerous texts as "Checking Islam on the Steppe" detailing Kazakhstan's supposed path of moderation.<sup>24</sup> Marvin Fried and Eric McGlinchey acknowledged the threat of Islamist terrorism in Uzbekistan, but pointed out the danger of the Karimov policy as they argued that the harsh measures of controlling Islamism would create or attract more radicals than they would suppress.<sup>25</sup> They advocated that a policy of engagement with moderate Islamists would prevent terrorist threats from occurring more than repression.

Other scholars critically analyzed the threat of terrorism in both countries, doubting the motivations of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in their extreme policies against Islamism. Mariya Omelicheva in particular highlights the development of Kazakhstan's securitization policies in Kazakhstan, a first for Central Asian scholarship.<sup>26</sup> Monica Whitlock also identified state image as a factor in Anti-Islamist policy, saying that the 1999 bombings in Uzbekistan "also blew apart Uzbekistan's image of rock-hard stability."<sup>27</sup> Adeb Khalid followed a similar path in his 2007

book, where he detailed the story of Central Asian terrorist groups and their limited capabilities compared to state propaganda.<sup>28</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh discussed the US-Uzbekistani relationship in more critical terms, arguing that while both were concerned with Islamist terrorism, Uzbekistan feared it more in terms of regime stability and used the US to bolster its own policies.<sup>29</sup> Such research expands the question of Islamism in Central Asia beyond the war on terror and shows Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as having deeper motivations for their control of religion. This research contradicts earlier assumptions by authors like McGlinchey and Fried that anti-Islamist activity was simply an ineffective response to terrorism. Numerous anthropological researchers brought to light a more diverse view of Islam than had been presented by the governments, and questioned the very appeal of Islamism as a whole.<sup>30</sup>

The difficulties in researching sensitive topics as Islamism and security in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan should also be noted. All sources maintain bias, with Western writers skewed towards Western interests and Russian authors skewed towards Russian interests. Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani authors are further hampered with the restrictions on writing imposed by the governments. Therefore, solid, independent research on Islamism is extremely difficult, as very little official information from either Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan reveals the motivations for anti-Islamist policy. Rather researchers must speculate on motives, even as they trace actions and people in the countries and determine how and who informs policy decisions towards Islam and Islamism. Time clearly determines how researchers examine such issues, and as international and domestic events change, so too will research into Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

### **Pre-Independence Period**

Islam has been the main organized religion in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Islam in general was more entrenched factor in Uzbek culture in the pre-Soviet era than

in Kazakh culture; where the Uzbek cities contained madrasahs and mosques famous throughout the Islamic world, Kazakh tribes were far more syncretic in their approach to Islam, and pre-Islamic rituals coincided as Muslim practice.<sup>31</sup> It should be noted, however, that even in Uzbek areas pre-Islamic practice remained, and these regions held a vast panoply of Muslim people. Thus, the Soviet Union had to contend with a wide variety of religious practice when it began its nationalization policy in the aftermath of the Russian Civil War. The Soviets began enforcing their atheist policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, moving between a transition period of enacting secular laws to active persecution of all religious beliefs in the Stalinist period. This policy changed during World War II, when Joseph Stalin reversed his position on Islam and religion in general. He authorized the formation of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), which became the sole legal organization for Islamic practice.<sup>32</sup> For the rest of the Soviet period, SADUM maintained a more or less stable position in Central Asia, and though the Soviet authorities restricted and monitored its activities, it followed the party line enough to be considered a part of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Alternates to the official Soviet organization persisted. For the most part, however, even these illegal groups practiced traditional Hanafi Islam, or else continued pre-Islamic practice, such as shrine visitations and saint cults. Indeed, the most esteemed Muslim cleric not associated SADUM, an Uzbek man named Muhammadjon Hindustani, advocated for the cohabitation with the Soviet state, rather than resistance.<sup>33</sup> Though he suffered considerably from Soviet oppression during the Stalinist period, he remained apolitical in his stance towards the Soviets, instead focusing on Islamic practice and teachings.<sup>34</sup> It is highly likely the Soviets knew of his activities, yet given his docility, did not see the need to intervene. The Soviets thus negotiated Islam with some tact, and in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Islamic practice

remained an important factor of life; circumcisions, celebrations of the Islamized Persian holiday Nowruz, and Muslim weddings and funerals continued.<sup>35</sup>

While political Islam was never a potent force at any point in Soviet history, a handful of Muslim thinkers began to study the development of Muslim political parties in the greater Islamic world.<sup>36</sup> The most prominent of these were Uzbek students of Hindustani, who gradually rejected his teachings of cohabitation with the Soviet Union in favor of an activist approach.<sup>37</sup> Hindustani met these initial flirtations with Islamism with grave concern, and urged his own followers away from a political approach to Islam.<sup>38</sup> His own influence was enough to counter the growth of any Islamist movement during the Soviet period, and there is no evidence the Soviets ever felt particularly threatened by the growth of Islamist thought. Nevertheless, these early Islamist thinkers in the Uzbek Republic maintained their own circles, especially in the Fergana Valley region, and began teaching their political tracts and ideas in private to other Uzbek Muslims.<sup>39</sup> SADUM administered Muslim activities in the Kazakh Soviet Republic much as it did in Uzbekistan, but unlike that region, there was no noted independent Kazakh clergy of any particular note during the Soviet period; although the estimated number of independent imams is quite large, there was no Kazakhstani equivalent of Hindustani.<sup>40</sup> The major issue of Islam in the Soviet era was not religious divisions, but the domination of Uzbeks in the clergy.

### **Origins of the Divide**

After independence, Nazarbayev and Karimov met increasingly assertive Muslim activists. In Uzbekistan in particular, the Islamist students of Hindustani, who had died before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, began to petition for a greater Islamic presence in the new country. Nazarbayev faced only a mild Islamist challenge, and the Muslim clerics in the country supported the president. Islamist calls varied between the establishment of Islam as the official

religion in Kazakhstan, to the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Uzbekistan. This early challenge forced Karimov to alternate between compromise and crackdowns. His response was naturally more muted than his Uzbekistani contemporary. This divide in challenges would determine the divergent policies of the two states towards Islamism.

Islam in Uzbekistan was divided between three factions; SADUM, which represented the official Hanafi clergy, the independent Islamist movements, and the populist Muslims, which held to folk Islam and pre-Islamic traditions and rituals. Only the former two forms of Islam became prominent in the political landscape of Uzbekistan, as the folk Islam of Uzbekistan is not coalesced into any individual organization. Karimov, who became head of Uzbekistan's Communist party in 1989 amid ethnic riots and internal squabbles in SADUM itself, found the Islamic organization an ally in the beginning of his administration.<sup>41</sup> The same year Karimov came to power in the Communist Party, a cleric named Muhammad Sodik Muhammad Yusuf became head of SADUM.<sup>42</sup> Sodik was a dedicated member of SADUM, receiving for his loyalty to the organization a substantial Islamic education, including study at Islamic Universities in the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> To Karimov, SADUM under Sodik offered a strong basis for Muslims of all political and religious persuasions, as Sodik attempted to reconcile traditional Hanafi Islam with the Islamist movement, blaming foreign influence for the growing rifts.<sup>44</sup>

In comparison to SADUM, the Islamists lacked a single leader or countrywide body. Some Uzbekistani Muslims joined the international Islamic Revival Party, founded in Astrakhan, Russia, which sought to create a political party unifying Muslims throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup> This organization was not much different in orientation from SADUM in its moderate positions, however, and did not satisfy Islamists.<sup>46</sup> The conservative movement was centered in several Fergana Valley cities, most specifically Andijan and Namangan.<sup>47</sup> The most prominent Islamist

group was the Namangan based *Adolat* (Justice) party.<sup>48</sup> As Soviet authority from Moscow waned, *Adolat* and other Islamist movements asserted their influence. They formed patrols enforcing Islamic protocol, such as closing shops during prayer times, blocking alcohol sales, and censoring Western music and dancing.<sup>49</sup> That such organizations existed shows the tensions between Islam and the state, and Karimov's relative immaturity in handling Islamism compared to his later severity. Indeed, *Adolat* members forcibly challenged efforts by Communist officials to suppress their activities, including a siege of the Namangan prosecutor's office that resulted in the prosecutor himself being forced to apologize for his actions against the Islamists.<sup>50</sup>

The instability throughout the Soviet Union allowed much of the actions of *Adolat* and other Islamist groups in the Fergana Valley to continue without government challenge.<sup>51</sup> Once Uzbekistan left the Soviet Union in August 1991, however, Karimov decided to engage the Islamists. He first relied on Sodik, who retained his position of Mufti of Uzbekistan. He attempted to draw the Islamists into SADUM by organizing a debate between his own traditional Hanafi faction and the Islamists.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately for Sodik, the debate proved far more heated than he expected, with considerable conflict leading to physical violence preventing any resolution between the two sides.<sup>53</sup> His attempts at reconciliation were further marred by his own power struggle with leaders of the Islamist factions, one of whom attempted to usurp Sodik's position as Mufti.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the debate failed to unify Islam in Uzbekistan and indeed solidified the gap between official Islam and Islamism in the country.

After *Adolat* seized control of the regional committee building in Namangan, Karimov himself visited the Islamists.<sup>55</sup> Islamists demands of him were wide, varying from the formation of an Islamic state to disallowing men to work in women's hospitals.<sup>56</sup> Karimov's tone was conciliatory; in his speech to the crowd at the regional committee building, he actually promised

the assembled Islamists respect for Islam, telling them he would be sworn in on the Koran and have Muslim blessings over the election and his presidency.<sup>57</sup> Karimov also responded to calls for an Islamic Republic by implying that such a decision “would depend on what was decided by the country’s elected officials.”<sup>58</sup> Fortunately for Karimov, the meeting quickly degenerated as *Adolat* members and other Islamist groups competed to speak their demands to Karimov.<sup>59</sup> The Uzbekistani president was eventually able to deliver his speech, reiterating his supposed decision to follow parliamentary demands regarding the establishment of an Islamic state.<sup>60</sup>

Karimov afterwards abandoned any semblance of discussion or debate with Islamists. *Adolat* and other Islamist parties were banned and its leadership and members arrested.<sup>61</sup> Sodiq asserted his position, and claimed much of the support that the loss of the *Adolat* leaders created among Islamists in the Fergana Valley.<sup>62</sup> All the while, the Karimov government continued purging the country of political dissent, eliminating secular as well as Islamist opponents.<sup>63</sup> Sodiq was not immune from the political upheavals, and he was forced to resign in 1993.<sup>64</sup> Karimov replaced him with a more pliable figure who directly supported the actions against religious dissidents.<sup>65</sup> Karimov furthermore dismantled the Soviet-era SADUM, confiscating its assets in the process, and replaced it with the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (UMU).<sup>66</sup>

Olcott describes this meeting between Karimov and the Islamists as giving the Uzbekistani president “a new appreciation of the strength of those committed to radical Islamist causes” as opposed to this defining event humbling him and leading to a desire for revenge.<sup>67</sup> This latter explanation is frequently given, yet it is unlikely that the secular Karimov from Samarkand would have ever viewed the rising Islamism in the Fergana Valley as anything but a threat. Rather, as Olcott suggests, he saw the capacity for political mobilization that the Islamists had, and acted to prevent its reemergence. He thus built a formula to control Islamism; where

negotiation and debate failed, arresting and dismantling the Islamist organizations offered immediate success. Karimov used the UMU to control Islamic organizations, curtailing any mobilization under Islamic lines beyond the establishment.

Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan faced none of the dilemmas in regards to Islamism at the start of his administration. In 1990, Kazakh clergy of SADUM formed their own administration, the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims in Kazakhstan (DUMK).<sup>68</sup> The Soviet authorities in both Moscow and Almaty approved its creation.<sup>69</sup> The government in Almaty continued its support of the Board after independence, just as DUMK became increasingly nationalistic.<sup>70</sup> The first mufti of DUMK, Qazi Nisanbaev, began his career in post-Soviet Kazakhstan by centralizing the organization's power and dismissing the majority of the non-Kazakh clergy of DUMK.<sup>71</sup> His power grab and dismissals culminated in a confrontation over his right to lead a prayer for victims of communism, during which protestors from the *Alash* political party, in conjunction with the clerics themselves, stormed Nisanbaev's office.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately for the protestors, Nisanbaev enjoyed the support of Nazarbayev and his government.<sup>73</sup> Nisanbaev himself had been a supporter of the government and his loyalty and his position against the opposition *Alash* party doubtless secured his support from Nazarbayev's administration.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, this conflict over DUMK was a minor issue in Kazakhstan, and Nazarbayev allowed Nisanbaev his restructuring once the mufti's position was secure without further issue.<sup>75</sup>

The *Alash* party that supported the ouster of Nisanbaev was the only party in the wake of independence to call for the integration of Islam and the state. Its Islamist agenda was modest, advocating simply for the recognition of Islam as the state religion of Kazakhstan.<sup>76</sup> It adopted Islam as part of a nationalist agenda, with its official slogan being "Islam, Turkism, Democracy."<sup>77</sup> Islam was simply part of a wider nationalist platform for the *Alash* party, and it

used such idealism in order to present itself as an alternative to Nazarbayev and his Communist legacy.<sup>78</sup> *Alash* did not garner much support in Kazakhstan, and the party consisted mostly of Kazakh youths.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, the uncertain circumstances of Kazakhstan in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union meant *Alash* was a potential destabilizer for the nascent Nazarbayev regime. When it challenged a government supporter, it immediately acted and banned the *Alash* party. This isolated incident prompted no subsequent actions against Islamic groups, and likewise no substantive efforts to limit the growth of independent Islam.

Kazakhstan's saga with Islamism in its opening years was thus much shorter and far less intense than in Uzbekistan. Where the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan met a fairly well-organized Islamist opposition centered in a major population center, Kazakhstan faced a small political party that was clearly using Islamist rhetoric to support a nationalist agenda. While both presidents were leery of Islam becoming a major player in politics, the fact that Karimov had to immediately face an Islamist opposition made him far more determined in controlling the religious landscape of Uzbekistan. Nazarbayev, however, only had to deal with a minor vaguely Islamist party in a host of much more pressing ethnic and political issues. This circumstance led to a seemingly more tolerant atmosphere in Kazakhstan. These divergent policies caused Karimov himself to deride the Kazakhstanis for not combatting Islamists in Kazakhstan.<sup>80</sup> The waning period of the Soviet Union and the transition to independence represents the major divide between the two countries and began parallel approaches to managing Islamism, as Kazakhstan attempted to balance where Uzbekistan sought to control the movement.

### **Suppression in Uzbekistan, Restrained Tolerance in Kazakhstan 1994-2005**

In the aftermath of the post-Soviet period, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had suppressed the immediate manifestations of Islamism. While Islam grew across multiple vectors of Uzbekistani

society, it is only in this country that Islamism split into a terrorist movement and a political opposition, resulting in a ferocious crackdown. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, faced minimal Islamist challenge, and continued to operate under a policy of tolerance, while seeking to undermine Islamism in order to negate any challenge. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York both countries became involved in the greater War on Terror, and both states increased their anti-Islamist rhetoric and actions. The result would be the “securitization of Islam” in Kazakhstan and the Andijan massacre in Uzbekistan.

After the suppression of Islamist activities in the Fergana Valley, Uzbekistani Islamism collapsed. Karimov had shown his willingness to suppress Islamist and secular political opponents, and maintained tight controls over Uzbekistan. He went so far as write his own book, which contained his political manifesto and emphasized the importance of stability.<sup>81</sup> The repressive atmosphere prevented a return to the level of activity of *Adolat*, yet at the same time, such repressive measures seemed to produce a violent local backlash. In 1997, alleged Islamist militants kidnapped and killed local police officers.<sup>82</sup> These two incidents each prompted major crackdowns, with the 1997 attacks resulting in over 1000 people arrested.<sup>83</sup> The main reason for this upswing in militancy was not any change in local Islamist groups, however, but the closing of the Civil War in neighboring Tajikistan.<sup>84</sup>

The Tajikistani Civil War had always been a concern for Uzbekistan; not only was the war geographically close, it also pulled in Uzbekistanis. In particular, several Uzbek Islamists had split from the Islamic Revival Party (IRP) in Tajikistan over their moderation.<sup>85</sup> They in turn formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), led by Tohir Yoldoshev and Juma Namangani, who had been involved in *Adolat* in 1991.<sup>86</sup> They had left Uzbekistan after the 1991 crackdowns and joined the Islamic struggle in Tajikistan.<sup>87</sup> The IRP, however, was more settled

in its political views, and fought mostly to secure their place in the Tajikistani political sphere.<sup>88</sup> The IMU, however, became much more radical in scope, dedicating itself to the overthrow of the Karimov regime and the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan.<sup>89</sup> To this end, it trained a host of fighters and waged a terrorist campaign against Uzbekistan.<sup>90</sup>

Despite an elaborate agenda and support from al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the IMU never managed the elaborate campaign they had initially envisioned. The Uzbekistani authorities accused them of a bombing campaign in Tashkent in 1999, killing sixteen people and injuring over a hundred more.<sup>91</sup> Most importantly, these bombs narrowly missed hitting Karimov himself, rendering further evidence to the Uzbekistani president of the threat of Islamism and its inherent danger.<sup>92</sup> While Karimov was right in calling the IMU a security threat, the only evidence of IMU involvement was a series of confessions clearly acquired under torture.<sup>93</sup> The IMU's involvement is further doubtful, as the IMU took credit for its other terrorist acts. Rather than bombings, however, the IMU kidnapped Japanese scientists in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and attempted several armed incursions onto Uzbekistani territory.<sup>94</sup> These efforts all faltered, and even in the Fergana Valley, they could not inspire an Islamist comeback.

In Kazakhstan, there was no evidence of either Islamist influenced terrorism nor even Islamist groups. The transition period, in fact, was the friendliest in terms of the government's relationship with Islam and Islamic civil society. It was in this period that Nazarbayev, who at first offered only a modicum of respect for Islam, began to issue pronouncement like "We (Kazakhs) are Sunni Muslims and must follow this path," which Shirin Akiner described as "a violation of the principle of conscience that is guaranteed on the Constitution."<sup>95</sup> That the President of Kazakhstan would make such a statement in favor of Islam showed his willingness to ignore constitutional standards to ride populist Muslim sentiment. Even as Nazarbayev sought

to appropriate Islam, however, he knew the dangers of unrestrained Islamism in Kazakhstan as a potential focal point for his political enemies.

Much of the development was government-sponsored. Given that the only Islamic college registered with the government is The Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak, named for and funded by President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, it is clear Nazarbayev took inspiration from other regimes that took a dim view of independent Islam.<sup>96</sup> Nonetheless, for the first decade of his administration, Nazarbayev allowed some Islamist activity; several missionary groups were active during the 1990's until the early 2000's, most of them foreign funded and not opposed to the Nazarbayev regime.<sup>97</sup> Generally, groups that received recognition from DUMK were allowed to operate, whereas Islamic groups that did not were banned.<sup>98</sup>

The divergent presence of Islamism and independent Islam in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan created different legal and policy reactions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the two countries matured in the post-independence transitional period. Both countries offered freedom of speech and religion in their respective constitutions, just as they honored Islam in their speeches.<sup>99</sup> Yet both countries began rolling back on religious freedom, albeit again to different degrees. Uzbekistani policy moved towards greater repression of independent Islamic practice based on their concerns over Islamism, culminating in the widely condemned 1998 law on Religion. Kazakhstani policy did not focus on religious issues, and its effort against Islamism focused mainly on preventing its formation, rather than attacking an existing problem.

Both countries had freedom of religion in their constitutions, just as they honored Islam in their speeches.<sup>100</sup> Even Uzbekistan has a constitutional guarantee of religious freedom that seems to protect religious expression in all forms and ensures separation of religion and state.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, the government controlled and promoted Islam through its sponsorship of the

UMU. In 1998, Uzbekistan passed the law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," which widely restricted religious practice. The law's restrictions are wide in scope, including prohibiting anyone but clergy to wear religious garb.<sup>102</sup> Such restrictions are only occasionally put in force, however, indicating it is simply a legal tool the security forces can use when going after groups targeted for other reasons.<sup>103</sup> Far more onerous is the way the law frames religious freedom as a security question, "subject only to the restrictions necessary to ensure national security, public order, and life, health, morals, rights and freedoms of other citizens."<sup>104</sup> This 1998 "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" law would serve as the legal basis of oppression of Islamism, real or perceived, in Uzbekistan.

Kazakhstan, much like Uzbekistan, officially established freedom of religion in its constitution.<sup>105</sup> As in Uzbekistan, however, the law created some confusion, for even as it defined religious associations as separate from the state, the Kazakhstani government was still responsible for DUMK. The law further placed a burden on registration with the government, even as Muslim groups were required to have permission from DUMK to practice Islam.<sup>106</sup> Nazarbayev himself further "pushed through constitutional amendments that put a ban on any theoretical or practical religious intolerance."<sup>107</sup> The law thus gave ostensible freedom of religion, even if from the very start of Kazakhstani independence the government balanced the actual law with the need to monitor and regulate religious practice.

Like Karimov, the Kazakhstani authorities paid attention to the end of the Tajik Civil War and the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996. This prompted Nazarbayev to pronounce that prevention of religious radicalism in Kazakhstan would be a top priority.<sup>108</sup> Concurrent with the Uzbekistani campaign against the IMU, the Kazakhstani president signed a decree against terrorism and extremism in 2000.<sup>109</sup> It is difficult to determine, however, whether

the events in Uzbekistan prompted Nazarbayev or were part of an ongoing struggle with the growth of religion in the state. While the upswing in violence in Central Asia certainly encouraged the Kazakhstani government to control religion, maintaining the balance between the religious establishment and the growth of religious sentiment was a greater motivation.

Kazakhstani authorities targeted the minor heterodox sects without much violence. Two Sufi groups, for example, Pir Ismatulla and Tariqatshillar were banned from Kazakhstan.<sup>110</sup> Though they were accused of “radical Islamism” the leaders and followers of both groups were not arrested, persecuted, or tortured; they were merely expelled from the country.<sup>111</sup>

It is likely that the banning of these Sufi groups, rather than being politically motivated as the “radical Islamist” accusation would indicate, came about as internal conflicts with DUMK and the Sufi groups. Sufism is every bit as historic in Kazakhstan as Hanafi Islam, but has never had the same government recognition. Kazakhstani authorities have similarly gone after Sufi faith healers, whose populist Islamic practices likely challenged DUMK clerics.<sup>112</sup> It can be construed that government targeting of Sufism is a product of DUMK fear of losing its influence to a rival group rather than actual government fear of Islamist inspired activity emerging from the Sufis. It would thus seem that the Nazarbayev regime was more interested in preserving the status quo for the Islamic establishment than cracking down on political dissent.

Kazakhstani authorities proved far more assertive in combatting alleged “Wahhabists.” Police arrested several “Wahhabi” groups in 1998, consisting of local Kazakhs and foreign nationals.<sup>113</sup> The authorities accused the groups of forming an “illegal social organization” and charged its members with religious extremism.<sup>114</sup> The jail times served were relatively short, indicating that while the Kazakhstani authorities took a dimmer view of “foreign” Islam than Sufism, it was still not considered dangerous enough to warrant a violent response.<sup>115</sup> At the

same time, the very term “Wahhabism” provoked a much stronger reaction than Sufism. This would indicate that while Nazarbayev promoted an image of tolerance, he still maintained Soviet-era fears of foreign inspired Islamist groups. Independent Islamic practice, though always held suspicious, became dangerous if they preached a conservative form of Islam.

In response to this growing trend of religious pluralism, in 2001 the Kazakhstani parliament drafted a law that would curtail the ability for most religious groups outside the mainstream to form and practice, such as placing missionary groups under total surveillance and defining religions as those over 50 people.<sup>116</sup> The government would control registration of religions, as the government had the final authorization to determine whether a group was to be considered religious or not.<sup>117</sup> In an unexpected turn, however, Nazarbayev held the law up for review, and the draft law was not passed.<sup>118</sup> Many internationally based minority religious groups, including Islamic groups but also Protestant groups and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, protested passage of the law.<sup>119</sup> It would appear that this was a victory for religious freedom, but given Nazarbayev’s own ambivalence to minority religious groups and independent Islam, it is highly doubtful he reacted simply due to the pressure of religious groups. Rather, Nazarbayev likely calculated that the law would agitate the growth of independent movements and damage the government’s international image more than the presence of such movements would. Holding the law up for constitutional review simply gave him an easy exit from the law. Where Karimov faced a direct threat that prompted him to ignore international criticism, Nazarbayev faced no such opposition and ruled a much more socially diverse country than his Uzbekistani counterpart; he thus had to take a more nuanced approach to the question of religion and did not need to risk his international image without the threat of Islamist opposition.

In contrast, the Uzbekistani security services showed no restraint in their efforts to combat Islamism. In the wake of the passage of the 1998 Law on Religion and the IMU campaign the Uzbekistani government began an aggressive campaign against Islamism. Security services arrested anyone with the suspicion of belonging to an Islamist group, whether they were actual members, periphery members, or simply the family of the accused; the authorities further broadly defined Islamist groups as those practicing outside the confines of the UMU.<sup>120</sup> Arrested suspects were afforded few rights, kept in poor conditions and subjected to torture so routine, the United Nations Committee against Torture described its use in Uzbekistan as “systematic.”<sup>121</sup> Mahallas, the traditional neighborhoods of Uzbek communities, became controlled by local committees, who were authorized to spy on religious practice and report illegal religious activity.<sup>122</sup> The twin pressures of state authority and mahalla committees effectively created a surveillance society, where any independent Islamic practice was reported and used as a baseline of accusation for all manner of crimes against the state.

With this wide dragnet, many people accused of Islamism and terrorism were guilty of and punished heavily for nothing more than studying Islamic texts in private.<sup>123</sup> By the time terrorist attacks struck Uzbekistan again in 2004, the anti-Islamist campaign was already in full swing; Uzbekistan needed only one terrorist attack to prompt its wide-ranging campaign, and the impetus to control Islam against mass movements remained. It should be noted that apart from the legitimate terrorist threat posed by the IMU, the security services vigorously pursued the nonviolent Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>124</sup> This organization is an Islamist group dedicated to the restoration of the Caliph and the formation of a transnational Islamic state.<sup>125</sup> For the most part, it seeks to extend its Islamic message through propaganda and Islamic teaching. Though it

pursues its agenda through non-violent means, the organization suffers intense scrutiny by Uzbekistani authorities since it first came to the country.<sup>126</sup>

The extremity of the Uzbekistani crackdown on Islamism was the Andijan massacre in 2005. It is difficult to verify the exact events of that event, but it is known that after the arrest of members of a local Islamic group, a group of armed men attacked the prison in which the group was held.<sup>127</sup> The attacks inspired a large protest against the Karimov regime, resulting in Uzbekistani soldiers shooting the protestors.<sup>128</sup> The government never denied its response, but blamed the unrest on terrorists groups and claimed only 187 casualties.<sup>129</sup> Independent sources are much more varied, however, with claims of hundreds killed in the massacre.<sup>130</sup> The response to the protests in Andijan came at a tumultuous time in post-Soviet history, with the so-called ‘color’ revolutions in full swing. While fear of a revolutionary event, as occurred in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, doubtless played some role in Karimov’s thought, the events of Andijan 2005 were not unique, in that they were a culmination of over a decade of anti-Islamist activity.

There was no corresponding violent event in Kazakhstan; yet even so, Nazarbayev tightened laws on religion and began pursuing Islamists more aggressively. While they never faced a dedicated Islamist terrorist group like the IMU, HuT did proselytize in Kazakhstan. Indicative of its growing awareness of Islamism, Kazakhstan began persecuting the movement. While the Kazakhstani authorities did not ban the group at first, they did arrest many members for possession of weapons and “extremist” material.<sup>131</sup> Accusing opposition groups of possessing arms is an old tactic in the post-Soviet region, so it is within the realm of possibility that arms were planted on HuT members. Indeed, all Islamist government opponents faced greater scrutiny from the security services than did the secular opposition in Kazakhstan. The secular opposition, despite making some attempts at coalescing against Nazarbayev through the

1990's, was by the early 2000's coopted or coerced into government control, and the regime could easily cut off sources of support for secular opponents operating in political parties.<sup>132</sup> Secular opponents were in the open, where Islamists like HuT operated in cells and did not attempt to engage with the state. Further, Kazakhstan had seen how Islamists inspired large scale protests in Uzbekistan, and where secular oppositionists had staged similar movements in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan had controlled such opponents. Islamism thus was a special opposition of the regime that required a very specific legal and security framework to control even beyond how it controlled the secular opposition.

When compared to the outright brutality of the Uzbekistani campaign, the Kazakhstani suppression of HuT seems rather tame. Nonetheless, it represented a marked shift in attitudes towards Islamism. With an easily identifiable group in its border, Kazakhstan had to act in a much more aggressive manner in order to maintain its stable atmosphere. It also took cues from Russia, and likely Uzbekistan, in efforts against the group and other Islamists. While it did not pass the restrictive law on religion, the Kazakhstani government did pass a law on extremism in 2005, banning HuT along with terrorist groups.<sup>133</sup> It is indicative of the hardened stance of Kazakhstan that a nonviolent group was lumped in with terrorists. The law began a new phase in Nazarbayev's relations with Islamism, as he began placing the movement more in line with the security question. This is especially relevant with the greater global War on Terror, as Kazakhstan joined in, and hence could receive money from, Russia and the United States.

The passage of the 2005 Law on Extremism in Kazakhstan and the Andijan massacre in Uzbekistan indicate major turning points for both countries. Kazakhstan began to treat Islamism as a security question, and the crackdown in Andijan showed Karimov's willingness to fight Islamist opposition. These two events also show the development in policy between both states.

Nazarbayev now faced the growth of Islamist parties in Kazakhstani borders and passed laws that would target the formation of any group that would attempt to introduce Islamism.

Uzbekistan had gone from having President Karimov negotiate with Islamist protestors to imprisoning anyone associated with Islamism. Their different starting points in relation to Islam meant that Uzbekistan still attacked Islamism far harsher than Kazakhstan, but by 2005, both agreed that Islamism represented a threat to regime security.

### **Securitization and Continuation: 2006-present**

At this point Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan both identified Islamism as a security issue, and Islam in general became embroiled in the security policies of both states. As Kazakhstan developed a more rigorous policy to combat Islamism and persecute alleged Islamists, the Uzbekistanis continued their crackdown in the Fergana Valley. Both countries, in fact, faced pressure from Islamist terrorism, with Kazakhstan finally suffering alleged Islamist terrorist attacks and Uzbekistan still combatting armed militants. Yet the threats posed by these groups proved only minor compared to the growing government pressure on both Islamist groups and Muslims in general. The Arab Spring showed both countries the threat of revolution and the power of Islamism in uniting people against the state, which made the governments fearful of the role of Islam in public spheres. The goal for both countries was thus to contain Islamism and keep Muslims within the influences of state-controlled boards.

Despite widespread international condemnation, the Andijan massacre was a success for the Karimov regime. The Uzbekistani president had shown the lengths to which he would go to fight the opposition. He had furthermore shown to the Fergana Valley his unwillingness to negotiate with any sort of Islamist groups. International sanctions did nothing to stop his continuing suppression of dissent and independent religion, as the massacre was an effective

demonstration of the severity of the anti-Islamist policy of the Uzbekistani government. Uzbekistan continued to arrest and imprison alleged Islamists, now with special emphasis on HuT. By 2008, accused HuT members made up the majority of the prisoners arrested for religious crimes.<sup>134</sup> The authorities continued to focus primarily on the Fergana Valley, especially as Kyrgyzstan became increasingly unstable due to the 2005 and later 2010 revolutions.<sup>135</sup> Clerics who even remotely disagreed with Uzbekistani policy or criticized Karimov faced attacks, and nonviolent clerics were killed along with extremists.<sup>136</sup> Allegedly “terrorist” attacks directed against the Karimov regime were easily controlled by security forces, and provided effective pretext for Uzbekistani assertion of dominance in the Fergana Valley.

Justification for cracking down on Islamism is never a difficult thing, however, and despite the rhetoric of security, the campaign against Islamism is seldom straightforward. The Uzbekistani authorities claimed that the interethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern Kyrgyzstani city of Osh in 2010 would bring thousands of recruits to Islamist terrorist groups, yet the violence of that conflict had nothing to do with Islam.<sup>137</sup> Uzbekistan continues to torture and imprison alleged Islamists in the name of state security, yet also continues to restrict possession of religious garb and materials, with one person fined 150 times the average monthly salary for illegal possession of a prayer rug.<sup>138</sup> The haphazard application of laws on religion is evident, as the Fergana Valley endures a constant crackdown on Islam in the name of fighting Islamism, while western Uzbekistani provinces have numerous independent Muslim clerics, often mystical in origin, who are largely ignored.<sup>139</sup> Thus, folk Islam, while independent of the Muslim Board, does not represent the sort of Islam the government or the UMU fears.

Though Kazakhstan still has not pursued Islamists with the same brutality as the Uzbekistanis, the Kazakhstani security services cast a much wider net than they had before. Just

as in Uzbekistan, the securitization of Islam has prompted increased control of the everyday practice of the religion; mosques face closure if they fail to register with the Muslim Board, and all non-Hanafi literature is banned.<sup>140</sup> The authorities rigorously target HuT as a terrorist group, with alleged members facing arrest on charges of extremism.<sup>141</sup> Missionary groups are suspected of being covers for radical Islamist groups or terrorist movements, hence state authorities regard spreading of Islam outside state controls is a security threat.<sup>142</sup> One group of Islamic missionaries, for example was charged with “inciting ethnic enmity, unlawful possession of weapons, and unlawful preparation of weapons.”<sup>143</sup>

After terrorist attacks in the Western Kazakhstani city of Atyrau in 2011, the first in the country’s history, the Kazakhstani parliament passed the restrictive law on religion that Nazarbayev had previously blocked.<sup>144</sup> The fact that it was an Islamist terrorist group that claimed responsibility added extra weight to the attacks, as the Kazakhstani government passed the restrictive law on religion, despite existing anti-terror and already restrictive anti-extremist laws ostensibly covering such attacks.<sup>145</sup> The law, according to the Kazakhstani Ambassador to the United States Kairat Umarov, rooted out extremist groups, so that at least according to state propaganda, the law succeeds in combatting extremism.<sup>146</sup> And yet, Kazakhstani officials have also linked opposition politician Mukhtar Ablyazov to terrorism with minimal evidence, so it is highly likely that any Muslim opposition will face similar charges.<sup>147</sup>

The 2011 law on religion thus serves as another phase in the greater securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has not yet sunk to the level of Uzbekistan in persecuting independent Islam, yet with the 2011 law, there is a clear development of attitudes; they have formed a legal framework where religion is tightly monitored in the name of security. When the government first tried to pass a restrictive law on religion, Nazarbayev viewed the risk of

upsetting the new religious movements and Muslim groups as greater than the benefit of controlling the religions. In 2011, after the Arab Spring and the terrorist attacks in the country, the risk was worth it, as the attacks shattered the carefully cultivated image of stability Nazarbayev built. The security question proved an excellent pretext to pass a law that would be useful for cracking down on independent movements. Uzbekistan, meanwhile, remains firm in its continuing battle against Islamism, even as the actual threat of Islamists regaining the strength they had decades ago is long gone.

### **Analysis**

Assessing the motivations for both countries in aggressively pursuing Islamism is difficult because the reasons for doing so are many. For average members of the security services, there is certainly a financial motive for aggressively pursuing alleged Islamists; as the administration sets the policy against Islamism, security service members receive substantial reward for minimal effort in rounding up alleged Islamists. Poorly paid police officers can likewise solicit bribes from independent Muslims by threatening to arrest them as members of HuT or another extremist group. Officers, meanwhile, can advance their careers and status with the regimes by arresting large numbers of Islamists. Naturally, both officers and personnel of the security services have the excuse of “following orders” in their violation of the human rights of Islamists, alleged or not. The motivations of the regimes are much harder to decipher, as the Islamist threat in either Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan is not severe.

Despite the long standing Islamist challenge to Uzbekistan and the emergence of Islamist inspired violence in previously peaceful Kazakhstan, the appeal of Islamism is not great in either country. Even in Uzbekistan, where there has been a sustained Islamist terrorist presence in the country, the terrorist movements within Uzbekistan are mostly fractured and limited in

capability; there has not been a serious terrorist attack on Uzbekistani soil since 2004. Yet both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan equate Islamists of any form with terrorism and extremism, and even regular Muslims practicing their faith outside the confines of official Islam are caught in anti-extremist campaigns. The security issue for both countries is thus one of regime security, rather than simply state security against a terrorist threat. The regimes define Islamism as Muslims acting beyond the national Islam the Muslim Boards espouse. The boards act on behalf of the governments as they challenge Islamists and independent Islamic movements. Official Islam therefore is a means of controlling Islamic practice with the intent of reining in Islamism, as it acts on behalf of the government.

Using John Anderson's theory on religious freedom, it is possible to identify the underlying motives for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in promoting their official Hanafi Islam over independent and divergent forms of Islam.

To what extent has the traditionally dominant religious community (or communities) sought or been granted some form of formal legal or constitutional 'privilege' or 'recognition'?

In both countries, the formation of Muslim Boards constitutes the formal legal recognition of Islam; in Kazakhstan the Board is DUMK, in Uzbekistan it is the UMU. This formal recognition has given the Muslim Boards effective control over Islam in their respective countries. The Muslim Boards are the sole legal publishers of Islamic material, have authority over the construction and closure of mosques, and control the appointment and education of clergy. Muslim Boards are also granted the great privilege in organizing *Hajj* pilgrimages, allowing them both the opportunity to solicit bribes and extra payments for potential pilgrims and prohibit undesired candidates.<sup>148</sup> Presidents of the two countries endorse these Muslim Boards, despite

the official separation of religion and state, with Karimov himself endorsing both Islam and the Board in his country.<sup>149</sup> Legal recognition does not afford the Muslim Boards protection from the government, as legal recognition entails legal responsibility to follow government directives. While the governments can give the Muslim Boards considerable freedom in governing Islamic affairs, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have final say over their affairs. Independence is thus limited but as long as the clergy remain loyal, privilege is assured.

To what extent has this entailed or been accompanied by, the placing of legal or administrative restrictions on the rights of other religious communities?

Legal and administrative restrictions on other Islamic communities amount to the effective banning of any organization not registered with the Muslim Boards. While this does mean that some alternate forms of Islam receive permission to practice, especially in Kazakhstan, the requirement to register with the primary Muslim Board effectively gives the official Islamic clergy complete control over which groups are permitted to practice. The level of restrictions varies; in both countries folk Islam is censured far less than those advocating for the increased presence of Islam in society. Islamism is essentially equated with extremism or terrorism. Where the Hanafi Islam of the Muslim Boards is treated as part of national heritage, independent Muslims are regarded as foreign and hence, dangerous. The Muslim Board in turn has become an instrument for controlling Islamism, with the UMU writing detailed tracts against HuT.<sup>150</sup> Government recognition of Hanafi Muslim Boards as the sole proprietors of Islam isolates other Muslim groups, and defines independent Muslims in security terms regardless of any special affinity they might have with Islamism.

Which actors or individuals have been arguing for 'privilege' or 'recognition' and/or discrimination, and what arguments have they used to justify their claims?

The main actors arguing for recognition, apart from the established Hanafi clergy, are the leaders of the government. The clergy of the Muslim Boards benefit considerably from their arrangement with the government, and in turn are threatened by rival Muslim clerics and teachers. They argue that their position is not only natural, as Hanafi Islam is the historic form of Islam in Central Asia, but safer. In the words of the UMU, “The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan is actively working to preserve the religious unity of Uzbekistan’s Muslims, to present the rules of Islam clearly and correctly, and to inform them about the important events taking place around the world.”<sup>151</sup> The UMU thus presents itself as the sole guarantor of proper Islamic practice and teaching of traditional Islam in Uzbekistan, effectively becoming another element of government propaganda against Islamism. The government accepts these arguments, arguing that the Muslim Boards allows Islam to prosper while at the same time protecting the religion from extreme elements that affected neighboring countries.

What factors or explanatory models might help to explain the differences?

The structure and function of the Muslim Boards in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is functionally the same. Despite the different extents to which the countries control Islam, the Muslim Boards represent the central feature of the government response to Independent Muslim practice, as Boards define what Islam is in the country. This leads to the obvious conclusion that religion is not free in either state. The difference between the two countries exists not with regard to how they define Islam and how they regard as Islamists, but how far they go in opposing those outside the Boards. The question then is why the two states pursue those outside the control of the Boards to such different degrees. There are a variety of domestic and international factors at work to explain these differences.

The most obvious difference between the two countries is that a direct Islamic challenge emerged much earlier in Uzbekistan than in Kazakhstan. Where Kazakhstan faced only a marginal Islamist presence in its formative years and suffered terrorist attacks only in 2011, Uzbekistan endured a major Islamist presence and terrorist attacks within the first decade of its existence. That difference accounts for the earlier legal and security responses to Islamism in Uzbekistan than Kazakhstan. Considering that Uzbekistan lacked a particularly sophisticated political and security arsenal, it responded the only way it knew how: with utter brutality. They extend their attacks to nonviolent Islamists and independent Muslims as well as terrorists because the authorities have faced a much greater challenge from the mass Islamic movements in 1991 and 2005 than from terrorist attacks. Kazakhstan has never faced a mass political uprising, so that even if the presence of Islamists and terrorist attacks damage the image of the regime, they do not represent the threat to cause major imbalance in the country's political structures to warrant the brutal campaign in Uzbekistan. Islamism must be managed in Kazakhstani government policy, but torture and other brutal methods are not needed. Thus, a greater Islamist challenge provoked a stronger response, and the lesser challenge a nuanced response.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan is much more connected to the international community than Uzbekistan. It has a greater amount of foreign investment and trade with states in the European Union that might not respond well to the level of religious persecution of Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan must therefore balance the need to control Islamist opposition and the need to pay lip service to religious freedom to avoid international censure; at the same time, Kazakhstani policy against Islamism became more repressive as the Nazarbayev regime became more stable in its energy wealth, just as it had proven able to serve the human security function many Islamists fulfill.<sup>152</sup> Lacking the international investment Kazakhstan has cultivated, Uzbekistan has no

financial motivation to moderate its routine human rights abuses, and Islamist groups rival the security structures that the Karimov regime fulfills.<sup>153</sup> That Uzbekistan does not even respond to boycott of its cotton industry due to human rights violations shows its lack of concern for international censure.<sup>154</sup> Kazakhstan balances its repression of Islamism as a political force while also refraining the abuses that scare away investors. Hence, Kazakhstan has been slower to adopt the same brutal practices of its southern neighbor, even though it continues to develop security policies that restrict religion in more subtle ways.

While Kazakhstan receives more international investment, Uzbekistan is a more forceful participant in the global war on terror. It had advocated larger powers for aid in its own war on Islamism since before the 9/11 attacks on the United States, and has supported the war against the Taliban.<sup>155</sup> When it has not affiliated with the US, as happened after U.S. criticism of the Andijan Massacre, Uzbekistan has drifted closer to the Russia. Uzbekistan offers a vital transport route for American military equipment coming in and out of Afghanistan.<sup>156</sup> Kazakhstan portrays its own Islamist opposition as inherently terrorist, but is more careful in how it presents itself; since Kazakhstani officials expressed dismay when Kazakhstan was placed on an American high terrorism risk list.<sup>157</sup> While it benefits from aid in the war on terror as result of this risk, Kazakhstan does not view the actual security threat as enough to warrant damage to its reputation. There is thus less incentive for Kazakhstan to build the same wide ranging and brutal attacks on Islamists, as they have not billed their country as facing the same terrorist threat as Uzbekistan nor have they felt the same pressure from Islamists.

An important comparison between the two countries is how they treat new religious movements (NRM) like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna, especially compared to how they pursue Islamism. Kazakhstan uses legal means and harsh regulations to prohibit and deter

the activities and organization of NRMs, just as Uzbekistan will employ torture against such groups.<sup>158</sup> Those arrested in both countries are charged with extremism. It would thus seem that the logic for both countries' oppression of religion in the name of security holds. And at the same time, NRMs are clearly even less of a risk to regime security, as Islam motivates people far more than NRMs. The repression of religion is thus an issue of image rather security, like Islamism in its more moderate forms and can be oppressed in the same way.

At the same time, Islamism is unique, for even if it is repressed in much the same manner as new religious movements, the scale of oppression against heterodox Islam in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is much greater. Where campaigns against NRMs are focused simply on their actual practitioners, campaigns against Islamists will target Muslims outside the Muslim Boards based on how far they go against these Boards. Where proper Islam is defined by state-sponsored institutions, new religions exist on their own and can thus be targeted more exclusively. Islamism is also linked to more direct security concerns, especially in the Uzbekistani mindset where it is more of a challenge than NRMs can ever be to the state. For Kazakhstan, NRMs and Islamism are both less of a regime challenge than they are a bane to the state's national image. But where NRMs are simply a threat on a domestic level, Islamism, in state theory, is linked to wider international concerns, so that the Nazarbayev regime does not want to be linked with Islamist inspired terrorism. While Islamism is demonized in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as much as NRM's, Islamism represents a much more direct challenge to the power of the state, and is thus a much more oppressed movement.

The motivating factors for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to engage in their anti-Islamists policies, to the point they infringe on religious freedom, are overdetermined; there are too many reasons for the countries to attack religious freedom for any one motive to stand out over others

as the primary source for such policies. There is simply no advantage for either country to allow an Islamist challenge and religious freedom. The most salient factor for both states is that Islam outside the Muslim Boards is a liability as it has the potential to politicize and become a source of opposition, as has occurred twice in Uzbekistan. The terrorist threat from Islamists is limited, but they have the potential to enlarge the opposition. Further, though dedicated Islamists like HuT might be few, they can act as a source of opposition that might attract other dissident movements, similar to how nationalist movements attracted other oppositionists during the Soviet breakup. Secular opposition certainly exists, but it is a much more easily controlled opponent of the regimes. Islam is best kept under state control, and persecuting Muslims outside state controlled Boards as Islamists and thus terrorists is the best means to assure this control.

The differences in policy between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan towards Islamism vary only in the degree to which they persecute alleged Islamists. Different economic, security, and political concerns in both countries have caused different extremes in policy, yet both countries view Islamism a security threat and treat the spread of Islamism as a matter of security. The degree to which this security threat varies depends largely on the extent of the Islamist challenge, so that regardless of international factors limiting Kazakhstan's moderated response or encouraging Uzbekistan's extreme response, changes in the extent of Islamist challenge can radically alter how far the security policies of either state will go in oppressing Islamism.

### **Future Trends**

The Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani governments have few incentives to change the status quo. While a more open policy towards Islam and Islamism might make it possible for greater dialogue between official and independent Islam, thus giving radical Islamists less motivation for violence, there is no hint in either Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan that such an opening will occur.

Indeed, such an opening might be considered detrimental to the image of the regime. The Arab Spring, the war in Syria, and the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan all show the regimes the dangers of Islamism, rather than the dangers of controlling Islamism. Islamism is a source of opposition for both states, meaning prosecuting Islamism coincides with general policies limiting all forms of political opposition.

The future of religious freedom in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is bleak. Recent reports of Kazakhstanis joining terrorist groups in Syria demonstrate to the Nazarbayev regime that even the limited Islamist presence in Kazakhstan is a genuine security threat.<sup>159</sup> Kazakhs joining terrorist movements severely damages the reputation Nazarbayev has established for Kazakhstan as a moderate Muslim country. On balance, it is far better for Kazakhstan to have a reputation as restricting the rights of Muslims than to be connected with terrorists, especially as Kazakhstan does not practice torture as Uzbekistan does. The death of Nursulatan Nazarbayev might bring about some change in Kazakhstani policy, as his successor might develop human rights in an effort to attract Western governments. It is more likely, however, that a successor will keep the status quo, as any Kazakhstani president will still have the same reasons to control religion as Nazarbayev has done. Using the rhetoric of security, a future Kazakhstani regime might also use the threat of Islamist terrorism to expand control of the state and consolidate power.

Like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan has few prospects for improvement. Karimov's oppression of Islam has been a policy for keeping him in power for over twenty years. Islamism turned from a force that could directly challenge him to a fringe movement. Uzbekistan shows no sign of lessening anti-Islamist policies and persecution of Islamism has turned into an assault on religious freedom. A post-Karimov presidency could change the status quo, as a future president might attempt to control the Islamists directly. Shirin Akiner has discussed such a model, where

Uzbekistan could adopt a Pakistani model of controlling Islam; where Islamist clerics are brought into the fold to coopt Islamism.<sup>160</sup> Such a change seems distant, but if Islamist forces can ever mount a solid opposition, it might be possible for a future Uzbekistani president to simply adopt a more pragmatic form of Islamism. While such a state would never become the Islamist state equivalent to Iran, it would cast off the appeals to secularism of the Karimov regime in favor of using Islam as a means to power. Naturally, a future president might continue Karimov's anti-Islamism policies, and institute a crackdown as a means of consolidating power.

The national establishment in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan does not allow for religious plurality as a matter of policy; Islamism is the chief focus of state control of religion as it represents the greatest political threat. Islamism has proven a lesser threat to human life than government policies on religion in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Despite terrorist attacks, Islamism in these two states has manifested as devout believers handing out pamphlets and holding prayer meetings. Even if Kazakhstan does not practice torture or engage in the routine harassment of Muslims, it still treats Islam as a regime security issue, and religious freedom in the state has severely worsened. Uzbekistan has no issue with breaking the laws of human rights in its efforts to persecute Islamism. Differing security threats and questions of image have created this change in policy between the two countries, but neither state considers religious freedom as a means to create open discourse instead of closeted violence between Islamists and the state. For both countries controlling religion is the policy itself, not simply the method of combatting terrorism. Even as Islam has opened, state Muslim Boards use their power for the sake of the state and their own advantage. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan thus maintain the control over religion that keeps the regimes in power, even as thousands suffer for it.

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