



Religion and State in Central Asia: A Comparative Regional Approach

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Abstract

This article analyzes Islamization process occurred in the five Central Asian countries after their separation from Soviet Union in 1991, and ambivalent way in which authoritarian states reacted to this phenomenon to use it for political purposes and, at the same time, controlling its alleged subversive potential. In this sense, article intends to demonstrate that, with its particular nuances in each case, religion-State relationship after 1991 has been determined by a triple contradiction between, first, the growing Islamic resurgence at societal level and states interest for using part of that religious symbolic capital to legitimize political regimes and prop up new national identities; second, between states' need to differentiate themselves from their former Soviet identity and their continuity attitude regarding power exercise and religion perception; and third, between states authoritarian nature, interested in exercising strict control over religious sphere, and the emergence of religious activism opposed to interventionist and repressive governments policies, including the most radical forms of violent extremism.

Keywords: *Central Asia; State, Religion; Islamization; Relationship*

Introduction

Until the end of last century State-religion relationship explanation in modern societies was dominated by a classical secularization theory, strongly influenced by Weberian sociology of modernity and rationalization (Pierucci, 2000). Secularization was understood as an inevitable result of modernization because this social change could only occur if public influence and religion relevance were sacrificed (Habermas, 2008: 6). In this sense, secularism model presupposed a clear separation between the State and religion, with a consequent functional differentiation of social subsystems, the withdrawal of religion from public sphere, and general decrease of its importance at social level (Casanova, 2011). State endorsed and reinforced its secular character while it would guarantee citizens the right to freedom of belief understood as a private matter.

However, in last three decades secularization paradigm has been exposed to a growing epistemological crisis (Garzón, 2014: 102), since its assumptions were unable to explain various phenomena occurred on a global scale that suppose a repositioning of religious presence in public life, such as missionary expansion, fundamentalist radicalization, and political instrumentalization of the three great universal religions potential for violence (Habermas 2008, 5). The unfulfilled prophecy about religion's debacle and its social importance loss determined the need to rethink traditional secularism foundations (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and Van Antwerpen, 2011; Fox, 2015), and stimulated current toward to progressive post-secularism construction as alternative paradigm to explain complex adaptive and interactive processes related to presence of religious communities in increasingly secularized environments (Berger, 2005; Habermas, 2006; Casanova, 2011; and Ungureanu and Thomassen, 2015).

However, post secularism has not managed to achieve same consensus reached by classical theory for so long, despite having very influential supporters within intellectual and academic world. Some critics even question its value as explanatory theory because consider it focuses on certain specificities Western contemporary reality and fails to explain the broader dynamics of the phenomenon, which from their point of view generates more questions than answers (Camilleri, 2012; Beckford 2012). Nor has it help the broad and polysemic meaning that practical use of concept has had, and that can be utilized, for example, to highlight the role of pluralities within political and social interactions (Obirek ,2019) or for refer specifically to deprivatization and return of religion to public life (Crockett, 2021).

From classical secularism review also came other alternative visions with recognized weight in specialized literature, such as case of interesting proposal of Alfred Stephan (2000; 2011) about multiple secularisms, which defends the existence of several models of secularism within which it can be occur, and in fact occurs , what he calls "twin tolerance", a mutual and balanced space of interaction in which democratic institutions can function without religion's obstruction, while citizens also receive from these institutions sufficient space to exercise their religious freedom without restrictions.

The contributions of this vast academic production are interest for State-religion relationship analysis in Central Asia, but it also presents limitations that hinder their application to a case study that differs in several ways from most recurrent prototypes used in these theoretical conceptualizations. Studies that set tone, both in construction of secularism and post secularism, revolved around historical experience of Western Judeo-Christian world (Taylor, 2007). Analyses of phenomenon in societies where other religions, particularly Islam, constitute dominant creed remain exceptional, due in part to the controversy over whether secularism can actually "travel" and express itself in such societies (Bilgrami, 2016) or it remains determined by the Western path of modernization, in which case political decisions about religion seem to matter little because secularization simply follows its inevitable course (Soltz, 2020: 19).

Another implicit issue in these studies is the close secularism-democracy association, a premise only exceptionally questioned (Casanova, 2011), that generally leads to considering the phenomenon analysis in democratic or, at least, in democratic transition societies. Explanation of problem in authoritarian contexts, such as those existing in Central Asia after 1991, has not received the same attention by secularism scholars. For example, Alfred Stepan (2011) in his proposal of multiple secularisms considered, based on Turkey case, a separatist model of State-religion relationship that he calls "separatist autocracy", "authoritarian secularism" or "fundamentalist secularism", but whose conceptualization was little developed, and its distinctive feature was limited to highlighting the strong state regulation of religious life. Even on that assumption, the model would help to review only one important dimensions of State-religion relationship in Central Asia (strong regulation), but it would not be enough to explain other fundamental aspect referring to the instrumentalization of religion by Central Asian governments as a source of political legitimacy (Von Soest and Grauvogel, 2015; Omelicheva, 2017; Gerschewski, 2018).

This is linked to another phenomenon specificity in Central Asia. Society Islamization and state-building occurred almost simultaneously and interacted within a complex process of constructing new national identities after the independence of 1991 (Akçil, 2003; Kamrava, 2020). The new states were born in a context of great ethnic plurality and without the anchoring of their own national identities. The need to differentiate themselves from previous Soviet identity created conditions in all of them for Islam to become a point of meeting with an old and rich local cultural tradition, totally dissociated from that Soviet past. With different specificities and degrees, the five Central Asian republics evolution was immersed in a triple contradiction: on one hand, between growing Islam revival at societal level and the States action interested in partially instrumentalizing these religious values without renouncing its secular character; on other, between States' need to differentiate themselves from their former Soviet identity and their continuity attitude regarding power exercise and religion perception; and finally, between States authoritarian vocation, which aims to keep under tight control the religious sphere, and growing expressions of religious opposition to governments interventionist and repressive policy, including the most radical forms of violent extremism.

Precisely, the interest in Islamization issue in Central Asia during last two decades has been linked to its alleged relationship with religious extremism and global jihadist networks, although from different perspectives. The mainstream has focused attention on spread of political Islam and violent extremism in Central Asia as a latent threat to regional security and stability (Baran, Star and Cornell, 2006; Idrees, 2016; Mori and Traccetti, 2016; Karim, 2017; Lang 2017). In contrast, others argue Islamization did not necessarily lead to radicalization and consider exaggerated the weight attributed to Islamic extremism, which constitutes a very small force within the spectrum of regional Islam (Achilov, 2012; Hearthershaw and Montgomery, 2014; Cornell, 2018); or even claim that traditionally professed Hanafi Islam in Central Asia --tolerant, liberal and distant from Arab culture--is not political, violent or incompatible with democracy by nature and, therefore, it doesn't in itself represent a breeding ground for radicalism (Priego, 2009).

This article aims to analyze how triple contradiction mentioned above gave State-religion relationship in Central Asian countries an ambivalent character and a multidimensionality that needs to be addressed from three different perspectives: the sociocultural, referring to spontaneous process of societal Islamization; the state-owned, related to construction of an official Islam politically instrumentalized; and from socio-political activism, which refers both expressions intended to defend the right of religious freedom within secular State and those that oppose secularism and aspire to reshape State from an Islamic perspective through different means.

Historical Background

Islam has been predominant religion in the territories of Central Asia, constituting a very relevant factor in its historical and cultural configuration (Lenz-Raymann, 2014:117-119; Yemelianova, 2019). The history of its presence began in late seventh and early eighth centuries with Arab conquest of Transoxiana, nestled between Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, and which today is part of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Although Arab rule in the region failed to consolidate for long due to pressure from other rival forces (Iranian, Turkish and Chinese), the seed of Islam germinated and continued to grow after the end of Arab presence.

Trade provided an avenue for expansion of religious influence (Liu, 2011), due to growing relevance acquired by large bazaar cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, and Kokand, which had an intermediary function in the trade route between Middle East and China and became in turn spreading centers of Islam. The other avenue of growth was adoption of religion by many local rulers (Mori and Taccetti, 2017:7), which helped to promote the new creed among dominant elites and to shape what

Ernest Gellner called "high Islam" (1992:10-11), from which emanated a particular essentially Sunni religious hierarchy, sponsored by the rulers and supporter of Hanafi school, with a more flexible interpretation of religious doctrine, detached from the puritanism of the Arab tradition (Priego, 2009: 236-237) and influenced by the tradition and local cultural heritage.

According to historical evidence the forced conversion of the population was not a recurrent practice of the rulers, however during the following centuries a broad "low Islam" was also gradually configured by its diffusion among popular sectors. This "folkloric" Islam, enriched by local customs and traditions, became a fundamental cultural identity pillar in the region and, thanks to this, even many nomadic peoples entered on Islamic civilization orbit (Khalid, 2014). By the eighteenth-century Islam had become widely and solidly implanted in Central Asian societies.

Central Asia was under the control of the Russian Empire from the second half of the nineteenth century until World War I. Tsarist rule faced frequent expressions of rebellion in the region due to its plundering economic policy and land colonization, but in religious and cultural sphere it generally refrained from interfering with traditional way of life (Hiro, 2013: 25). This situation changed after triumph of Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and the intention of new regime to incorporate Central Asia's territories into a political project of Marxist and atheist ideology, which considered religion as "opium of the peoples" and aspired, consequently, not only to separate the religion from public life but also to disappear it as a social phenomenon.

At first the new Soviet power avoided taking measures that would exacerbate the already strong anti-Russian hostility in the region (Keller, 2001: 31), but the outbreak of civil war in 1918 precipitated a radical turn towards land nationalization, prohibition of madrassas and closure of Islamic courts, policy that led a major blow to traditional order and provoke the outbreak of a vast armed resistance led by landed middle class, tribal chiefs and religious leaders, with broad support from local population. The Basmachi nationalist movement (bandit), so called by Soviet power, adopted an Islamic inspiration that won it great popular support in Fergana Valley, a traditional Islam bastion (Hiro, 2013: 39). Soviet power used military force to crush resistance and also proceeded to reverse its radical measures for a while. From 1920 onwards many of the confiscated properties were returned and Islamic courts and schools were restored (Lenz-Raymann, 2014:130). Basmachi movement was finally defeated and Central Asia's territories were formally integrated into Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), according to new principle of nationalities imposed by Stalin in 1924.

From 1925 Islam was progressively stigmatized and besieged by Stalinist intolerant politics. Islamic schools and courts were again banned, lands were targeted by forced cooperativization policy, and religious leaders became victims of political purges. By the end of 1920s most of the Islamic infrastructure inherited from pre-revolutionary era, consisting of 26,000 mosques and 45,000 mullahs, had already disappeared (Hiro, 2013: 47). In the name of scientific atheism, campaigns for Islam annihilation –also Christianity and Judaism – continued during the following decade and by 1941 there were barely a thousand mosques throughout the Soviet Union (Peyrouse, 2007: 42).

However, German aggression against USSR and the titanic war effort urgency forced Stalinist regime to moderate its religious intolerance as part of nationalist strategy to defend "Motherland" from Nazi danger. Religious activity was again allowed, but under strict state supervision (Yemelianova, 2010: 23). In late 1943 the Soviet government established the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), whose main mission was to establish a rigorous differentiation between "pure and correct" and "traditionalist and retrograde" religious practices (Epkenhans, 2016: 182). Under these terms, Islam was recognized and endowed with a government-controlled structure, obliged to cooperate and show loyalty to Soviet policy. SADUM became the only Muslims official representative body until USSR disintegration in 1991.

Soviet policy displaced Islam from public spaces and promoted secularization of religious consciousness with particular fervor (Khalid, 2014; Thibault, 2015), not only through repression and censorship to freedom belief, but also through construction and promotion a new idea of "national identity" (Soviet), and realization of major projects in education field based on active atheism principles (Naumkin, 2005: 21), values of the "new man" (communist) and woman emancipation, all widely disseminated through the educational system, social organizations, mass media and different artistic manifestations, especially literature and cinematography.

The policy of "atheization" and imposition of "Soviet culture" succeeded in co-opting Islam and forcing it to adopt an "official" version. State authorized the operation of a few hundred mosques and both worship and Islamic education came under the control of SADUM as official Islam representative (Roy, 2000: 181). However, Islam political instrumentalization failed to eradicate the influence of values deeply rooted in regional tradition and which, in various ways, continued to permeate social relations and daily life (Heathershaw and Montgomery, 2014:5). Even spite repression and hostile ideological environment, many spiritual leaders continued to propagate religious ideas among their disciples and maintained their underground schools (*hujra*) for Koranic teaching, especially in isolated Fergana Valley, territory shared by the republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan (Peyrouse, 2007: 41).

Islamic expressions found more propitious space for their growth from the 60s when Soviet policy became more relaxed due to a certain folkloric vision of religion associated with cultural traditions. The effects of that relaxation began to be seen with alarm in early eighties and government's attitude towards Islam intensified again, but its course was soon truncated by perestroika onset (Kehl Bodrogi, 2006: 237). Policy of reforms promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev created conditions for reversal de-Islamization process practiced by regime in the preceding period. The new political openness atmosphere, freedom of religious identities, and awakening of a strong social criticism against Soviet model foundations, contributed to a contained and restricted Islamic tradition, but not destroyed, could regain strength in the heat of process of general crisis that led collapse of system and USSR disintegration. At the end eighties Muslim associations multiplied, the number of mosques grew, religious education was again allowed, Islamic literature from Middle East began to circulate internally and religious points of view found some media spaces of expression (Alonso, 2005: 10). So, by the end of the Soviet era, the process of Islamic revival already seemed like an incipient trend underway.

Religious Resurgence After 1991

Independence of the five republics of Central Asia contributed to transform ongoing religious resurgence into a visible process of society Islamization, since progressive reunion with Islamic identity became a socially viable resource of self-identification due to its close link both with ethnicity (Omelicheva, 2017: 6) and also with prior history to period of forced Sovietization of Central Asia. This led to a sharp increase in Islamic activity after 1991, both at the level of personal and daily religiosity, and the visibility of Islam in public sphere (Heathershaw and Montgomery, 2014: 4).

In a general, resurgence or re-Islamization phenomenon adopted some common features at regional level that allow identifying three essential stages in its behavior and development, regardless of the specificities of each country (Nogoybayeva, 2017: 19-20). The first stage had a content of identity externality, which implied the revaluation and appropriation of Islamic culture by a growing number of people self-defined as Muslims. Increase in religiosity was favored by atheist system disappearance and by pernicious social effects derived from economic difficulties that followed independence (unemployment, poverty, corruption, drug trafficking, prostitution), which accentuated the perception of a deep moral crisis (Heyat, 2004: 275, 280-281), and made it possible for the symbolic arsenal of Islam to gain ground in public and private life. Political narrative incorporated religious expressions, many historical sites related to the Islamic past were rehabilitated, religious festivities were celebrated, new

mosques and educational institutions were opened (Achilov, 2012), also grew the number of people who incorporated the pillars of Islam into their daily lives, especially ritual prayers, and increased the interest of believers for pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina holy places (*Hajj*). The idea of belonging to global Islamic community also started to make its way bath into collective imagination and realm of formal politics.

The sustained rise of Muslim identity did not call into question secularity of state, but in little more than two decades it helped to define much more clearly population religious affiliation. Currently the number of Muslims in the region is 60.6 million people, equivalent to 85% of total population of the five Central Asian countries (CIA World Factbook, 2022). Four of them are even above that average: Tajikistan (98), Turkmenistan (93), Kyrgyzstan (90), and Uzbekistan (88). Only in Kazakhstan Muslim population (70%) is still somewhat distant from rest of its neighbors, but if we consider that number in 2001 barely reached 47% (Baltar, 2003: 101), the increase in last 20 years has been very significant.

Vast majority of Central Asian Muslims are Sunnis of Hanafi tradition, the most tolerant school towards local pre-Islamic traditions and most permissive in terms of independent reasoning of Islamic jurists (*ijtihad*), consensus (*ijma*) and deductive analogy (*qiyas*) as resources for interpreting issues not explicitly referred into Qur'an and Sunnah (Cornell, 2018: 69). Independence years also brought a relative expansion of Sufism, a mystical and heterodox form of Islam with historical roots in region, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and lesser extent in Kyrgyzstan (Lenz-Raymann, 2014: 110). It is difficult to measure Sufi beliefs weight in Central Asian countries because many of its practices are incorporated into popular tradition and historically it has been able to coexist with tolerant and less puritanical Hanafi Muslim ascription. However, after 1991, many shrines of Sufi masters were also rehabilitated to become pilgrimage centers (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2006: 236).

On other hand, Shiite branch of Islam has a merely testimonial presence in region due to its insignificant demographic weight. Shiite community has been associated with two key ethnic minorities. The most important is Azeri living in parts of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan; and the other is ethnic Iranian population integrated into Tajik minority of Samarkand and Bukhara regions in Uzbekistan (Niyozov, 2003). However, Islamic resurgence in region does not seem to have contributed as elsewhere to exacerbating religious sectarianism phenomenon, perhaps because greatest threat to small Shiites minority has not come from overwhelming Sunni majority, but from Central Asian governments themselves who, with unfounded suspicion of Iran's influence, they have been responsible for repressing their activity, forcing them to survive almost clandestinely, especially in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Peyrouse and Ibrahimov, 2010: 91-93).

Islamic institutions also grew rapidly after 1991. Of five Central Asian republics, it was Tajikistan that experienced most intense Islamic resurgence during perestroika years. From 1980 to 1990 mosques increased from 12 to 128, but from 1991 to 2016 mosques growth multiplied by 30 times, reaching the figure of 3,930, the country with largest number of prayer centers and also with highest concentration level of imams (religious leaders) per inhabitant, one for every 2,210 people (Nogoybayeva, 2017: 8-9). Same trend can be seen in the other countries. In Kazakhstan number of mosques grew by 100 to 150 percent during first two decades of independence (Achilov, 2012: 84). By 2016, 2,669 mosques and 112 religious education institutions were officially recognized in Kyrgyzstan, 2,516 and 13 in Kazakhstan, and 2,065 and 11 in Uzbekistan (Nogoybayeva, 2017: 8).

Second stage of re-Islamization is associated with greater internalization of religious consciousness. At certain point the sense of confessional ascription associated with ethnicity and tradition (Omelicheva, 2010; 2017) begins to be succeeded by need to understand meaning and principles of Islam, to know the content of the Qur'an and Sunnah as sources of religious authority or understand the passages in Arab language during ritual ceremonies. A growing section of believers becomes more pious

and, consequently, increases their demand for correct interpretation of Islamic precepts (Nogoybayeva, 2017:19-20). "Being Muslim" is increasingly assumed to be "thinking and living" according to Islam norms.

It is difficult to define precisely when and how this transition occurs, let alone determine its magnitude with any accuracy. Increase in religious education is a powerful contributing factor (Achilov, 2012), and also the growing influence exerted on it by conservative Sunni traditionalism (Zhussipbek, Achilov and Nagayeva, 2020: 8), but phenomenon transcends the spaces dedicated to formal Islam teaching and practice and is visible socially and in the family and individual contexts. However, the evidence of accumulated potential begins to be reflected with expressions of a third stage, when this new force passes into action and begins to be projected on social or even political level. Islamic activism increases pressure on the secular state to adopt a more permissible stance towards religious values or even to conduct themselves in accordance with them.

Emergence of this religious activism in principle should not be circumscribed or confused with political expressions associated with Islamism or Salafism (Heathershaw and Montgomery, 2014; Hanks, 2015: 73), a radical current quite oversized by political narrative and that will be discussed in last section of this article. Islamic activism is a phenomenon that also comes from devotion and a pious spirituality shared by people and social groups committed to a way of life, more not interested in questioning the political authority of State (Shaykhutdinov and Achilov, 2014: 388). This growing social activism, fruit of the rise of daily religiosity, generally does not have an anti-secular character, on the contrary, it often argues its demands in the right to religious freedom enshrined in secular constitutions. As part of it can be considered the pressure actions for expansion of religiosity expression spaces, such as hijab use in workplaces, schools and others public places, the possibility to prayer on the streets and make call to prayer (*azan*) through microphones or demand a quotas extension to carry out Hajj and Umrah (pilgrimages), which have been recurrent with more or less intensity in all Central Asian countries (Nogoybayeva, 2017). These pressures, which also generate controversy at social level, reflect the contradiction and counterpoint between two coexisting realities within Central Asian societies, "religious and secular" or "traditional and modern" (Karin, 2017: 11), but it can hardly be considered themselves as political opposition actions, although all of them represent in fact clear transgressions to firm limits imposed by Central Asian governments to society re-Islamization.

Secular and Authoritarian States

Political constitutions promulgated after 1991 enshrined, with different nuances in each case, secular character of State and the right to freedom of religious belief in the five Central Asian countries. However, these two essential pillars of State-religion relationship in modern democracies lost much of their real meaning in context of openly repressive authoritarian regimes opposed to democratic freedoms, including religious one. This political context determined that states adopted a common contradictory and ambivalent position in face of society re-Islamization phenomenon.

Independences did not bring a fundamental change in power structures. In all cases, old ruling elite of Soviet era retained its power under new conditions (Akçil, 2003: 409). Former first secretaries of Communist Party and presidents of Supreme Soviets became new presidents of the independent republics. In four of them --Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan-formal transition went smoothly because reformist opposition had been crushed since before separation in 1991 (Hiro. 2013). Only Tajikistan, where democratic and Islamist currents formed a united opposition front, change was traumatic and ended up triggering a bloody civil war between 1992 and 1997 (Epkenhans, 2016). Fear over Tajik crisis reinforced neighboring countries solidarity, which in 1993 led to create Community of Central Asian States, a kind of holy alliance of regional authoritarianism. Thanks to that support, and of

Russia also, Emomali Rahmanov's regime managed to withstand the onslaught and negotiate a peace agreement that allowed it to remain in power after 1997.

Authoritarianism, immobility, and personality cult characterized the post-independence political scenario. Presidential republics became personalist governments and power was tightly concentrated in politicians' generation hands trained in Soviet-era school (Hanson, 2017). Saparmurat Niyazov ruled Turkmenistan from 1991 until his death in 2006, and Akaev held Kyrgyz presidency from 1991 to 2005, when a spontaneous protest movement (Tulip Revolution) forced him out of office (Hiro, 2013). Life of autocracies was much longer in the other three countries. In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov wielded absolute power until his death in 2016; Nursultan Nazarbayev did the same in Kazakhstan until 2019; and, in Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon won his fifth presidential term in 2020 and thus ensured that he remained in power for seven more years.

With Tajikistan's exception, where Rahmon constitutes a regional record of permanence in power, in the other four cases when autocracy of "nation founding leaders" came to an end, political succession was taken over by a second-generation figure who no longer came from high hierarchy of Soviet era, but of political capital created by prolonged autocratic powers and which, therefore, was more interested in status quo maintaining than in promoting a democratic opening. After Niyazov's death in 2006, Turkmenistan's presidency was assumed by former Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguli Berdimuhamedov, who used and reinforced authoritarian model of his predecessor to perpetuate himself in power as well (Borh, 2016; Horak and Polese, 2016). In March 2022 he ceded presidency to his son, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, establishing in fact the region's first dynastic autocracy. In Kyrgyzstan, despite the Tulip Revolution and Akaev fall in 2005, political changes failed to promote a stable transition due propensity of subsequent rulers to reproduce authoritarian patterns, corrupt practices, and civil liberties violations (Schmitz, 2021). The end of Karimov era also did not bring significant changes in Uzbekistan. The successor and former prime minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, followed a more liberal line regarding country's economic opening, but without modifying political system pillars (ICG, 2017; Eschment, 2022).

In Kazakhstan, finally, resignation of Nursultan Nazarbayev in 2019 and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev election, former prime minister (1999-2002) and president of the Senate (2013-2019), theoretically opened same dilemma between continuity and change (Bohr et al, 2019), although in practice succession gave way to a duumvirate masked formula that allowed Nazarbayev retain high share of power under First President-Leader of the Nation title, with lifetime rights and immunity from prosecution, and retaining leadership of ruling Nur-Otan party and of Security Council (Kassenova, 2022). Duumvirate formula finally collapsed with January 2022 crisis and the win to reform Constitution in later referendum, which formally ended Nazarbayev era. With constitutional amendment President Tokayev was freed from shackles imposed by his predecessor, but it remains to be seen whether this will finally lead to a true democratic transition in the country (Eschment, 2022).

This peculiar authoritarian political evolution of independent republics of Central Asia reflects clear elements of continuity with legacy of former communist regime. Within that context, State-religion relationship in general, and State-Islam in particular, were also essentially influenced by these continuity view (Gunn, 2003: 402).

State's Perspective: Instrumentalization, Legitimation and Securitization

Autocratic governments attitude towards Islamic resurgence was determined by interest of subordinating process to strict state control and instrumentalizing it as a resource of political legitimation through the construction of an "official Islam" (Omelicheva, 2017: 8). If during Soviet era the official Islam function was to neutralize subversive potential that religion implied for regime base on a new atheistic and supranational culture, its mission after 1991 has been linked to rescue and strengthening of an autochthonous cultural identity that legitimizes and provides a historical meaning to the new state

realities. This difference functions contributes to understanding Central Asian governments position to promote in some extent society Islamization, and even to decorate with religious symbols the secular state policy but ensuring necessary control mechanisms to prevent from phenomenon transcending desirable limits and could threat to autocratic powers stability. Consequently, government regulation of religion in Central Asia has been significantly higher than world average (Achilov, 2012: 93).

Following Soviet-era tradition, each country created its own government-controlled "spiritual administration" in the style of former Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Peyrouse, 2007: 40). Religious sphere was gradually subjected to a state control policy, which were very active in enacting laws, registries, and regulatory procedures. Formation of religious organizations was subject to strict official registrations. Religious proselytism, missionary work, and political activities were legally prohibited. Imams were required to accredit themselves and renew their documents periodically to exercise their ritual offices. Over time they also began to receive state stipends, paid indirectly through non-governmental organizations, such as the Iman Foundation for the Development of Spiritual Culture in Kyrgyzstan (Nogoybayeva, 2017:42), with which many were transformed in fact into civil servants.

Mosques and other religious works construction lost initial spontaneity and was also legally regulated, requiring granting of state licenses and permits. Mosques and religious centers closure, considered illegal because they lacked such official authorizations, became a powerful instrument for exercise government control. Many Islamic places of worship were forced to close their doors in recent years for lack of official records. In 2017 alone, 2,000 mosques in Tajikistan were closed for this reason (AsiaNews, 2018). Although responsibility for building places of worship does not lie with State, but with the community of believers and external sponsors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, governments have exercised strong oversight over mosques interior, reviewing and censoring imam's sermons and even installing security cameras to monitor facilities. Islamic education was also restricted, private religion teaching was prevented, and Islamic schools and universities created after 1991 were inserted into general education system and had to share their religious curriculum with subjects from secular sciences (Mushtaq, 2015: 4-5).

In all cases, governments justified their policies of control by need to preserve purity of "traditional" Islam and remove it from pernicious influence of foreign Salafist radicalism. To this end, government narrative promoted, on one hand, the symbiosis between "official" and "traditional" Islam, based on recognition of Central Asian Islam ascription to Hanafi thought school, of a less rigorous and traditionally apolitical nature; and on another, its opposition with extremist, violent Islam alien to region cultural tradition (Omelicheva, 2017: 8-9).

As Islam increased its influence in Central Asian societies, official Islam instrumentalization as embodiment of cultural identity became more important. Tradition served to publicly condemn Western influence vices and justify authoritarian political practices (Walker, 2003: 21). Interest in recovering heritage and historical memory associated with Islam grew, and almost forgotten figures of great Sufi jurists and teachers acquired new relevance. Religious references in official discourses became more recurrent and Islam capital symbolic began to be used as a resource of mobilization for political and electoral purposes. Presidents of the five republics began to show a special commitment to project a personal image associated with Islam. Koran use in presidential inaugurations and leaders' pilgrimages to Mecca constituted two unequivocal expressions of new legitimizing role conferred on Islam, but also of increasing interest to inserting itself in Muslim world for access ensure solvent Islamic banking (Khaki and Malik, 2013; Hoggarth, 2016).

In addition to serving as in Soviet era for a supposed differentiation purposes between good and indigenous Islam, and subversive and foreign one (Kamrava, 2020: 12), exaltation of Hanafi tradition was also convenient to legitimize Central Asian governments aspiration to keep Islam totally out of political

realm. Throughout post-Soviet period religiously oriented parties have been expressly prohibited by law in all countries except Tajikistan (Aleef, 2021: 175) where, as result of civil war, failed attempt of an Islamic party coexistence within framework of a secular state took place between 1997 and 2015 (Nogoybayeva, 2017:36).

In Tajikistan, the combined Islamist and secular forces front that fought Emomali Rahmon regime during civil war under United Tajik Opposition (OTU) name, was headed by Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), founded in 1991 by Said Abdullad Nuri (Epkenhans, 2016). After difficult negotiation process sponsored by United Nations and other international actors, Rahmon and Nuri agreed to sign a peace agreement in 1997 on power-sharing basis, whereby OTU accepted to demobilize its military forces to insert itself into national reconciliation process. Political Protocol to peace agreement granted OTU 30% of government posts, including some ministries, and enshrined commitment to make constitutional amendments (Abdullo, 2001: 51-52). Groups integrated into OTU were legalized and IRPT was able to participate for first time in legislative elections as a political party in 2000.

Agreement worked for a few years, but its foundations were eroded as grew Islamist organization public visibility, especially after Nuri death in 2006 and rise to party leadership of Mukhiddin Kabiri, with more liberal and pro-democratic discourse (Aleef, 2021: 180), and with openly opposition to Emomali Rahmon regime intention of neutralize opposition forces. Final confrontation occurred after 2015 legislative elections and the later Tajik government's maneuver to involve IRTP in a failed coup attempt led by Deputy Defense Minister Abdukhalim Nazarzoda (ICG, 2016: 4-5). Supreme Court immediately banned IRTP activities and turned it into a terrorist organization. Thus concluded an exceptional experience derived from civil war, which allowed Tajik regime to resume Central Asian states tradition of trying to keep Islam out of politics. However, they all fed the same fear about latent threat of a radical Islamism willing to challenge secular state outside realm of system and formal politics.

Religious Radicalism: Real Threat or Official Narrative?

Central Asian states major concern regarding Islamization of society since 1991 has been alleged infiltration of radical Islam from abroad. However, contrary to these fears, presence in region of radical Islam is not new and neither seem to have exaggerated importance that official narrative attributes to it as a threat to national security. Radical Islam roots in Central Asia go back to the 60s and 70s of the Soviet period, when Fergana Valley became fundamental center of doctrinal resistance to official Islam imposed by Kremlin, and a confrontation field between conservatives of Hanafi school and Islamists of Hanbali and Shafi'i orientation (Peyrose, 2007: 52), contradiction accentuated in following years by perestroika, the influence of neighboring Afghanistan after Soviet military intervention, and communist regime final crisis. So political Islam in Central Asia had its own antecedents that in a way paved road for development of a Salafist current in post-1991 period (Brill, 2007; Lenz-Raymann 2014: 140).

Delimitation of radical Islam scope action and its real weight during post-Soviet period, however, are more difficult to determine because of ambiguity in terminology handling, largely influenced by an official discourse perspective tending to correlate radicalism with Islamization, in particular its expressions that go beyond the narrow frameworks of permissible official Islam. Tendency to consider any conservative and/or political religious Islam action as expressions of Islamism (political Islam), Salafism, radicalism, jihadism, or terrorism, generates a confusion that distorts relationship between religion and politics in Central Asia (Hearthershaw and Montgomery, 2014: 7). After terrorist attacks of 09/11, Western view of political Islam tended to stereotype it as a monolithic and violent current by nature, whose ideology derives from unity religion-politic inherent to Islam itself, and not for its instrumentalization by individuals and groups to achieve political objectives (Özçelik, 2022: 47). General feature that identifies Islamism or political Islam, and at the same time differentiates it from other conservative religious expressions, is rejection of secular forms of government and aspiration to replace

them with a State based on Islamic law. But within this ideal there are diverse and differentiable tendencies according to its doctrinal principles, its scope (local, transnational, or global), level of ideological intransigence (moderate or radical), and means used to achieve its objectives (peaceful or violent). This means that, unlike stereotyping, Islamism is rather a heterogeneous phenomenon, with moderate and radical expression forms, and in which extremism or radicalism can in turn manifest itself by peaceful or violent means (Cornell, 2018: 67-68).

The actions derived from social projection of growing Muslim civil society do not constitute by itself Islamist expressions (Peyrouse and Nasritdinov, 2021). Even political manifestations that do not have objective of subverting State' secular character, but rather expressing discontent of groups and social sectors, organized or not, towards certain government policies do not adequately respond to essential Islamism objective either. IRTTP case in Tajikistan after 1997 constitutes a good example of relationship type between Islam and politics that would not fit well within Islamist mold, since its program did not have an openly anti-secular character, but it did serve as a government opposition within a constitutional scheme for more than 15 years. Nor would fit as political Islam actions those related with isolated contestatory expressions of a pious and conservative Islam sectors. However, true dimension of political Islam has been consistently distorted through a dual association, between Islamization and Islamism, and between political opposition and rise Islamic radicalism (Hanks, 2015: 73). Both inferences are constructions of authoritarian governments aimed at securitizing Islam to justify repressive policy and to position idea, both inside and outside their countries, of great danger of an Islamization not strictly regulated by State. Paradox behind these associations is that Islamism has been a minor product within tendency to society Islamization, not determined by it and unequally distributed geographically, with greater visibility in Fergana Valley shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan (Idress, 2016: 6), whose operational bases have been most of time outside Central Asia territory.

Islamism had two fundamental forms of expression in Central Asia after 1991. First was through transnational groupings expansive activity generally interest to establish Islamic state by peaceful means. Second was for autonomous local jihadist organizations apparition with violent projections, which will be analysis in next section. Principal exponent of first type is Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HT), an organization that emerged in East Jerusalem in 1953, which experienced a progressive rise in following decades to become one of the most popular pan-Islamist groups, with several thousand sympathizers in different parts of the world (Karagiannis, 2010: 13). HT's program promotes "pre-violent jihad" strategy as a way to initially achieve Islamic state by peaceful means through incessant society Islamization (Mori and Taccetti, 2016:10), although it accepts violent jihad resort at a later stage to realize the supreme aspiration to establish a global caliphate. Like other radical groups, ideological platform of HT is based on religious puritanism defense, but unlike Salafism, it circumscribes true Islam exclusively to revelation and Prophet times without attaching importance to later four orthodox caliphs period, singularity with which HT has tried to gain a space into Islamist narrative (Olsson, 2021: 10).

HT found fertile ground in central Asia to expand its influence in the late nineties. Without other large competing Islamist organizations presence, his message of social change by peaceful means achieved some resonance in the region, due to ideological vacuum of post-Soviet period, to social frustrations caused by serious economic difficulties, and to lack channels for discontent express with government policies. As result, HT became main Islamist grouping in all Central Asian republics, with exception of Turkmenistan where its presence has been much smaller (Baran, Starr and Cornell, 2006: 22). In Tajikistan, HT not only confronted authorities, but also sought to establish itself as ideological rival of IRTTP, the only legalized religious party in the region (Karagiannis, 2010: 15).

The missionary work and anti-government HT demonstrations were strongly repressed, especially in Uzbekistan, its main stronghold, which helped to spread its activity more quickly to other states of the region. After 9/11 terrorist attacks, the organization was banned in several Western countries and Central

Asian governments also began to treat it as a terrorist group, although this perception was little shared at social level due to nonviolent nature of its actions (McGlinchey, 2009). Despite evidence lack linking HT to terrorist actions, its discursive radicalization in support and justification of violence exercised by other Islamist groups ensured that it was seen as a dangerous pulley transmitting terrorism (Baran, Star and Cornell, 2006: 22). However, HT criminalization produced two undesirable and somewhat contradictory effects. One was the split of unhappy groups with HT's strategy and supporters of more aggressive action in response to government repression, which formed new smaller groups such as Hizb-an-Nusra and Akramiylar (Alonso, 2005). The other was its indirect contribution to HT popularity, whose message began to attract attention of some sectors of middle class and not only of the humblest layers, which favored that Islamist group could maintain its presence despite repression, although that influence could hardly be considered a real threat for national or regional safety (Karagiannis, 2010: 15).

Tablighi Jama'at (TJ) is another important transnational Islamist organization active in the region after 1991. Founded in India during 1920s and attached to the purist Deobandi school, TJ progressively expanded its presence in various parts of the world and is now estimated more than 50 million followers in 200 countries (Ma'mun, 2019: 145) including those in Central Asia, although it is difficult to determine its number in the region. With an even more moderate orientation, TJ rejects violence as a means of establishing Islamic State and even prohibits its members from political activism as a cause of division (*fitna*) among Muslims. As a pious Islamist group, it defends proselytism as an instrument of regeneration of Islam and a way to achieve Sharia-based state goal. For TJ leaders, missionary activity at grassroots and door-to-door proselytizing constitutes a kind of peaceful jihad aimed at strengthening religious faith and mosque's social role (Mori and Taccetti, 2016: 11).

Despite its transnational nature, TJ was not well known before 2001. But global war on terror boosted his visibility and put his missionary and proselytizing work under suspicion. The peaceful and apolitical image of TJ, as well as its international networks and its capacity for movement, began to be seen as probable facades for terrorist cells infiltration. Central Asian governments also branded it a Salafist threat and proceeded to crack down fiercely on it. Far from seeing it as an alternative and containment force for radical Islam, most rulers feared that, under certain social circumstances, TJ transformative proselytizing might contribute to radicalization of a youth dissatisfied and frustrated by socio-economic difficulties, which is why its activities were banned in all countries of the region, except Kyrgyzstan where it has continued to have some presence (Reetz, 2017: 132-133).

Violent Religious Extremism

Violent jihadism constitutes other side of Islamism and its most important exponent in Central Asia has been Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), whose antecedents date back to 1991. IMU evolution as a jihadist organization has gone through three fundamental stages: 1991-2000, 2001-2014, and after 2014 (Lang, 2017: 1-2). The three periods are characterized by different operating scenarios and, in general, reflect a progressive IMU remoteness from its Central Asia original place.

For 1991-2000 years Fergana Valley was radical Islam epicenter, especially in Uzbek-populated areas, and its activity was linked to struggle for overthrow neo-communist regimes in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In 1991 Salafi group Adolat emerged, led by Tahir Yuldashev, an Uzbek Islamic ideologue, and by Juma Namangani, a Soviet army veteran also Uzbek radicalized after his military experience in Afghanistan campaign (Baran, Starr, and Cornell, 2006: 25-26). Due to initial instability context that followed independence, and Uzbek central power weakness, Adolat managed to impose his temporary authority in Namangan province, at northern end of Fergana Valley, and from there confronted Islam Karimov government to impose Sharia throughout Uzbekistan. But following regime's successful offensive, group's remnants moved their operation bases to Tajikistan in 1992 and joined to anti-government front led by Abdullah Nuri and the IRPT as country's civil war had just begun.

Until 1997 its leader Namangani commanded military operations in Tavildara, a mountainous region and relatively close to Afghanistan border. But 1997 peace accords caused distance between Nuri and Namangani due to latter's intransigence to agree with the government, although in fact he continued to retain his operations and recruitment bases in the Tavildara Valley. In 1998, Adolat's forces and other small radical groups unified under Namangani and Yuldeshev leadership to form the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Mori and Taccetti, 2016: 10), with the main objective of combating Islam Karimov's regime, although their violent actions also extended to the Kyrgyz and Tajik parts of Fergana Valley. The failed attempt on President Karimov in 1999, allegedly attributed to jihadist group, intensified IMU persecution and intensified pressure on Tajik government to expel it from Tavildara region. This situation prompted it to leave the country and seek shelter in Afghanistan, which by then had already become Islamist subversion regional epicenter (Baltar, 2003: 97-116).

After Kabul conquest by Taliban in 1996 and Islamic Emirate proclamation headed by Mullah Omar, the rest of warring mujahideen factions allied themselves in an anti-Taliban United Front, led by Tajik militia of commander Ahmed Massoud and participation of General Dostum's Uzbek group. Apart of Pakistan, Taliban's main external backer, countries in regional environment, including the Central Asian republics, backed United Front for fear to religious radicalism and Taliban association with Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, which involved transfer to Afghan territory of global jihad operational center and the establishment of training camps for thousands jihadist militants from various parts of the world, including Central Asia (Rashid, 2010). IMU decided to ally with Taliban in fight against United Front in exchange for its support in establishing operational bases in northern Afghanistan, and from there act in Uzbekistan and the rest of Fergana Valley (Witter, 2011: 1). Since the end of 1999, IMU participated in Taliban offensives in northern provinces and held direct relationship with Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, through which began its immersion within global jihadist current. Up to that point, IMU's view about jihad had been rather simplistic, despite Yuldashev's theological pretensions and passage of some of his militants through Pakistani madrassas (Brill, 2007: 28).

The 09/11 terrorist attacks and US military campaign in Afghanistan gave way to second stage in IMU evolution, which could be defined as its Pakistani chapter. IMU followed same strategy that Taliban and Al Qaeda of crossing border into Pakistan to seek refuge in Waziristan, one of the autonomous agencies of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) (Witter, 2011). New reality caused a split within Islamist group between those who insisted on fighting President Karimov and supporters of joining global jihad, leading to formation of Islamic Jihad Group in early 2002, which would change its name for Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) in 2005 (Lang, 2017: 1). However, geographical remoteness that presupposed its exodus to FATA nullified any purpose distinction and imposed both Islamist groups a very similar course. In practice, Central Asia, and particular Fergana Valley, lost its centrality as a theatre of operations, although it continued to be a source of recruitment and target of isolated terrorist acts with symbolic rather than destabilizing value. IMU and IJU actions were mainly aimed at fighting, together with Taliban and Al Qaeda, to Pakistani army in Waziristan and NATO forces in Afghanistan (Witter, 2011: 4-7); and they also became an instrument of global jihad for their alleged participation in the execution of terrorist attacks and acts in Europe, Russia and Central Asia between 2004 and 2012 (Lang, 2017: 2). Although ethnic exclusivism was never primary importance, as the IMU and IJU commitment to international jihadist cause increased, its multicultural character also modified with militants' incorporation of Central Asian, Azerbaijani, Turkish, and even Pakistani.

Beginning of third period was determinate by abandonment Waziristan bases and IMU and IJU departure from Pakistan in 2014, just at the moment of Syrian conflict intensification, Islamic State (IS) rise and its break with Al Qaeda. Belligerent Pakistani Taliban (TTP) actions forced Islamabad government to launch a harsh military offensive against its bases in Waziristan and to engage in an ambitious counterterrorism strategy in the FATA called National Action Plan (Ali, 2018: 7). IMU and IJU were forced to leave what had been their sanctuary for 12 years. Many of its militants traveled to join

Syrian jihad and others went back into Afghanistan, where United States and NATO had evacuated the bulk of their troops and responsibility for security had been handed over Afghan government.

IMU and IJU adopted different positions on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Ayman al-Zawahiri dispute for the leadership of global jihadism. The first symbolically joined Islamic State (IS) in 2015 and shortly after its leader was killed in a clash with Taliban in Afghanistan, which practically led to organization deactivation. For its part, IJU although greatly weakened maintained its Taliban and Al Qaeda association, and its militants continued to participate in joint operations in Afghanistan (Lang, 2017: 2). Old jihadist organizations originating in Central Asia lost importance and their strength decreased considerably due both to Syria exodus and to factional fighting. But radical Islamism took on a new form of expression through many young Central Asians incorporation into Syrian conflict (Sakiev, 2020). Islamist propaganda, especially from IS, managed to attract volunteers for jihad in Syria in all countries of the region, and in its labor migrant hubs in Turkey and Russia. It is difficult to determine number of Central Asian fighters in Syria. Estimates are imprecise and often include Iraq as well. For years 2014-2017, it is generally estimated that between 2,000 and 5,000 fighters were recruited and traveled to Syria, often accompanied by their families (Idrees, 2016: 7), although some sources put number at the high end of that range (Soliev, 2021: 125). Central Asian governments, alarmed that flow would lead to an influx in the future, adopted laws to impose severe prison sentences on citizens who illegally took part in armed conflicts and military operations on other countries.

The lack of ethnolinguistic links with territory and not being an Arabic speaker, determined that Central Asian fighters in Syria, both veterans of the ranks of IMU and IJU as well as the new generation recruited in the region, tended to form their own brigades based on their ethnic affiliation (jamaats) (Sakiev, 2020: 2), which in turn were incorporated into larger jihadist formations confronting Syrian regime, and among themselves. The most notorious were Imam Bukhari Battalion, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad and Sabri Jamaat (Soliev, 2021: 126). The first appears to have been organized by old elements of IMU and mainly integrated by Uzbek origin combatants. Initially subordinate to IS, it later joined rival Islamist group Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, former al-Nusra Front associated with al Qaeda. The second consisted mainly of Kyrgyz volunteers and also fought on the side of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. And the third, composed mainly for Tajik and Uzbek elements, fought under IS command (Karin, 2017: 23-24). Some of these groups established connections in their home countries for militants' recruitment and carrying out of occasional terrorist actions for propaganda purposes.

Region' governments saw jihadists flow as a major potential threat to Central Asia security, a concern heightened by IS territorial defeat in early 2018 and decline of jihad in Syria, due to possibility of a likely return of Central Asian fighters to their origin places. Except Turkmenistan, the other four Central Asian governments organized repatriation programs to try controlling process and preventing ex-combatants' clandestine infiltration. As of mid-2021, just over 1,300 people had returned as part of those programs, mostly children and women (Farrell et al, 2021: 5). Repatriation of men involved in combative actions has been very scarce and, in all cases, they were sentenced to years in prison, which inhibits possibility that any significant number of former jihadists opt for that alternative.

There is also no evidence to confirm governments fears about an independent and clandestine return of ex-combatants to the region. However, the possibility is still latent if one considers that about 29% of those recruited died in combat and an undetermined percentage of them remain in the conflict zone or relocated elsewhere (Soliev, 2021: 126-128). In contrary sense, this situation can also reinforce tendency to view jihadists exodus as a beneficial escape valve for Central Asian regimes more than a threat to security, since IMU's own history confirms impossibility massive ebb and how jihadist potential, instead of returning, continues to relocate in a new conflict scenario (Lang, 2017: 4). The point is still debatable, because there are also examples where Islamism upsurge was associated to jihadist veterans return, although that return had not occurred immediately and massively. Taliban's rise to power in

Afghanistan, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) actions in north of the country (Schmitz, 2022), are variables that could generate expectations about a probable rapprochement of radical Islamism to Central Asian countries borders, but there is still not enough evidence to affirm that something like this is happening or could happen in immediate future.

Conclusion

Re-Islamization phenomenon of Central Asian societies after 1991 was a spontaneous and natural response to the strong identity crisis that ensued after almost seven decades of Soviet Union membership. If during previous period the peculiar and historical relationship between ethnicity and religion served as a shelter for Islam to preserve its presence in Central Asia through popular tradition, after 1991 same relationship provided an essential pillar for perception about an own distinct identity from Soviet past. Consequently, Islamic resurgence in post-Soviet period has been associated with construction of a new identity within the framework of a secular state and with a daily religiosity basically inspired by a tolerant, heterodox, and apolitical Hanafi tradition.

Despite this, Central Asian governments' distrust of this new social phenomenon led to imposition of a contradictory and ambivalent State-religion relationship, aimed at maintaining Islamization within controllable and convenient limits to ensure political stability. Tight state control of religious activity was a consequence of neo-Soviet elites' autocratic vocation that seized power in the five countries after 1991, who resorted all available means to suppress any potential opposition source, resistance, or criticism of their regimes. In all cases, construction of an official Islam, self-proclaimed traditional and pure, sought to fulfill dual function of instrumentalizing religious values for political legitimation purposes and of differentiating it of religious interpretations and practices considered foreign, dangerous, and illegal, thus subordinating belief freedom principle to reproductive needs of political authoritarianism.

Islamist threat oversizing has been part of government's strategies to justify its strict policies of religious regulation. There is little evidence to demonstrate underlying existence of a relevant trend towards radicalization within Islamization phenomenon in Central Asia after 1991. Islamist and Salafist current, in its peaceful and violent aspect, has been present in region and will surely continue to do so in the future, but until now its influence has not been strong enough to truly constitute a danger to regional security and stability. Most aggressive Islamist groups associated with IMU left Central Asia in the late nineties and thereafter their operations continued to move away from their origin place. Central Asian jihadist origin linked to Al Qaeda and Islamic State have participated with some notoriety in terrorist actions perpetrations in various parts of the world during last 20 years, but percentage of these attacks occurred specifically in Central Asia is insignificant. So, during all that time, region has been characterized by being more a center expelling militants to other places than a stage of action of local and transnational Islamism. This does not mean, however, that this trend cannot be modified in the future under new internal and regional factors impact.

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