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## **The State and Islam in Central Asia: Administering the Religious Threat or Engaging Muslim Communities?**

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# The State and Islam in Central Asia: Administering the Religious Threat or Engaging Muslim Communities?

by Alexander Wolters

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## Introduction

Despite the prominent discussion around religious extremism and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism (see for an analysis of this perspective, Morgan & Poynting 2012; for political implications, Sunier 2014), religion in general and Islamic ethics in particular are considered by scholars and political decision makers alike as a source for community strengthening and economic development. This attitude has been growing for decades now and it resulted in practical economic developments, for example in form of “Islamic banks”, as well as a new body of scholarly inquiry into “Muslim societies” and “Islamic economics”.<sup>1</sup> The present paper contributes to such studies by pursuing two objectives: *first*, to better understand state & society relations as a precondition for Islamic economics to take roots; and, *second*, to broaden our empirical scope by extending the focus to the hitherto ignored cases of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. This region has yet to emerge as an intriguing field of political experiments in state & society relations for scholars of religious awakening and “faithful economics”. I assume that the political regimes in Central Asia are facing a struggle to harmonize their secular tradition to regulate and control the society with their goal to allow for more Muslim community building and “Islamic economics”, especially financing and banking, to take roots among Muslim believers.<sup>2</sup> To investigate the institutions and policies of these regimes will inform us about the different abilities of the states to adapt to radically changing social and economic conditions that are caused by the accelerated integration of the region into the global market of goods, capital, ideas and people. How do the states in Central Asia politically engage the newly emerging Muslim societies, how do they “steer” Islamic economics and what are their recipes for balancing secular state traditions and religious awakening within the society?

To analyze the transformation of the relations between secular states and the emerging Muslim societies in Central Asia this paper is divided into two sections. *First* I introduce into the cases by highlighting recent developments in religious awakening, “Islamic economics” and the “War on Terror”. *Second*, I compare the state institutions, policies and actual practices to regulate the religious field in the five republics. I finally conclude on the politics of state engagement and the dynamics of state & society relations in Central Asia and possible further developments in Islamic economics in the region. I contend that development trajectories depend on *the available space for political maneuvering* that both state and society actors can use to engage one another. An open political system like the one in Kyrgyzstan promises more innovation and eventually more stable relations than a closed political system like the one in Uzbekistan, for example. Politics as an more or less open arena for exchange between opposing forces proves essential for the development of new institutions and practices, regardless of whether they are formalized or not. Only such social innovation allows states in the region to make use of Islam and religious faith in general to serve as a source for community strengthening and economic development, both much needed in

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1 Cp. for example studies on the case of Malaysia or Indonesia, Freedman (2009), Hadiz & Teik (2011); on Islamic economics, see Hosseini (1986), Choudhury (1983), Reza Nazr (1989), Bjorvatn (1998), Reda (2013); on Islamic entrepreneurship on the case of Turkey Adas (2006), on Turkey, Indonesia and Sudan, Demiralp (2012).

2 For a different trajectory, see the case of Indonesia, where secular elites employ Islamic populism to successfully pursue particularistic interests (Hadiz & Robison 2012). Others highlight the different stance of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), and the newly de-politicized Muslim community (see on MUI, Lindsey 2012, and Nazir 2014; on Muslim community, Sakai & Fauzia 2014).

the internationally pressured and politically instable region. To test my hypothesis I will rely for most parts on recent scholarly work about the “Islamic revival” in Central Asia and on research about the states' institutional settings. In addition news reports provide evidence on current events in the “War on Terror” and on “Islamic economic” practices in the region.

### **Islamic Revival and the State in Central Asia**

The Central Asian republics have been subject to differing, yet often interdependent developments that to some extent can be captured with the term “religious awakening” or, more specific: “Islamic revival”. I will concentrate my further description on three such developments to highlight the relevance of the “Islamic revival” and the challenges and prospects for the political and economic systems in the region. The *first* development concerns the emergence of new Islamic communities and movements, which signifies the diversification of religious practices in the region. The *second* development refers to a – increasingly state sponsored – “angst” of Islamic extremism. The state sponsorship relates to the contentious practice to connect to Western discourses on Islamic terrorism on the one hand and to control unwanted social deviance on the other. The *third* development is the establishment of Islamic forms of business and financing, from conventional investment by the “Islamic Development Bank”, an international donor organization, to the emergence of Islamic financing, including micro-financing and informal business practices like “waqf” (Islamic endowments). Such developments indicate faith-based social and economic activities that are new to the region. Taken together they call upon the political regimes to design new modes of social and economic regulation and a new relation between state and society.

1. To describe the Islamic revival in Central Asia, a few notes on the historical background and earlier and later scholarly work on Islam in the Soviet Union are at place. Historically, Islamic faith practices in Central Asia had been subject to state control and strict supervision in times of the Soviet Union. The onslaught on religious communities and the abolishment of their infrastructure in form of mosques, madrasah and “waqf”, initiated by Stalin and taking place after Lenin's more supporting approach towards the Soviet Central Asian Muslim republics, moved devout Muslims into the shadows. For some time scholarly work on Islam in Soviet Central Asia emphasized the strict surveillance by the Soviet State. The “Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan” (SADUM), established in 1943 in Tashkent, was the state body to control Islamic affairs and served as an indicator for the reduced role of Islam in Soviet Central Asia (Tazmini 2001). Islam as a system of belief and its corresponding faith practices, it was held, became irrelevant to the everyday life of Soviet Muslims (Gunn 2003). Instead Soviet citizens, even those of Central Asian, North-Caucasian, or Middle-Wolga origin, engaged in the Leninist discourse and here found their incentives for political obedience or dissidence. General opinion asserted, that Islam like any other religion in the Soviet Union neither served as a point of departure for political critique nor as an alternative to organize everyday life. Today, this view has been questioned by many scholars. In comparison with the Middle Eastern colonial experience, Islam in the Soviet Union certainly featured less space for development (Volpi 2011); however, recent research also highlights the diversity that was preserved, and the space for devote

Muslims to combine Soviet doctrines of Marxism-Leninism with Islamic values and practices (Gunn 2003; Sartori 2010; Kamp 2010)<sup>3</sup>. The “Soviet Muslim”, it is assumed today, created ways to preserve, to develop and to evolve her need to practice Islam.

Against this background of a better understanding of Soviet Islam, the view on the emergence of new Muslim ideas and practices in Central Asia after the dissolution of the USSR has changed. Today the Islamic revival is studied in more complex ways than those proposed at the end of the 80s, which considered Islam mainly a threat and political challenge for the Soviet power. Suppressed by the anti-religious Soviet state, it was assumed back then, the Muslim republics would rebel and destroy the Union on their way (Benningesen & Broxup 1985; Rywkin 1990). Partly this perspective informed scholarly analysis of Central Asian Islam even after the end of the Soviet Union. It contributed to studies of Islam in the region that, at best, employed dichotomous perceptions of old and new, modern and traditional, or, at worst, varying categories of radicalism (Rashid 2002). Research in social anthropology and religious studies, on the contrary, has helped in recent years to correct such views. The question is less about the influx of radical ideas from the Arabian peninsula or the simple juxtaposition of idealized versions of “old” and “new”, but more so about the complex and diverse adaptations of ideas of the global *ummah*. Muslims in Central Asia and their religiosity must neither be reduced to simple categories of “the dangerous radical” versus “the integrated moderate”, nor considered irrelevant and left without attention. And so must the relation between these complex developments of a “reviving” Islam and the states in the region not be perceived as one of simple confrontation or co-optation, but a contested field with many different and often temporary solutions.

Today a variety of studies about Islam in Central Asia provide a rather complex picture. A generalized understanding proposes a renewed interest in Islam of the “Hanafi school” (McBrien 2008; DiMaio & Abenstein 2011). In addition, many scholars point out the need to trace regional and sometimes local conditions to provide a full picture of emerging belief systems and corresponding practices (Khamidov 2013; McBrien 2008); to account for the changing dynamics of contested religious fields in the republics in Central Asia (Epenhans 2011); to consider the transnational character of social innovations in form of missionary work, for example the “Tablighi Jama'at” movement (Mostowlansky 2006; Balci 2012); or the educational exchange between Central Asia and other parts of the *ummah*, from the Middle East to Malaysia (and for some time also Tatarstan; see Abramson 2010). Islam in Central Asia, and this most likely holds true for the Russian Federation as well, forms a societal sphere in which multiple ideas and concepts of Islam, emerging from inside and outside the region, connect with diverging needs of different parts of the population to re-shape current frames to imagine and to engage state and society. This combination leads towards a complex network of sometimes contradicting<sup>4</sup> but most often mutually influencing, and differently specialized belief systems and corresponding practices.

The Muslim communities in Central Asia, as evidenced by surveys, exhibit a strong

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3 This question deals with the degree of the preservation of Muslim practices, of “Muslimness”, in the Soviet Union by means of the establishment of “ethnic republics”, which were allowed to conserve forms of religiosity as a sign of their cultural heritage that was not deemed a form of religious deviance (see Khalid 2007; Crews 2010).

4 So far it seems that the Northern Caucasian experience of “Sufi” and “Salafi” confrontation, most visible in Daghestan, does not repeat itself in Central Asia.



attachment to Islam, in the sense that Islam is often considered a way of life than necessarily a dogmatic religious system. As Ro'i and Wainer state: "The Muslimness of the Central Asian population is expressed in a variety of ways, which vary considerably, seemingly arbitrarily, rather than in accordance with definable criteria" (Ro'i & Wainer 2009). It seems that Islamic revival, if this term still suffices, is much more a development that combines paths towards past and future, mixing different notions of tradition and modernity (McBrien 2009; Liu 2012), less so a clear re-establishment of the Hanafi school of thought, deemed valid by the secular state and its religious policies.

For the states in Central Asia this Islamic renewal in all its varying facets mounts up to a challenge. It carries significance beyond that what is considered appropriate religious practice from the point of view of political regimes that are wary of their societies and fearful of uncontrolled social change. So far the creation of institutions and the design of policies that guide the Muslim communities in Central Asia are for their most part attempts to regulate from above, less so genuine calls for the open engagement of religious innovation in the society. Seifert and Usabaliev (2010) capture the task ahead for the Central Asian state. According to them Islam in its newly "nationalized" form undermined the Soviet notion of secularism, to which elites in the countries still adhere. The revolutionary changes in the region since 1990 included a top-down transformation of the politico-economic context and a rather "evolutionary" change of the religious and cultural sphere. They contend that:

"Under certain circumstances, this evolutionary process could become a politically revolutionary eruption in which the majority of religious citizens cease to feel ties of loyalty to the ruling elites. In addition, Islam could become an ideological integrating force for various social and political groupings that are dissatisfied with the political regime, high unemployment, and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. [...] The ability to adapt to Islam and Muslim elites will become a basic survival factor for Central Asian political regimes. Under these conditions, the instruments that the state has used in the past to control Islam and its representatives come up against their limits. While repressive instruments are increasingly losing their effectiveness, state authorities in Central Asia – with the exception of Kazakhstan – lack the economic and financial means to bring about a rapid improvement of the precarious economic and financial situation. The secular power is thus forced into dialogue with Islam – with Muslim clerics, elites, and political activists, but above all with "nationally minded" Muslims. At the very least, it is necessary to achieve a political modus vivendi with them." (2010: 158)

Seifert and Usabaliev further argue that only democratic mechanisms can provide for some form of co-existence or even cooperation. Leaving this very last conclusion aside, I want to generalize the claim and argue that the political regimes, the "secular powers", are in need of instruments to manage communication and links with the diversifying Muslim societies in the region. If those instruments work best in the form of strategic policies or specific institutional alignments remains to be seen. Of importance is the assumption that Central Asian Muslim communities feature a high level of diversity in terms of societal innovation. This capacity quite naturally might, following here Seifert and Usabaliev, translate into a critique of current state practices of power and governing and thereby pose a challenge for the current political leadership in the republics.

However, contrasting this “negative” reading, such innovation should also be considered as a source for societal change and for integration which, up until now, has hardly ever been utilized by the political elites in the region.

2. The second development that critically determines the relationship between state and Islam in Central Asia is the “discourse on danger”. Each government in the region, from the most isolated regime in Turkmenistan under president Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov to pluralistic Kyrgyzstan under current president Almazbek Atambaev, employs a discourse on Islamic extremism. This “discourse” produces narratives that serve a twofold aim in all five republics. On the one hand, repeating warnings against the danger of extremism, in all its obviousness, attempt to form political alliances with like-minded ideologues in the West and its “war against terror” as well as in Russia and in China and their “fight against extremism”. The latter two are being addressed most vividly within the “Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, the former is approached within the “Northern Distribution Network” and the campaign in Afghanistan and further platforms to elaborate on the “Islamic threat”. On the other hand, the discourse is used to silence regime critics of all kind by extensively framing oppositional activity as linked to a terrorist agenda (Russia and Eurasia Programme Seminar Summary, 2010).

To what extent this threat of Islamic extremism is “real” or not is a much debated question. In the following section I will shortly introduce into the relevance of the “discourse of danger”, highlighting first cases of alleged Islamic extremism in the region and, second, state reactions to these events. Indeed, if one surveys news on “Islamic terrorism in Central Asia”, the last years have produced ample evidence on alleged extremist groups acting in the region and posing a security challenge to state and society. In Kazakhstan the movement “Jund al-khilafah” is considered a terrorist group that is held responsible for attacks on state security facilities since 2011. Despite the attacks and public claims to take responsibility, not much is actually known about this group and some observers question its very existence (Registan, 10.4.2012). In Kyrgyzstan the parliament repeatedly debates the chances to ban missionary groups like “Tablighi Jama'at” which high-level officials suspect to spread extremist ideas (Radio Free Europe, 26.8.2013)<sup>5</sup>. The events in the southern region of Nookat in 2008, where followers of “Hizb ut-Tahrir” clashed with local police over a decision by district authorities to reject a people's claim to celebrate a Muslim holiday, has contributed to the general mistrust ever since (Khamidov 2013). In Uzbekistan the “Islamic threat” has been a cornerstone of the ideology of Islam Karimov's regime to legitimize wide-range political repression. Since the events of Andijon in May 2005 the Uzbek government warns against Islamic radicalism. In particular the “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” is considered to be a destructive force that aims to topple the current leadership and to establish an “Islamic Caliphate” in the region. To which extent this threat is, intentionally or unintentionally, the child of “angst”-projection of the regime is disputed (Tucker, 12.9.2013). However, most observers agree on the very real authority this projection possesses in shaping policy strategies in Uzbekistan towards the own population (Pikulicka, 6.3.2011). In Tajikistan the “Islamic Rebirth Party” is engaged in a constant struggle to fight off attempts of the authorities to frame the organization as “extremist”. In addition, the clashes in 2011 between government forces and alleged extremists were also presented by the government in Dushanbe as a confrontation with

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5 For more information about the movement's activities see Ismailbekova & Nasritdinov (2012).

Islamic radicals (Roche & Heathershaw, 17.1.2011). Only in Turkmenistan the effect of the discourse on Islamic extremism seems suspended, when it falls in line with the general state doctrine that all affairs social and political are under strict regime control. The Turkmen government with president Berdymukhammedov at the top officially denies any existence of an Islamist threat. Such denials notwithstanding, even in this isolated Central Asian republic occasional reports refer to the growing movement of estranged Islamic radicals and question the effectiveness of the state policy of isolation in neutrality (Neweurasia, 7.3.2011).

The “danger” of Islamic extremism, independent of its real or imagined character, compels all five Central Asian states to undertake decisive steps. Today the experience of the “Arab Spring” and its conflicts adds a new dynamic, and so does the expected withdrawal of coalition forces in Afghanistan and a reinvigorated Taleban. The regimes in Central Asia fear a possible Islamic mobilization and they fear that the civil war in Syria will draw more numbers of Central Asian young men into the ranks of the fractured Islamic extremist groups (Tucker, 18.5.2014). In light of these developments, all states have been increasing their efforts to curtail the influence of Islamist movements. In Kazakhstan for example, a court in Atyrau in the West of the country in November 2013 sentenced alleged members of the “Jund al-khilafah” to lengthy prison terms for the attacks on state institutions in October 2011 (Radio Free Europe, 18.4.2012). In the same month special services in Kyrgyzstan arrested a member of “Hizb ut-Tahrir” for distributing extremist literature (Interfax, 28.11.2013). Meanwhile the government has been seeking strategies to prevent young men from joining the *jihād* in Syria (Centralasiaonline, 25.11.2013). In Tajikistan the political regime under Rahmon considers a reformed religious education to be the key to prevent young people from searching for religious inspiration abroad (Centralasiaonline, 2.5.2013). The Turkmen state, likewise, has been surveying its Muslim community in search of potential extremists, trying to force young people to return home from foreign educational institutions (RFE/RL, 30.3.2013). Finally, Uzbekistan recently arrested several women in Namagan oblast that were allegedly propagating the ideas of “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, using a pyramid principle in which women were granted loans in exchange for efforts to recruit new members (Centralasiaonline, 11.4.2013). In response to such incidents the state has stepped up its efforts to prevent women and young people from joining Islamist movements with the help of information campaigns and education.

The ideological confrontation between the self-proclaimed secular regimes and their fight against terrorism on the one hand and the perceived threat of Islamic extremists on the other is difficult to trace for its causes and consequences. Assessing the risk remains a difficult task for outsiders, if the realities on the ground remain unaccessible. Plus, often the deconstruction of the myth of the Islamist threat (see brilliantly done by Tucker, 12.9.2013) leaves the observer with the only conclusion that the reproduction of projections of this very threat by the regimes might alienate moderate Muslims in the long run and create Islamic radicals eventually (Roche & Heathershaw 17.1.2011). Taken together the actions of the Central Asian states testify to the region-wide challenge to react to a complex call to stem the spread of Islamic extremism, perceived or real, global or local, and past or future. This challenge constantly tests the appropriateness of the current institutional setting of the Central Asian states and their policies vis-a-vis their Muslim communities. What can be considered to be the right mix of security control and religious freedom as a means to social integration?

3. The third development that I consider to indicate a changed need for Central Asian states to engage Islam in the region is the emergence of Islamic banking and financing. This development is made up of different trends. Following chronologically, the first notion of Islamic financing is connected with the activities of the “Islamic Development Bank” (IDB) which started operations in the region in the mid-90s (DeCordier 2012). The IDB, mostly funded by states from the Arabian peninsula and from Northern Africa, usually follows the rules of the globalized development aid industry. Relying on partnerships with state institutions in the target countries, funds of the agency are most often directed towards large scale infrastructural projects. Until 2012 the IDB invested more than 2,2 billion US-Dollar in the region (DeCordier 2012: 3), via its different brands – among others the “Islamic Corporation for Insurance and Export Credit” and the “Islamic Corporation of the Development of Private Sector” –, channeling financial aid to energy and transport projects, for the support of small and medium sized enterprises and sometimes also towards the reconstruction of Islamic religious sites. This investment, however, despite its Islamic origin, does not necessarily follow the principles of Islamic banking. *Sharia* compliant rules like the prohibition of interest (known as “riba” or “usury”) or the prohibition of investment in sinful activities (“haraam”) as well as the ban on financial deals that include speculation (“gharar”) play only a minor role in the banks activities in Central Asia. The dominant goal is to support the economies of countries with a Muslim majority population by means of infrastructural development.

The establishment and development of Islamic banking and financing changed during the global financial crisis in 2008. Today the situation in each country is different. In Kazakhstan, for example, the state started to show an increased interest in *sharia* conforming banking principles when it attempted to attract more investment from crisis-free states in the Middle East. Not without the support of the IDB, various interest groups within the Kazakh state apparatus met to set up a framework for the development of Islamic banking in the republic. The result was the establishment of the “Al-Hilal Bank”, which operates on Islamic principles and for most of its business cooperates with corporate and state enterprises. So far the retail market has not been engaged by the institute and remains underdeveloped in the republic. In Kyrgyzstan the regional representative of the IDB, Shamil Murtazaliev, used his contacts to the newly established regime of Kurmanbek Bakiev after the Tulip Revolution in 2005 to create a pilot project on retail banking with the support of the IDB. The formerly Russian owned “Ekobank” was finally re-branded “EkoIslamikBank” in July 2010 and had started to offer Islamic banking services as early as 2007. Whereas in Kazakhstan different state agencies pushed for the development of Islamic financing, in Kyrgyzstan the National Bank, once entitled with the oversight over all affairs related to Islamic banking, took the initiative to draft new legislation to prepare the market for different Islamic financial products (Wolters 2013). In Tajikistan, despite very positive attitudes among the population towards Islamic principles in business and financing, no Islamic banking institute was operating as of Spring 2013. However, with the help of the IDB and expertise from the Malaysian law firm “Zaid Ibrahim & Co.” the formulation of a draft law “On Islamic banking in the Republic of Tajikistan” was initiated (News.tj, 1.11.2012). In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan similar developments in Islamic financing can not be observed. Yet, in Spring 2013 the chairman of the supervisory board of “Hamkor Bank” in Tashkent, Ikram Ibragimov, announced an agreement with “AlHuda Centre of Islamic Banking and Economics” (Cpifinancial, 12.2.2013). The Pakistani

consultant is invited to assist in the establishment of Islamic finance services in the republic through the network of “Hamkor Bank” via human resource development and advise on *sharia* conformity of banking products.

Five years after the financial crisis the drift towards the quick establishment of Islamic banking seems to have come to an end. The need for fresh money from the Arabian states is reduced when access to Western financial markets is being re-established. This development in the international financial system altered the incentives for state agencies to engage in the creation of the corresponding legal infrastructure for Islamic financing and banking. Observers agree that most initiatives seem to remain with convinced proponents of Islamic Banking like Kuralai Yeldesbai, the head of a Kazakhstan-based Islamic insurance company, or Murtazaliev in Kyrgyzstan (see Botoeva 2013). Reaching out to the regular private customer is the challenge ahead and it demands much more state regulation and support than selected development projects with IDB or corporate business only, like in the case of “Al-Hilal”<sup>6</sup>. So far, most initiatives operate within an insufficient legal environment. The question is, to what extent the Central Asian states are willing, capable and prepared to answer to the rising demand for *sharia* compliant financial services among their populations.

It remains unclear to what extent this demand is also mirrored in informal practices that some parts of the Muslim population employ to regulate their economic and financial affairs. Informal financing practices are wide-spread in Central Asia and collective fund-raising events like “chernaya kassa” (“black cash desk”) are used by many to lend money within circles of friends and acquaintances. Muslim charity certainly features high within devote communities, where contributions to support the poor or to help building a mosque are common. This is far from any notion of *zakat*, one of the five columns of Islam which would demand the contribution of up to 10% of one's wealth to support the community. Unfortunately, there is less information available about Muslim endowments or simple social support groups that have been established as a means to generate capital within Muslim communities in the region. McGlinchey (2009) reports about the activities of Islamic “jamiyats” (“associations”) in the south of Kyrgyzstan that step in to fill the gap left by an ineffective state apparatus. Relying on contributions from regional elites but also small-scale gifts from regular Muslims, these organizations provide shelter for those in need, granting basic welfare. Other forms of such associations in the republic are the “Gulen” inspired group “Adep Bashaty” or the “Association of young Entrepreneurs” that likewise collect donations to support the vulnerable or to generate capital.<sup>7</sup> For Tajikistan, Epkenhans (2011) discusses the interpretation of *sadaqa*, a voluntarily donation, by one of the country's most known religious authorities, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda. Turajonzoda warns of excessive donation practices and reminds his audience of the need for *sharia* compliance, to restrain from public exhibition of wealth in donations and to not exceed one's financial capacities when contributing. This warnings can also be understood as a critique of wide-spread, even if functionally distorted, charity practices. Finally, in Uzbekistan the

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6 A new initiative in Kyrgyzstan, bringing together the IDB, “Kazakhstan Ijarah Company”, the “Eurasia Group AG”, and “Tredstone LLC”, aims to develop leasing services based on the “ijara” principle, a *sharia*-conform way to regulate the leasing of – here – arable assets, see CPIFinancial (1.6.2014).

7 There are few information available about the activities of such groups. About Gulen's engagement in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan see Balci (2003) and Turam (2004). For information about Gulen inspired groups in Kyrgyzstan see Abdyramanova (forthcoming).

Andijon massacre in May 2005 is also a story about a state that moves against a group of local businessmen who had set up an informal charity organization which was aiming at supporting the Muslim community. Once arrested supporters gathered to demand the freedom of the local entrepreneurs and eventually broke into the prison which was followed by the attack of the security forces (Karagiannis 2011). In all three instances stories about the existence and development of charity, of Muslim donation practices like *sadaqa* and associations in the form of “jamiyat” or like “Adep Bashaty”, inform about the relevant influence of Islamic forms to generate support and capital among the local populations in Central Asia.

The emergence of Islamic forms of doing business and financing, regardless of whether it is official or takes place in the shadows, poses challenges to the states in the region as it does offer opportunities to further develop society and its economy. The events in Andijon support the hypothesis that the local regimes are wary of independent social and economic capital circulating among informal Islamic groups. Even legalized forms of Islamic banking seem to carry the notion of a dubiousness in times of the “war against terror”. On the other hand, both ways represent new forms to produce economic and financial capital, and they promise to contribute to the integration of an otherwise socially fragmented society in the region. How do the states and their current political regimes prepare, institutionally and policy-wise, for this new call for action?

The newly emerging practices to do Islamic business and financing in Central Asia build upon Muslim communities in the region that experienced a religious revival in the last two decades. This potential to create capital, be it purely religious, or social and economic, can and should be considered by experts and political decision-makers alike as a source to strengthen the integration of society. In contrast, the states in the region consider of themselves as heirs to the secular legacy of the Soviet Union and are caught in the “discourse on danger” which serves regime security and international relation building, but risks to estrange the stakeholders of the different sorts of capital mentioned here. On the other hand, the task to produce economic growth, to generate social cohesion, and also continue the project of nation building, requires the political regimes in the region to develop sophisticated tools to engage these stakeholders, regardless of whether they are local Imams and their communities, foreign trained Islamic bankers, regionally operating missionaries, or young urban entrepreneurs and their charity associations. Even radically minded movements like “Hizb ut-Tahrir” deserve a differentiated policy approach, if only for the reason to reconnect the ever-escalating “discourse on danger” to the realities on the ground. The following section serves the purpose to survey current institutions and policies and their impact on the development of the “capitals” and their stakeholders' activities.

### **Regulating Islam and Muslim Communities in Central Asia**

In the states of Central Asia a set of different and only weakly integrated institutions regulate the phenomena described above. Two decades after independence, the management of security risks, the shaping of economic reform, and the oversight over religious communities continue to be perceived as separate issues that necessitate rather different state policies. The following section describes these distinguished spheres of responsibilities and their institutional arrangement.

The primary institution to regulate and monitor Muslim communities and their practices

of religion in almost every Central Asian republic are so called “Boards of Muftis” or “Spiritual Administrations”. They are inheritors of the “Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan” (SADUM) that was located in Tashkent and responsible for Soviet control over Muslim affairs in the Union. After independence, the newly established republics set up their own administrations to regulate Islamic affairs in the society, in parallel with new state organs to supervise the emerging religious diversity among the population. In Kyrgyzstan it is the “State Committee for Religious Affairs” that oversees all religious communities in the republic and the director of which is appointed by the president. The state demands from a religious community to get official registration before its members can practice their faith. A highly contested norm currently requires 10 members for a religious community to be entitled for registration with the Ministry of Justice after preliminary approval by the State Committee (see Wolters 2012). Muslim communities in Kyrgyzstan have their semi-official representation vis a vis the state in the “Spiritual Board (or Administration) of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan” (also referred to as “Muftiate”). It is headed by the “Supreme Mufti”, who is elected by the “Council of Ulemas” (in 2013 the supreme mufti is Rahmatulla Egemberdiev). The Spiritual Board is responsible for religious oversight and formally exercises control over the mosques in the countries, the madrasahs, Muslim organizations and it is tasked to supervise religious education. The Muftiate is an institution placed between state and the Muslim communities, it is official yet resembles more a semi-autonomous self-regulating public representation of the Muslim communities. In addition the state has the possibility to reach out to further organizations that claim to represent the interests of Muslim communities, like the “Congress of Muslims” for example. In Kazakhstan a similar structure does exist. Here the state body is called “Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Religious Affairs” and operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture since 2010. Similar to the case of the Kyrgyz state committee, the Kazakh counterpart collaborates with the ministry of justice for the registration of religious communities. Such groups must have at least 10 members and they are required to register not only with the central administration but also with regional administrations. In Kazakhstan the “Spiritual Board” is led by the Supreme Mufti and has its seat in Almaty (in 2013 the head is Jershan Majamerov). The Muftiate fulfills functions of oversight similar to those described for the Kyrgyz Muftiate. The fact that many mosques in the republic formally exist as affiliates of the spiritual board suggest an even stricter oversight practice, however. In Uzbekistan the same structure is being preserved with a highly centralized Muftiate operating under the supervision of the government. It is assigned to regulate Muslim faith from mosques to education (McGlinchey 2006: 125). In the case of Uzbekistan, some observers discuss to what extent the state also relies on alternative structures like the “informal” muftiate of religious authorities like former supreme mufti Shaykh Muhammad Sudiq Muhammad Yusuf (Tucker, 14.10.2013). Such twofold engagement underlines Uzbekistan's authoritarian approach to religion, in that it attempts to systematically access even informal sections of the society. In Turkmenistan the actual power to monitor is the domain of the “Council for Religious Affairs” that appoints – with presidential approval – the Imams and serves as the nexus between state and religious communities (Peyrouse 2011). The spiritual board, the “kaziyyat”, originally designed to serve as the semi-official link between state and society, came under pressure when former president Niyazov introduced the “Rukhnama” as the official Turkmen ideology. Unlike the situation in the neighboring republics, the

Turkmen spiritual board has not much powers left to oversee and regulate Muslim affairs. Instead the Council took over most of these tasks. Finally, in Tajikistan, the “Spiritual Board” as a successor to the Soviet SADUM, led by the Islamic scholar and qadi Akbar Turajonzoda, took sides in the civil war and was later found unreliable by the new government under president Emomali Rahmon. It abolished the Muftiate and in its place established the “Council of Ulema” and the “Islamic Centre” and bestowed it with the authorities that formerly rested with the spiritual board. Today in Tajikistan the Council issues *fatwas*, for example determining the length of beards and dress standards for women (Asia Plus, 17.11.2012), and regulates the registration of Muslim communities and oversees the selection of Imams. In its activities it is supervised by the “Department for Religious Affairs” under the Presidential Administration. Also, like in most of the other republics, the Council regulates Islamic education and formulates the curriculum in the Islamic University (O'Dell 2011: 16).

The semi-official institutionalization of spiritual boards and councils of ulemas represents the impact of the Soviet heritage and past forms to regulate Muslim affairs in Central Asia. So far neither of the republics has engaged into wide-scale reforms to rearrange the institutional link between state and religious society. Differences between the institutional settings across the republics relate to the autonomy given to the spiritual boards on the one hand and post-independence power constellations and their impact on institution-making, like Niyazov's rule in Turkmenistan or the civil war in Tajikistan, on the other. They do not signal a genuine departure from the historical perception of the patronizing state that uses institutions only to monitor and control. All spiritual boards or councils serve the purpose to guarantee the implementation of “moderate” or “domesticated” Islam, usually labeled as a version of the “Hanafi” school, yet they hardly provide a forum for open and public debates over contested religious issues within the society. How does such lack of reform reflect on the states' engagement with the “religious awakening” described above?

Before I describe the actual practices of regulation, I will review the institutions in the Central Asian states responsible for questions of security and for monitoring economic activities. To master the challenge of Islamic extremists, if imagined or real, is in most cases the task of the secret services in the Central Asian states. Where extremists are being prosecuted, the investigations as well as counter-operations are carried out by the “State Committee of National Security of Tajikistan”, the “State Committee of National Security of Kyrgyzstan”, the “National Security Service of Uzbekistan”, the “Turkmen Ministry of National Security” and the “Committee of National Security of Kazakhstan” (see for example for the case of Kazakhstan, EDM, 2.7.2012). As in the case with the spiritual boards, the secret services form a legacy of the Soviet era KGB, and, as it was the case in the past, serve as the main state organ to secure the well-being of the authoritarian political regimes. Furthermore, unlike the reform in Russia which created two separate institutions, the internal security service FSB, and the espionage and intelligence service FIS, the secret service organs in the Central Asian republics remained untouched after independence. The role of the secret services in the “fight against extremism” is determined by their close connection to each regime's central power structure and the task to reproduce the “discourse on danger”; the consequences of their work for the society, however, stems mostly from the lack of independent supervision and the unprofessionalism of competing security organs. The close connection to the ruling elite is formalized in the authority of presidents over the secret



services, even in Kyrgyzstan, which has experienced far-reaching reforms in establishing a parliamentary republic in recent years. In none of the republics has the parliament or any other political body gained genuine competences to check on the activities of the secret services. Also, the ministries of interior in most of the states have transformed into corrupt bodies that more often engage in organized crime activities than actually contributing to solving them (Cornell 2006). At least for the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reports inform today about the nexus between the ministries of interior and organized crime businesses, be it drug trafficking, human trafficking, smuggle of all kind, involvement in the game and sex industries (Marat 2006). This combination between a strong reliance of power-holders on the secret services for regime security (see for instance o Uzbekistan, Registan, 30.7.2013), the underfunded and unprofessional interior ministries, and the lack of political oversight over secret service activities contributes, it seems, to insufficient investigations into potential extremists' threats. Too often anti-terror operations end up deadly and any institutional inquiries by possible supervisory bodies are suspended due to the "secretive" nature of the actions undertaken<sup>8</sup>. Requests for official inquiries that could be launched against interior ministry activities do not take place, when the GKNB (Russian acronym for "State Committee for National Security") runs all operations. At the same time, such lack of inquiry and actual investigation adds to the impression of an hypothetical threat by extremists and perfectly serves the "discourse on danger". The facts behind the "fight against extremism" in Central Asia remain inaccessible, yet the impression of danger in the society stays rather real.

Concluding on the role of secret services, their success or failure eventually depends on the analytical angle developed. By most accounts, the secret services in the region must be considered to be more engaged into a game of fear production, the artificial creation of a threat projection than the actual fight against a real danger by Islamic radicals. Their reliance on confidentiality shields them from the potential scrutiny by skeptical observers. Regime stabilization, less so the global fight against terrorism, has today become the main task for the GKNBs in Central Asia.

Turning to the regulation of Islamic financing, the challenge so far has been the formulation of new legal norms to allow Islamic principles to be adopted in business and financing activities. So far, the initiative for such reforms has come from inside the governments. Eventually the monitoring of such activities in the sphere of banking lies with the Central Bank of each state, for example the licensing for new banks. The most advanced case is Kyrgyzstan where the Central Bank has not only fulfilled the formal role of accrediting new institutions, but also has been pressuring on law-makers to create more legislation to introduce additional Islamic financial instruments (Wolters 2013). In Kazakhstan similar pressure was build up by the "Kazakhstan Development Bank", at least in times of the financial crisis, when Islamic finance was considered to form the solution to the sudden reduction of investment coming from Europe. Only Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have had experiences with establishing Islamic financing institutes on their markets. It remains to be seen, if the eventual introduction of Islamic banking in Tajikistan brings about a similar increased authority of the Central Bank, or if the government or even the presidential administration keep reform processes under close control.

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8 In Kazakhstan ideas to create a special Anti-Terrorist Agency testify over the increased secrecy of the danger of extremism (see OSW, 17.10.2012)

A second challenge is the regulation of *sharia* compliance or Islamic financing and business. The adoption of Islamic principles in formalized forms like Islamic banking must be subject to approval by formally accredited Islamic authorities. In most cases such approval is issued by the “*Sharia* Supervisory Board” (SSB) of the corporation that offers Islamic financial products. In regard to such supervision all five republics show a rather low level of domestic capacity to guarantee adequate monitoring and accounting. On the other hand, international bodies like the “Accounting and Auditing Organization for Islamic Financial Institutions” and the “Islamic Financial Services Board” have developed rules for *sharia* compliance and set norms for the appointment and composition of SSBs. In result, banks like “Al-Hilal” in Kazakhstan or “EkoIslamikBank” in Kyrgyzstan rely on external guidance and appointments to staff their SSBs. In general this picture mirrors the weak institutionalization of Islamic knowledge production in the countries. Differences exist, however, when one surveys the control of this specific lack of institutionalized knowledge production. Kyrgyzstan certainly forms an extreme case. Here the spiritual board only superficially controls Imams and Islamic authorities and it is incapable to regulate *sharia* conformity on the ground. Much more so, as has been found out by Botoeva (2013), religious authorities give credit to Islamic finance and business practices and their *sharia* compliance while caring for their local following, less so for compliance with state rules. The opposite condition must be suspected for the case of Turkmenistan. The “*kaziyyat*” is tasked to implement state ideologies and guarantee their, albeit superficial, acknowledgement. Nothing is known about the autonomous, even if not institutionalized, production of theological knowledge. In Turkmenistan all is about Islam's compliance with the state's ideology. That this lack of even informal Islamic knowledge production has had no impact on Islamic forms of financing and business has to do with the lack of independent economic activities in the authoritarian state. To what extent local religious authorities managed to find ways to circumvent the state and establish their own guidelines and mobilize localized faithful economics, is difficult to assess from the outside.

Institutionally all Central Asian republics exhibit similar features in regard to forms of regulation of their respective Islamic communities. The Soviet legacy is strong to the extend that it shapes the state's attitude towards religious organizations and that it compels them to rest on organs to control and monitor, less so to engage and mobilize. The fight against the extremists' threat also shows similarities as secret service structures prevent public inquiries and sustain the “discourse on danger”. Differences between the countries become more visible, if one turns to actual events and practices in the states' efforts to “deal” with their respective Muslim communities. What are the trends in the development of the relationship between the state and the religious society?

In the case of Kazakhstan recent developments signal a return to more centralized forms of oversight and regulation. An issue in particular has been the critical position of the government vis à vis the “Tablighi Jama'at” movement.<sup>9</sup> In Kazakhstan the Tablighi have been active for many years and they were not considered a threat by most observers. Members of the movement were fined every now and then, yet the question

9 This Islamic group, with roots in India and today headquartered in Pakistan, proselytizes among Muslims with the aim to foster the religiosity among believers. To that end, members periodically form in groups and go from door to door and invite to local mosques to teach about their vision of Islamic faith that some consider to be more conservative.

to ban the group like other movements, for example “Hizb ut Tahrir”, was not raised (Forum 18, 14.11.2006). Conflicts between the movement and the state never left the local context, with cases of some members complaining about harassment from the side of local state administrations. Quite to the contrary, the movement was anxious to regularly state its non-political intentions. Like in other cases, where the Tablighi are active, a discussion evolved around the question, to what extent Tablighi ideas correspond to “local” traditions of Muslim faith – with no side in such discussion able to draw clear lines of what is pure tradition and what is “new” (see for example Global Voices, 12.6.2013). Connections by Tablighi members to extremist movements however, were not detected. Despite this history, in 2012 the Kazakh authorities slowly started to formulate a harsher stance on the Tablighi Jama'at. In October 2012 a Kazakh senator already claimed that more than 200 missionaries had been banned in the republic throughout the year, a steep rise comparing to the number of 35 banned missionaries in 2011 (Interfax, 19.10.2012). In early 2013 a district court in the capital Astana finally banned the movement following a request by the prosecutor general to declare the Tablighi an extremist organization (Centralasiaonline, 26.2.2013).<sup>10</sup> In its verdict the court explained that Tablighi Jamaat was distributing extremist literature; yet according to observers it did not specify what parts in the propaganda materials found were characterized as extremist. What is more, the court referred to similar bans in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to justify its decision, adding further substance to the impression that the ban followed political motives rooted in the “discourse on danger”, less so legal considerations or an actual theological dispute with the Tablighi. A conference organized by the State Agency of Religious Affairs in March 2013 with the suggestive title “Tablighi Jamaat – A Destructive Religious Movement” completed the picture of a new state effort to curtail the impact of missionary movements and Islamic reformist ideas. The chair of the conference, Kairat Lama Sharif, used the opportunity of the public conference to call upon Kazakh citizens not to fall for the radical propaganda of the Tablighi, while referring to new data according to which 80% of extremists were from this movement (Interfax-Kazakhstan, 29.3.2013). On the other hand it was claimed that those who joined the ranks of the movement were in need of help to find the way back to the “traditional forms of Islam”.

The case of the Tablighi Jama'at and the narrative employed by state officials is mirrored in further activities of Kazakh authorities that aim to preserve and develop a “traditional” Islam in contrast to all forms of “radical” versions. Within the framework of the new “Strategy of Kazakhstan 2050” such efforts shall guarantee the vision of the harmonious co-existence of multiple confessions in a secular republic. Also, to that end, a new security strategy initiated in Fall 2013 and a revised law on terrorism are set to work hand in hand with initiatives by the spiritual board and the state agency for religious affairs to raise the public awareness among the population about religious extremism and to promote “traditional spiritual values of the People of Kazakhstan” (Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Religious Affairs, 15.1.2014). In this regard, McDermott speaks about the idea of state authorities in Kazakhstan “of coopting the public in the fight against these potential threats” (EDM, 8.10.2013). The unreflected appropriation of denouncing terms in public representations as well as the repressive use of the pretext of “confessional harmony” signals the departure from more liberal forms

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10 Only in late 2012 the Kazakh National Security Committee called the already banned “Jund al-Khilafah” a threat to national security (Centralasiaonline, 4.12.2012). This move adds to the impression of a further enforcement of the discourse of danger by Islamic extremism in Kazakhstan.

to regulate religious affairs. In this view, outlawing the Tablighi must be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the social space for Islamic grassroots activism that manifests itself in local community building.

Last but not least, this trend can also be found in regard to the stimulation of Islamic financing and business. As Botoeva (2013) found out, further developments in support of Islamic economics have come to a halt after the effects of the financial crisis of 2008 have calmed down. Independent religious authorities seem less able to connect to the state and promote their own ideas of appropriate *sharia* conformity in business and finance activities. The impression is that state sponsored notions of Islamic banking, like those promoted by the head of the Kazakh branch of the IDB Yerlan Baitaulet, who sees Islamic banking as a version of ethic banking, aim to diffuse ideas of a systematic approach to faithful economics. The state in Kazakhstan increasingly takes the initiative for regulating and steering Islamic business and financing only in times of need and, more often, only under conditions of strict surveillance. Against this background the hopes of Islamic bankers to work the field of Islamic business in the republic, prepared by supportive legislation, have been disappointed as well as have been the hopes of moderate and reformist Islamic clerics to instill new ideas of faith and piety in the society.

In Kyrgyzstan the development seems to follow an opposite path. Security agencies in Kyrgyzstan certainly engage in the employment of the “discourse on danger” and regularly and publicly declare about the risks of extremists to the national security (Eurasia Daily Monitor, 14.1.2013). They also announce from time to time successes in apprehending radicals (Eurasia Daily Monitor, 16.7.2012). However, these actions appear less systematically and they are less embedded within an institutional structure. In neighboring Kazakhstan security agencies in cooperation with the Spiritual Administration and responsible government agencies combine efforts to implement a centrally formulated strategy that results in the limitation of societal space for unconventional Islamic ideas and practices. In Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, uncoordinated actions by competing institutions render the policies towards the Muslim communities, even if inspired by the idea of control and monitoring, less effective. Two cases shed light on the relation between the state in Kyrgyzstan and the religious society. One concerns the workings of the Spiritual Board, the second story refers to the events of Nookat. For years the “Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan” has been enmeshed in corruption scandals, eventually forcing the State Committee of National Security to intervene and to impose external control. One main reason for the Muftiate's low reputation had been continuous accusations towards its address regarding the issuing of seats for the *hajj*. Several thousand seats are being reserved for pilgrims from Kyrgyzstan every year and prices for tickets can go up to 2.000 Euro. The tickets are supposed to be distributed by a lottery, a process designed to guarantee transparency. However, this and similar procedures had been compromised and Muslims who wished to go to Mekka could only do so by bribing officials within the Spiritual Board (Eurasianet, 14.1.2013). The scandals over the Muftiate's doings had led to frequent removals and re-appointments of heads over the last years, with the reformist-minded Supreme Mufti Chubak Jalilov leaving office over quarrels with other state officials and competition within the Muftiate in Summer 2012. He was followed by Rahmatullah Egemberdiev, who by the time of his appointment was already subjected to investigations against him for alleged tax evasion (CACI Analyst, 2.10.2013). This

occupation of the spiritual board in Kyrgyzstan with its own internal scandals has alienated it from the Muslim communities in the country. The reaction to these developments are a lack of trust on the side of the common Muslim believer towards the Muftiate and an increasing adherence towards local Imams and religious authorities (McGlinchey 2009). What is more, religious authorities in the province act independently (like the family of the Kamalovs in the south of Kyrgyzstan for example) and today they are capable to dismiss the Spiritual Board's claim to leadership (Ibid.). In conclusion, the case of the Muftiate suggests that the decentralized form of religious leadership, and the trend among local Muslim communities to look for spiritual guidance elsewhere, is less the outcome of a clearly formulated policy but takes place as a default mechanism due to the state's incapacity to install its institutional supervision and control.

The second case, the so called “Nookat events”, sheds further light on the hypothesis that authorities in Kyrgyzstan have been involved in a complex process of dis- and reconnection with local Muslim communities. In these events, studied in depth by Khamidov (2009), a clash between believers and police occurred following a decision by local authorities to ban a public site for holiday prayer in the town of Nookat in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Khamidov shows how central authorities rely on Sovietized mechanisms to mobilize local administrators and clerics in their attempt to control and mobilize local Muslim communities. He also tracks down the limits of such engagement, when multiple webs of informal relations in local communities eventually lead to different conflict outcomes and effects unintended by central authorities. For the current analysis most important is the insight that in the local context in Kyrgyzstan, Muslim communities have developed their own management of affairs and thereby reduced the influence of extremist ideas (Khamidov 2009). Local religious authorities in the province might not necessarily follow the directives coming from a corrupted spiritual board in Bishkek, but that should not be mistaken for an increased radicalization in the province. Quite the opposite, a complex process of community-building on the ground, less troubled by central oversight, provides space to test and develop new Islamic practices and that condition seems to impede radical interpretations.

This trend becomes visible in other social contexts as well. In the capital, new forms of “faithful economics” are on the rise (Botoeva 2013). Groups like “Adep Bashaty”, the “Association of Young Entrepreneurs”, or the “Black Quadrat” are newly founded groups that seek to create bonds of trust and solidarity among Muslim believers. They operate in informal ways most of the time, yet they are not afraid of confrontations with the religious officialdom. The “Black Quadrat”, for example, has been in conflict with the Muftiate and the group has been accused of extremism. However, so far it is not banned and it seems not be afraid to move into the open to oppose such accusations (Barakelde, 4.6.2012). In the meantime, its representatives are collecting donations from circles of faithful entrepreneurs and use the funds to engage into charitable work among their followers.

In conclusion, Kyrgyzstan provides a rather different picture of relations between the state and Muslim communities. Not only is the state apparatus incapable of implementing policies like the ones formulated in Kazakhstan, but there is less of a driving potential of the “discourse on danger” to contribute to an influential projection of fear. Kyrgyzstan provides with a much more pluralistic political context in which the

level of state repression is considerably low. All attempts to utilize the “discourse on danger” were ill-manufactured and have failed so far. On the other hand, the pluralistic context in Kyrgyzstan must not be mistaken as the result of a well formulated strategy to decentralize and pluralize the political and the religious field. Quite to the contrary, the experimental character of religious debates in Kyrgyzstan, the evolving Islamic discourse, are an outcome by default. They are the result of an institutional setting that suffers from corruption and fragmentation and from a lack of efficiency of formal regulations which opens up societal space for political maneuvering on the grounds.

In Tajikistan the relation between the state and the Muslim communities presents a mix of attitudes and practices that can be observed in the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The “discourse on danger” certainly is being employed by state security agencies. For example, according to some observers, the GKNB's arrest of members of the “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” in Fall 2012 was announced without providing much evidence (Eurasia Daily Monitor, 3.10.2012). In September 2012 the Supreme Court sentenced several members of the extremist group “Jamaat Ansarullah” to lengthy prison terms for terrorist attacks committed in 2010 and 2011. Many observers, however, question the very existence of such a terrorist group and suspect the political regime to frame the activities of oppositional strongholds as Islamic extremists (Eurasia Daily Monitor, 25.9.2012). The “discourse on danger”, these cases suggest, plays into the hands of the political regime in its attempt to marginalize the opposition. Beyond such employment of the discourse, the regime certainly also tries to exert its control over local Muslim communities, using traditional forms of authoritarian oversight. Here however, the regime of Rahmon and the state institutions at its disposal seem to be quickly exhausting their capacities. According to Epkenhans (2011), for example, the state's attempts to control local religious authorities remain ineffective with an Islamic Center unable to design clear strategies for the co-optation of such authorities. The result of such an incapacity is a fragmented “religious field” that leaves much to be wished for in they eyes of the regime and in its attempt to make Islam part of its nation-building narrative. Yet, as Epkenhans describes, the field is formed by the interests and exchanges of different players that seek ties to local Muslim communities:

“In any case, local (political, business and/or criminal) elites frequently claim to support an ‘Islamic’ social order in their respective communities. By orchestrating an ‘Islamic’ habitus, local elites are able to establish solidarity networks, supplant inadequate local governmental structures and contain volatile groups within the communities. Local communities outside the elite stratum have sometimes convergent interests: patronage networks providing alternative forms of social order, access to business opportunities and eventually the representation of an ‘authentic’ Islamic practice in their community.” (Epkenhans 2011).

This picture is similar to that in Kyrgyzstan as it offers points of departure for social innovation in the space created by the disconnection between central authorities and local arenas of contesting, which Dushanbe is incapable to penetrate. The distinction between the two cases, however, lies in the regime's intention to monitor and control. In Kyrgyzstan the central authorities are not particularly concerned with the initiatives of local Muslim communities. What is more, they do not even try to prevent, again by default, the transfer of competing visions of an Islamic order to the central level. Neither does the institutional setting allow for such prevention, nor have political decision

makers shown any serious attempt to change the situation. What is left in the case of Kyrgyzstan is the miraculous work of the “politics of discrediting”, according to the rules of which each political initiative faces the public suspicion to be built upon corrupt motives and eventually gets compromised. The spiritual board in Bishkek testifies to this hypothesis. In Tajikistan, on the other hand, a genuine desire to control the Muslim communities must be considered. Only the tools of the authoritarian state apparatus in the case of Tajikistan seem not much developed nor are they funded well enough to secure the level of control that is demonstrated by the state in Kazakhstan, for example. Also, in contrast with Kyrgyzstan, the development of faithful economics in Tajikistan shows the gap between intentions and the means to implement political ideas and strategies. For years the state has been promoting the introduction of legislation that should allow Islamic banks to get registered. Despite such announcements, no corresponding law has been adopted (Asia Plus, 21.11.2013). Since 2012 experts and lawmakers examine possible regulations (Centralasiaonline, 6.12.2012) with the mentioned initiative of the IDB and the assistance of Malaysian consultants being the last of them. So far the draft law has been the best outcome.<sup>11</sup> In the end, the regime of Rahmon does produce declarations that aim, on the one hand, to engage the “discourse on danger”, and on the other, to monitor moderate Islamic activities, including the development of Islamic economics. One challenge for the regime lies obviously in the lack of a developed institutional setting to implement these divergent ideas and to provide sophisticated strategies (like those observable in Kazakhstan). A problem exacerbated by this lack, in the long run, might be the reduced social space on the ground for local Muslim communities to take affairs in their own hand effectively and productively. The danger here is the political regime in Tajikistan occupied with the desire to control and monitor the province, but without the capacity or knowledge to do so without harm and therefore contributing to alienation and radicalization of religious communities in local contexts.

In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan a possible public debate on the role of Islam currently seems unlikely. So far Uzbekistan has undertaken only minor steps to introduce Islamic banking, for example, and the regime of Islom Karimov by most accounts relies on its heavy security apparatus to employ the “discourse on danger” and to control any deviation from central state ideas of Islam on the ground. In Turkmenistan the situation looks even more grim, with the regime having successfully destroyed all means to engage in, even if only clandestine, examinations of Islamic thought as an alternative to the totalizing effect of Berdymukhammedov's state sponsored ideology. In their effort to control and suppress, both political regimes – not unlike their authoritarian neighbors in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan – receive increasing international support via their contribution to the fear projection with regard to future developments in Afghanistan. This support is even further extended with memberships in the “Shanghai Cooperation Organization” (all Central Asian states but Turkmenistan are members of the SCO) and in the “Collective Security Treaty Organization” (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in June 2012). Both regional security organizations propagate the “discourse on danger” in the region and both follow their hegemon's (China and Russia respectively) desire to strengthen the

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11 The “Dushanbe Business Forum 2013” in May 2013 was a further event to attract businesses interested in Islamic business and financing, with investors from members of the “Organization of Islamic Cooperation” (OIC), yet without a clear legislation at hand and no formal regulation for Islamic investors to build up their businesses in the republic (Idbgbf, 2013).

idea of the “foreign” Islamic extremist threat. In sum this international embedding of already existing domestic political agendas increases the incentives for the political regimes in Central Asia to further employ repressive means of control and supervision towards their Muslim communities. Such development, it seems, reduces the space for political maneuvering and it will exacerbate the often confrontational relation between grass-root Islam and local Muslim communities and their social and economic development potential on the one side, and central authorities and their notorious need for “religious engineering”, be it out of fear or for the sake of nation building, on the other.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I examined the relation between the Central Asian states towards their religious societies, in particular their Muslim communities and “Islamic economics”. The overview over the “Islamic awakening” in Central Asia as well as the survey of institutions for monitoring and regulation of the political regimes revealed rather similar experiences since the breakup of the Soviet Union. All states rely to some extent on inherited institutions to regulate their Muslim communities and perform the secular state; and all states employ to a more or lesser extent the “discourse on danger” to move against opposition forces, be they real or fictive. The short recounting of episodes of actual state engagement of Muslim affairs, however, showed differences in the results the states produce with their attempts to regulate and control. The social space for political maneuvering, the primary condition outlined in the beginning for a fruitful engagement of the religious parts of the society with the aim to strengthen societal integration and to foster economic development, appears in different size and shows different characteristics. In Kazakhstan the “discourse on danger” has already curtailed any initiative to experiment with decentralized forms of Muslim community regulation or Islamic financing. Official institutions like the GKNB or the agency for religious affairs work hand in hand with the Muftiate to guarantee the preservation of a harmonious relation between the religious parts of society and the state. The reduced space for political maneuvering poses a lost opportunity at best, when grass roots movements are not being used for social integration; and a security challenge at worst, when the dominant “discourse on danger” starts to alienate even moderate segments within the Muslim community. In Kyrgyzstan the central state has successfully infected any public figure with the general suspicion to represent corrupted interests, including the central religious bodies like the Spiritual Administration. This condition has created rather paralyzed central state monitors, and opened up space for political maneuvering at least for local religious authorities to engage into innovative Islamic practices. This engagement promises a vibrant religious society, open for impulses from abroad and from within and able to adapt to new changes. The potential, however, depends on the state's continued lack of interest and constant incapacity to formulate and implement religious policies that eventually would follow the lead of Kazakhstan and Russia. In Tajikistan the engagement of religious authorities in the province seems still possible and takes place. The challenge here is the constant threat by a state that obviously can not act as it otherwise, with enough resources available, would do. The future looks grim with a regime increasingly concerned with its own survival and a growing demand from Muslim communities to take spiritual affairs in their own hand. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, despite sporadic accounts of local initiatives and state sponsored attempts



to harness reformist Islamic thought, any public space to engage Muslim affairs publicly – and thus potentially politically – seems out of question for now. It is the state apparatus in both countries that suppresses the social transformative force of Islam and religion. The only distinction that can be drawn is that between an authoritarian regime in Turkmenistan that does not really need the “discourse on danger” for means of repression to much extend; and an authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan that has been relying on this discourse heavily – and that eventually runs the risk to produce the very threat it has only formed projections on for now.

In all five cases of the post-Soviet Central Asian republics the reduced social space to engage into new debates about the role of Islam and the Muslim communities creates risks for the societies in the long run. At least if religion in general and Islam in particular is considered to be a source for community strengthening and economic development, then in Central Asia this source is drying out due to a dominant “discourse on danger” dictating policies, and post-Soviet institutional settings fostering control and monitoring. The alternative, however, is less a question of democratic participation, as contended by Seifert and Usabaliev (2010), and the choice between revolutionary upheaval or national peace building; it is much more so the creation of debating space, be it public or informal, social or political, and hence the choice between stagnating social and economic development or new political and societal trajectories. The risk of political turbulences cannot be ignored. But I follow the assumption that the social innovation triggered by an open (public) engagement of Muslim affairs would benefit the Central Asian societies more in terms of progressive development. Opportunities to be developed are the new relations with the Islamic *ummah* and new forms of state & society relations, fully in contrast with the current failures of the political regimes in Central Asia to simply “administer” and “domesticate” Islam and “criminalize” their Muslim communities.

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