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"Islam" in the Security Discourse of the Post-Soviet Republics of Central Asia

Introduction

The complex of internal and external "security" (Russ. *bezopasnost'*) was one of the dominant discourses of Soviet political elites; this manifested itself not only in disproportionate military expenditure, but particularly in the central role played by the KGB. Since 1991, the political elites in Central Asia, most of whom used to be leading members of the Communist Party, have largely continued to follow the elite discourses and views of the Soviet period, despite the formal adoption of democratic systems by the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This is particularly true of views and concepts associated with the topic of "security": "Security" is generally understood not as an *inclusive* concept, in which "human security" (after the UN Commission of the same name) or the model of comprehensive security (such as the OSCE would like to represent) enjoys priority,[1] but as an *exclusive* concept that concerns only the political elite and their immediate networks. Instead of ensuring the involvement of broad societal groupings through the reconciliation of interests or consensus building, or making use of civil society structures in a domestic or regional security architecture, this model of security is primarily based upon the exclusion of popular opposition to the political and, above all, economic interests of the dominant elite.[2] In the presidential systems of Central Asia, this means above all a one-sided concentration on the presidents, their direct administrations – which in post-Soviet Central Asia generally possess more power than the various ministers – and the presidential family. Fundamental aspects of the security of the population – which the UN defines primarily as "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want" – are simply ignored. In this regard, the convergence of the terms *vlast'* (state power) und *bezopasnost'* (security) and their equivalent terms in the various official languages is telling.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that political discourses in the post-Soviet area, and in Central Asia in particular, are remarkable for their "virtual" character, i.e. the fact that they are simulated – and the "security dis-

1 Cf. Commission on Human Security (ed.), *Human Security Now*, New York 2003; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE Secretariat, Conflict Prevention Centre, Operations Service, *The OSCE Concept of Comprehensive and Co-operative Security. An Overview of Major Milestones*, SEC.GAL/100/09, Vienna, June 2009.

2 Cf. Venelin I. Ganev, Post-communism as an episode of state building: A reversed Tillyan perspective, in: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 4/2005, pp. 425-445.

course" is no exception. While all five Central Asian regimes claim to be seeking democratic legitimation, in fact, the relevant mechanisms and institutions of democracy (free elections, political parties, parliaments, etc.) are either subject to mass manipulation (elections) or more or less professionally staged (political parties). It is not the existence of a functioning democratic system that legitimizes the political elite of Central Asia, but the pretence of one. In this context, "virtual politics"[3] means that dominant elites declare their respect for democratic principles, human rights, and international co-operation, but, as a result of power-political considerations or economic interests, do not comply with the obligations that arise from them. Such virtuality can also be seen in the area of external security, particularly with regard to the regional and multilateral co-operation of the Central Asian countries. None of the five presidential systems and, above all, none of the presidents[4] is ready to delegate sovereign rights to multilateral institutions. The insufficient administrative and human resources available to the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics are clearly a reason for the failure of their democratic transformation as well as the inadequacy of their regional co-operation efforts since 1991. Nonetheless, it should be noted just how much the elites profit from the lack of democratic reforms and regional co-operation, although this fundamentally contradicts their publicly stated security interests.[5] The increasingly exclusive nationalist discourses of the dominant elites have further narrowed the range of options available in foreign policy – particularly in regional co-operation – and lent immediate conflicts, e.g. over water resources, a new dimension.[6] In relation to the high hopes and deep fears held about them, regional organizations – most significantly in this instance, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – have had barely any substantive influence on regional co-operation. Consequently, this is equally true of security co-operation, which theoretically is of principle importance for both the SCO and the CSTO. For instance, the SCO has broadly taken on the fight against "terrorism, separatism, and extremism", whereby the member states assume implicitly that the relevant threats are terrorism and extremism motivated by Islam.

3 Cf. Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven 2005.

4 Kyrgyzstan voted to adopt a parliamentary system in the constitutional referendum of 27 June 2010, but it remains uncertain how the country's elites will frame the new system.

5 Cf. Roy Allison, Virtual regionalism, regional structures and regime security in Central Asia, in: *Central Asian Survey* 2/2008, pp. 185-202.

6 The planning of the dam at Roghun and the massive campaign run by the government of Tajikistan have led to a dramatic deterioration in the already tense bilateral relations between Tashkent and Dushanbe. For instance, Uzbekistan has blocked rail transit through the country several times since early 2010. The dam at Roghun could regulate the flow into the Amu Darya. There is a further conflict between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over a dam project at Naryn, one of the chief tributaries of the Syr Darya.

Islam and Security

The "Islamic factor" was a constant element in the threat and security discourse both within and concerning the Soviet Union from as early as the 1970s. Both Soviet and Western experts regularly remarked upon the demographic change within the USSR in favour of the Muslim population, the putative immunity "of Islam" to socialist transformation and modernization, and the reactionary conservatism of societies with a strong Muslim influence, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus.[7] In this context, "Islam" or "the Islamic factor" was frequently presented as an essential feature of Muslim societies – one that was not subject to social, cultural, or political change. In the 1970s, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the revolution in Iran, Islamic activists and dissidents increasingly challenged the Soviet system. The younger generation of Central Asian Muslims, in particular, turned to the views and concepts of Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), who propagated a very narrow interpretation of Islam and is considered to be one of the founders of political Islam. With the arrival of glasnost, increasing volumes of public space opened up. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in particular, Islamic activists demanded the introduction of Islamic concepts of political and social order, which they frequently conceived of in exclusively nationalist terms. In this way, Islam became an integral component of the conceptions of the Tajik and Uzbek nations that were being strongly promoted.[8] This convergence of particularistic nationalism and Islamic conceptions of order was insufficiently recognized by both Soviet and Western observers, although "Wahhabis" were identified as the power behind an "Islamic renaissance" in Central Asia. "Wahhabis" is the name for followers of the Wahhabiyya, a Sunni Islamic order that had its roots on the Arabian peninsula in the 18th century and which follows an extremely narrow and aggressive interpretation of Islamic religious sources.

Wahhabis vehemently reject Islamic mysticism (Sufism), Islamic philosophy, together with all aspects of non-normative everyday Islamic culture, such as pilgrimages to the graves of saints and similar practices, and accuse all other Muslims of apostasy. Because of the specific local forms taken by Islamic religiosity in Central Asia, in particular non-normative but exceedingly popular practices such as the veneration of saints, the Wahhabiyya could only manifest itself in the region among marginalized groups that were excluded from mainstream local communities. The reference to "Wahhabi" influences on Central Asian Islamic activists also made it possible to include Saudi Arabia (and thence indirectly the trauma of Afghanistan) in the threat and security discourse on Islam in Central Asia, and particular attention has

7 See, for example, Alexandre Benningsen/Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, London 1983, or Talib S. Saidbaev, *Islam i obshchestvo. Opyt istoriko-sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya*, Moscow 1978.

8 Cf. Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, Berkeley 2007.

been paid to the financing of Islamic groups by Saudi Arabia. However, it should be noted that the financial needs of Muslim activists are generally not that great. In Central Asia, the financing of mosque building and religious schools is carried out less by ominous foreign sources than by local business people, politicians, and representatives of organized crime who consider it a way to earn religious and moral legitimacy in their communities. Accusations of foreign support for Islamic groups have also provided succour to a range of paranoid conspiracy theories. Finally, in this regard, it should be noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran has significantly increased its levels of development aid, particularly in Tajikistan, in which activities the Revolutionary Guards are the main actors – though they have the permission of the host countries.

Islam and Religions Policy in Post-Soviet Central Asia

Since 1991, the five Central Asian republics have all adopted theoretically democratic constitutions guaranteeing extensive religious freedom in line with Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. However, it rapidly became clear that the successor states of the USSR were proceeding hesitantly and arbitrarily in implementing their new constitutions. Since the political elites of post-Soviet Central Asia were largely recruited from former Communist Party cadres, who are (or were) still committed to the "scientific atheism" of the USSR, there was a continuity in the way religion, and particularly Islam, was perceived. Article 18 of the UN Declaration is interpreted in terms not of "religious *freedom*" but "freedom *of* religion". While the post-Soviet elites of Central Asia do accept Islam as part of a selective Central Asian cultural heritage, they reject Islam as part of a legitimate (for Muslims) social order and a concept of a political order (particularly as conceived by Islamic activists). The five Central Asian states can therefore all be said to be pursuing, albeit in different intensities and forms, Soviet strategies concerning how religious freedom may "function" – or, more accurately, "be manipulated".

"Official" vs. "Parallel" Islam

The USSR pursued a fundamentally atheistic model of society. The anti-religion campaign of the 1920s and the Stalinist persecutions of the 1930s rapidly destroyed traditional structures and institutions of normative Islam in Central Asia: Mosques and religious schools were closed, religious elites arrested, deported, and often liquidated, the practice of Islamic law was suspended, and the substantial land holdings of Islamic religious structures was expropriated. Less dependent on a normative Islamic written culture (as preserved and passed on by Islamic scholars), Muslim communities in Central

Asian developed local variations of Islam that interpreted a range of traditions and cultural practices as "Islamic" – as an expression of dissent from the Soviet system or the preservation of an "autochthonous" identity. Particularly after Stalin's death in 1953 and the amnesty that followed, the surviving Muslim clerics succeeded in re-establishing local structures and networks in their regions. These have been described by Soviet and Western observers as "parallel" Islam since the 1960s.

A correction was made to Soviet religions policy as early as 1943, as local Islamic practices had continued to be extremely popular despite large-scale persecution. A vital element in the new Soviet strategy was the recourse to "official" Islamic structures and institutions with the intention of training loyal clerics, acquiring authority over the interpretation of Islam, and controlling Islamic communities. A particular goal of these "official" institutions was to infiltrate "parallel" Islamic networks. However, the apparent dichotomy between "official" and "parallel" Islam is problematic and has little analytical value, as representatives of both spheres often pursued the same goals and were recruited from the same religious groups – groups such as the Sufi orders. The ostensibly "official" structures and institutions often functioned as patronage networks, which also integrated religious dissidents and "parallel" clerics and occasionally protected them from state persecution. At the same time, official Soviet religions policy oscillated between repression (the last large-scale atheistic campaign took place in the 1980s during Gorbachev's glasnost) and hesitant toleration. At no time did the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), the official governing body of Islam in the Soviet Union, possess the necessary resources to ensure authority over the interpretation of Islam in Central Islam. As a result of their closeness to state security services, the official institutions and a number of their functionaries had a poor reputation among the Islamic laity. From 1991, the now independent Central Asian states largely took over SADUM structures at Republic level under the name *qaziyyat* or *muftiyyat*.[9]

The five states, however, pursued different strategies in the positioning of their official Islamic administrative structures: The political elites in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan largely dispensed with the close control of official Islamic institutions from 1991 as they faced little opposition from Islamic activists. Nevertheless, in Kyrgyzstan in recent years, there has been a gradual change of direction, as the Bakiev regime has attempted, in the face of the increasingly public role played by Islam in the country, to strengthen official Islamic institutions, in this case the *muftiyyat*. The measures taken were nonetheless largely inconsistent and, following the events of April and June 2010, it is unlikely that the interim government will give the topic of Islam top priority. In Turkmenistan, by way of contrast, the bizarre self-promotion

9 *Qazi* and *mufti* are names for Islamic legal scholars. The establishment of official Islamic structures also occurred outside Central Asia, cf. Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, Princeton 2008.

of "Turkmenbashi" Saparmurat Niyazov left no room for religion outside a tightly defined framework. Under Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, no change of policy has yet been forthcoming. Uzbekistan's elite have faced a major challenge from Islamic activists since 1991, particularly in the Ferghana Valley. Islam has been identified as the country's central security problem – frequently with reference to the civil war in neighbouring Tajikistan. Uzbekistan acted far more systematically than its neighbours in gradually establishing a dense network of official Islamic state institutions that regulate all public aspects of religious life. As in so many areas of society in Uzbekistan, where the human rights situation is nothing short of catastrophic, the official policies implemented by these institutions seriously violate religious freedom and hence fulfil a repressive control function, which, flanked by measures taken by the internal security services (Interior Ministry, MVD, and National Security Service, NSS), generate additional conflicts between the state and the religiously oriented population. As a consequence of this, the official institutions enjoy no genuine popularity but are rather perceived to be the instruments of a repressive system.

In 1991, Tajikistan was less well prepared for independence than its Central Asian neighbours. Within a few months of the declaration of independence, large-scale regional conflicts over resources and politico-ideological power led to the outbreak of a civil war, which ended only in 1997 with the signing of a peace treaty between the opposition and the government. Although both sides used Islam to mobilize their supporters, the opposition, under the leadership of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was particularly prone to deploying Islamic concepts of order and society. At the same time, the official Islamic religious administration, the *qaziyyat*, under the leadership of Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, had, as of 1991, started to increasingly present itself as an independent political institution. When Turanjonzoda switched sides to the opposition in 1992, this led to the gradual dismantling of the *qaziyyat*, which was abolished in 1996 and has since met as the "High Council of Islamic Scholars", which enjoys far less support and has no actual powers. The central control function has been taken over in recent years by the department for religious affairs attached to the presidential administration, which also tends to see Islam as largely a security problem and has pursued a policy largely based on repression – in this case, particularly via the implementation of an arbitrary law on religion.

Religious Association Laws

Besides making frequently inconsistent attempt to co-opt Islam by means of official structures, the Central Asian republics have also enacted partially contradictory and repressive religious association laws.[10] While the majority

10 Cf. Tore Lindholm/W. Cole Durham Jr./Bahia G. Tahzib-Lie (eds), *Facilitating Freedom of Religion and Belief: A Deskbook*, Leiden 2004.

of OSCE participating States have done without separate laws on religion and do not interfere in the internal organization of religious communities (at most, the registration of a religious organization can be subject to the law on associations), the parliaments of the five Central Asian republics passed specific laws on religion – and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have strengthened their laws in recent years, despite international criticism.[11] In general, the various religious association laws require religious communities to register with the state, which in turn involves the fulfilment of a range of conditions. While the religious association laws are intended to support and regulate the activities of religious communities, the reality looks somewhat different. For instance, the registration of houses of worship (e.g. mosques, synagogues, and churches) generally requires the completion of comprehensive documentation, giving not just a demonstration that building and sanitation regulations have been fulfilled, but also a detailed description of religious beliefs. Furthermore, the wording of the laws is contradictory and allows for arbitrary interpretation – given the absence of the rule of law in Central Asia, religious communities have no legal recourse against arbitrary interpretation of the laws. However, what is more serious is the fact that the religious association laws allow state authorities to pass judgement on the character of a religion, i.e. to evaluate a given dogma as "good" or "bad" and to rule on the ethical and moral views of a faith. The direct intervention in internal affairs and the evaluation of the dogmas of a religious community is in contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and, above all, the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), which was also ratified by the post-Soviet Central Asian states in the 1990s (Kazakhstan in 2006). While civil society groups and various international organizations, including the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), worked hard to advise the various governments and parliaments in the drafting of the laws, pressing to ensure their compliance with international commitments, they were unsuccessful. The religious association laws make it fundamentally more difficult for Muslim communities to achieve registration (and thus to build mosques or open religious schools). However, other religious communities, mostly

11 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Comments on the Draft Law of the Republic of Tajikistan, "The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan about Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions"*, Warsaw, 31 January 2008, REL-TAJ/100/2008; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Comments on the Law on Amendments and Additions to some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Issues of Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations,* Warsaw, January 2009, REL-KAZ/125/2009; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ed.), *Comments on the Draft Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic"*, Warsaw, 7 October 2008, REL-KYR/120/2008; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Opinion on the Draft "Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religious Education and Religious Schools"*, Warsaw, 21 September 2009, REL-KYR/139/2009.

Christian missionary groups from abroad, are also increasingly being restricted by rigid interpretation of the laws. Here it should be noted that radical Islamic groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* ("Party of [Islamic] Liberation"), *Tablighi Jamaat* ("Society for Spreading Faith"), and *Salafiyya* (networks of Muslims found in Central Asia, see below for details) do not strive for registration for obvious reasons – and groups of this kind have often been banned in Central Asia on the basis not of religious laws but of other legislation (such as anti-terrorism laws). The religious association laws thus affect mostly religious communities that are interested in official registration and pursuing their activities by legal means. In theory, the Central Asian governments should be interested in legally integrating these religious communities, especially since this would also represent an opportunity for moderation. The frequently arbitrary and repressive interpretation of the religious association laws can ultimately lead to the disenchantment of religious groups that operate within the law, which may then decide not to seek registration.

Repression and Persecution: The Role of the Security Forces and Judiciary

Since the elites of Central Asia generally perceive Islam as a security problem, it is above all the security forces (militia, secret services) that have the task of monitoring the activities of religious communities and groups, and often of taking action against them. In this context, the security forces are fulfilling the expectations of the elites and their exclusive understanding of security. As the successor institutions of the KGB, the current security services have adopted the methods of their precursor, including the fabrication of evidence and the forcing of confessions. A further dramatic problem that has emerged is the absence of any democratic controls over the security forces: None of the parliaments of Central Asia has genuine legitimacy based on free and fair elections,[12] and this applies equally to the various parliamentary committees that have the task of monitoring the work of the security forces. This lack of democratic control should encourage restraint in questions of cooperation, yet the OSCE, for instance, is involved in a police project in Kyrgyzstan that failed dramatically (apparently in the naïve hope of announcing its return as an actor in the politico-military dimension in Central Asia), while in their analyses of Islam in Central Asia, experts on the region are proud to boast of their excellent contacts with regional security forces and paraphrase their views. The ethical implications of this are generally not discussed.

The lack of democratic control and transparency we find with regard to the security forces applies equally to the judiciary. The separation of powers between executive and judiciary is inadequate in post-Soviet Central Asia and is regularly suspended completely following interventions by the domin-

12 For details, see ODIHR's reports on the various parliamentary elections in Central Asia, at: www.osce.org/odihr.

ant elites. At the same time, the prevailing tendency is for trials of Islamic activists (such as members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* or the *Salafiyya*) to be held in camera and to result in disproportionately lengthy custodial sentences. Looking at developments of recent years, it is possible to conclude that the largely security-oriented strategy of the five Central Asia states with regard to Islamic communities and activists has generated additional conflict potential. The activities of religious communities outside the narrow official framework are increasingly being constrained. Islamic activists, such as members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and the *Salafiyya*, are subject to considerable persecution, which could lead to their increasing radicalization.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) is an Islamist movement that has been active in Central Asia since the mid-1990s. Founded in 1952 as a Palestinian group, it has gained a foothold among European Muslims as a kind of franchise operation since the 1980s. HT holds to a narrow interpretation of Islamic tradition and calls for the re-establishment of the Caliphate. It is banned in Germany, largely as a result of its anti-Semitic views, but is not considered a terrorist organization. While HT makes use of aggressive rhetoric that may be assumed to imply the existence of a climate in which violence is a possibility, it has never been proved to have been directly involved in terrorist activities. In Central Asia, HT is organized in the form of small, independent cells, notable, above all, for their anti-government and anti-Semitic propaganda. In the past, alleged sympathizers and members of HT have been condemned to long prison sentences as members of a terrorist organization.

For around five years now, Muslims in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been organizing themselves in local groups they have called *Salafiyya*. They also follow a narrow interpretation of Islamic tradition, but the *Salafiyya* does not have any recognizable organizational structure; it is rather a loose network of like-minded Muslims, who do not, however, make any strong political claims and have never been connected with any terrorist activities. Similarly to HT, the Central Asian states have banned the *Salafiyya* and sentenced, under dubious conditions, numerous members to lengthy custodial terms.

Groups and networks like HT and the *Salafiyya* may follow a radical agenda, but have so far never appeared in association with terrorist activities. While Central Asian security services have regularly accused HT of being involved in a range of attacks, the lack of transparency in their investigative practices, the common use of torture in securing "confessions", and the fact that trials are rarely open to public scrutiny mean that official reconstructions of events and suggestions of HT involvement have to be treated with a high degree of scepticism. Unfortunately, in connection with the "war on terror", this has been and continues to be treated with silent approval by various OSCE States (even – or particularly – by some to the West of Vienna), or even, in the case of Uzbekistan, as a result of the active co-operation of the security forces, accepted as a price worth paying. This has contributed sig-

nificantly to the discussion by civil society actors in Central Asia of the alleged double standards of Western OSCE participating States. Ultimately, critical observers fear that HT and other organizations are acting as ideological catalysts in the politicization of a younger generation of Islamic activists, who, given the persecution and disproportionate prosecution of alleged Islamists, could have recourse to increasingly radical forms of resistance.

Concluding Remarks

Security concerns with regard to Islamic terrorist movements and insurrections on the part of the five Central Asian republics are basically legitimate. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (*Ozbekiston islomii kharakati*, IMU), for instance, was a genuine danger in the region up to 2001. In 1999/2000, IMU fighters withdrew through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and joined up with *Al Qaida*. According to coalition reports, the IMU was largely destroyed during operation "Enduring Freedom", though a number of militants managed to withdraw to Pakistan's Swat Valley, and the Pakistan Army's 2009 offensive was directed primarily against so-called "foreign Taliban".

Despite their geographical proximity, linguistic and cultural affinity, and, above all, (alleged) common security interests, the Central Asian republics have failed to play a genuinely constructive role in a co-operative multilateral framework in the Afghanistan conflict since 2001. Mutual mistrust, contradictory interests, a lack of political will, and limited political and administrative capacities may be responsible for the failure of a regional Afghanistan policy to emerge in Central Asia. However, the US and the various European states involved also failed to consistently include the five Central Asian republics.

In Central Asia, Islam appears in political discourse mostly as a "security problem" or "danger". The concept of Islam as a component of a legitimate social order is only acknowledged hesitantly by the Central Asian elites, because Islam (like any religion) inevitably represents a challenge because of its claims of universal validity. Yet a civil society that expresses itself in Islamic terms (which may in part pursue interests similar to those of secular civil society actors) may nonetheless also represent a form of social order legitimated in Islamic terms, which, particularly in relation to questions of emancipation and equality, as well as a range of other social issues, is based on regressive notions that do not necessarily coincide with the ideals of a "good" civil society.

In recent years, there has been a rethinking of religions policy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. While the elites in all three states (as in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) tend to take a negative view of "religion", and of Islam in particular, it is clear today that the increasingly popular public ob-

servance of Islam by broad swathes of the population can no longer exclusively be channelled into unpopular and frequently underfunded official institutions and structures. In Tajikistan, for instance, President Emomalii Rahmon has attempted to co-opt Islam in the official conception of the Tajik nation. While the "conception" of the Tajik nation since 1991 has consistently avoided reference to the region's Islamic cultural heritage (e.g. Rahmon declared 2006 to be the "Year of Aryan culture"), Rahmon has presented himself more recently as an emphatically Islamic leader. In 2009, for instance, Tajikistan celebrated the year of the Imam A'zam (Abu Hanifa), the founder of the *Hanafi* school of Islamic jurisprudence in Sunni Islam, and, in 2010, Dushanbe was announced to be "The Capital of Islamic Civilization". At the same time, however, official religions policy pursued – as in the other countries of Central Asia – an increasingly repressive path, particularly by means of criminal prosecution of Islamic activists in a way that is disproportionate and lacks transparency.

Overall, it can be said that conflicts in post-Soviet Central Asia are being caused less by Islamic activists than by the policies of the dominant elites, who have largely subordinated state structures to their aims: Corruption and the socio-economic exclusion of large segments of the population, as well as security forces that have enforced the interests of the elites without democratic checks and balances and have infringed basic human rights have, in recent years, generated a far greater potential for conflict.