

INTRODUCTION

Reassessing the “Islamic Revival” in Central Asia

Pauline Jones

For most of the 1990s, there was a broad consensus that Central Asia was experiencing an “Islamic revival” analogous to what occurred throughout the Islamic world in the 1970s and 1980s,¹ and that this would have similarly negative effects on the social and political development of the five sovereign states that compose the region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.² And yet, despite over two decades of research, at the end of the 2000s we still lacked a thorough understanding of: (1) the extent, nature, and meaning of Central Asia’s Islamic revival, and (2) its social and political impact over time. The purpose of this edited volume is to shed light on both of these major questions by bringing together an international group of scholars from a variety of disciplines who offer a fresh perspective based on recent empirical work in one or more of the Central Asian states.

Admittedly, the chapters contained in this edited volume do not represent the first attempt to address these critical gaps in our knowledge. Most of what we know about the Islamic revival in post-Soviet Central Asia to date, however, is based on the thick description and cogent analysis of individual cases that have not been sufficiently stitched together to identify commonalities both within and across Central Asian states and societies.³ Research to date has also largely focused on documenting the Islamic re-

vival itself by demonstrating the increased role of Islam in citizens' daily lives and government policies designed to mitigate its social and political influence. We thus possess a rich array of detailed scholarly accounts, and yet lack a comprehensive picture that could form the basis of a cumulative body of knowledge.

This edited volume goes beyond earlier efforts by providing a more complete and aggregate portrayal of Central Asia's Islamic revival. First, it is divided into four parts, each of which examines the role that Islam has played in Central Asia since independence from a different perspective: part I, "A View from Below: Islam and Society in Central Asia," focuses on the everyday practice of Islam—its various manifestations and interpretations within and across local communities—and the role that both individuals and organized groups play in fostering these manifestations and interpretations in order to illuminate the form, content, and scope of Central Asia's Islamic revival; part II "A View from Above: Islam and the State in Central Asia," examines the evolution of state policies toward Islam, focusing on official attempts to regulate both the public and private practice of Islam through cultural, legal, and political institutions and the important ways in which these policies are distinct from Soviet religious policy; part III, "A View from Within: Sources of Religious Authority in Central Asia," describes the multitude of religious actors and specialists that compose the religious field (Bourdieu 1971) at both the local and national levels and the ways in which they are attempting to influence how communities understand and practice Islam, state policies toward Islam, and communal responses to state regulations; and finally, part IV, "A View from Outside: International Islam and Central Asia," reconsiders the extent to which increased interaction with and knowledge of the larger Islamic world is shaping both the form and content of Central Asia's Islamic revival and state responses. Second, the volume uses these perspectives to develop a set of collective insights, detailed below, that both corroborate and contradict the findings from previous research.

A Transformation, Not a Revival

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Louw 2007; Sahadeo and Zanca 2007), the chapters herein (particularly in part I) portray Islam in Central Asia as extremely diverse when it comes to both individual beliefs and daily practices across communities. Their point of departure is to suggest that this diversity warrants rethinking the common characterization of

increasing public and private manifestations of Islam in Central Asia since independence as merely a *revival* but rather as a *transformation*. The former term implies that Islam has “reappear[ed] in a cyclical or more or less unchanged form” (Davis 1987, 37). This volume clearly demonstrates, however, that what we have witnessed is not simply the reemergence of beliefs and practices that were suppressed under Soviet rule, but rather, their alteration in form, nature, and appearance, as individuals and communities gain direct access to ideas and information concerning both Islam and other religions via a variety of new sources (e.g., social media, Christian missionaries, and activists as well as opportunities to travel and study abroad), encounter an evolving range of state policies toward religion, and come into contact with multiple and sometimes competing sources of religious authority.

Recharacterizing Central Asia’s Islamic revival as a transformation is not only more accurate but also more consistent with the notion that Islamic beliefs and practices throughout the region should be viewed on a continuum from scriptural/textual to mystical/traditional with most people not located firmly at either end (Tucker 2013). Although these “competing discourses” have existed in Central Asia for centuries, they manifest themselves in different ways at both the individual and community levels and reflect what appears to be a “pluralization of Islam” since independence (Khalid 2007, 123). Based on an original mass survey conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2011–12, for example, Rouslan Jalil (chapter 1) concludes that society has generally become more attached to “certain aspects of Islamic tradition” and more committed to “observ[ing] . . . Islamic rituals” but that this varies significantly across regions and ethnic groups. Moreover, he finds that “despite the low level of religious participation [measured as adherence to the five pillars of Islam], the majority of the society considers itself to be religious.” His findings are consistent with two other chapters in part I that provide a more intimate examination of the multiple beliefs and practices associated with individual piety among local populations in Central Asia. As Svetlana Peshkova (chapter 2) argues, there is no singular meaning when it comes to being a pious Muslim, and thus, no one practice or behavior that constitutes piety. Rather, Muslims in Central Asia engage in a creative synthesis of multiple existing conceptions of piety to “create unique understandings of ‘correct’ Islam.” Finally, whereas both these chapters demonstrate the salience of the mystical/traditional end of the continuum, the final chapter in this section discusses the local communities in which scriptural/textual interpretations have gained the greatest

resonance. Similar to some previous studies (e.g., Babadzhanov 1999; Olcott 2007a), Vera Exnerova (chapter 3) emphasizes the domestic origins of fundamentalist beliefs and practices associated with radical political Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia. In contrast to these earlier studies, however, she argues that the Islamist groups that promote such beliefs and practices—namely, Mujaddidiya and Hizb-ut-Tahrir—are not interested in politics at all, but rather, in spiritual change within their communities. Exnerova's research also demonstrates that the desire to "purify" Islam in Central Asia has local origins rooted in a highly localized Islamic education that proliferated under Soviet rule.

Distinct State Policies

The plurality of beliefs and practices that characterize Islam in Central Asia, of course, do not exist in a political vacuum. Accordingly, the chapters in part II offer another set of collective insights regarding the evolution of state policies toward religion. In sum, they demonstrate that the avowedly secular governments of Central Asia have pursued approaches to regulating Islam that are distinct—not only from one another but also from their Soviet predecessors. David Abramson and Noah Tucker (chapter 4), for example, adeptly describe the state's response to the Islamic transformation in Uzbekistan as "inconsistent, confusing, and brutal." They argue that since independence the incumbent regime has adopted and implemented rules and procedures that are in many ways more restrictive, expansive, and invasive than under Soviet rule in an effort "to monitor, limit, and ultimately engineer Muslim religiosity" that is motivated by self-preservation. Similarly, Emily O'Dell (chapter 5) contends that the official rehabilitation of Sufism in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan from a source of Islamic extremism under tsarist and Soviet rule to a source of moderation was spurred by the regime's need in each country for allies to support their increasingly authoritarian rule. Both chapters thus illuminate how declining legitimacy in the wake of increasing religious expression compelled Central Asian regimes governing predominantly Muslim populations to reject the Soviet brand of secularism they inherited and manufacture their own.

These insights counter the common view that the state approach toward Islam in Central Asia is essentially a continuation of Soviet religious policy. Perhaps even more important, they suggest the need to reconsider both the substance of Soviet policy and its impact. In the concluding chapter in this section, therefore, Eren Murat Tasar (chapter 6) calls into question the

degree to which the Soviet state successfully controlled Islamic belief and practice by examining the persistence of “unregistered” Muslim religious leaders despite the strict registration requirements that Stalin imposed in the early 1940s. He argues convincingly that, although this outcome was “ideologically unacceptable” and “a source of consternation and worry for the leadership,” like other “gray spaces” such as the underground economy, it was unavoidable given the Soviet state’s emphasis on the rule of law over repression after the Second World War.

Multiple and Competing Sources of Religious Authority

Among the most important factors influencing the design and implementation of state policies toward Islam in Central Asia are the role of religious leaders and their relationship with state officials at both the local and national levels. And yet, this aspect has been relatively understudied. Part III of this edited volume is thus devoted to identifying the multiple claimants to religious authority, and how they interact with local communities, state officials, and one another.

Noor O’Neill Borbieva (chapter 7) highlights how the sources of religious authority in Central Asia—and hence, the basis for legitimately claiming such authority—have changed over time and the way in which competing sources of authority have contributed to the construction of local variants of Islam in the region. Whereas in the pre-Soviet period authority was derived from “the community and particularly the elders” who were entrusted with determining proper behavior for Muslims within their jurisdiction, both the Soviet and post-Soviet states attempted to centralize authority based on a singular interpretation of sacred texts. Focusing on the case of Kyrgyzstan, she argues that consolidation at the national level has unwittingly elevated a fundamentalist discourse over more traditional ones that have stronger resonance with the local population. In contrast, Tim Epkenhans (chapter 8) emphasizes the failure of Tajikistan’s government to limit the role and influence of a variety of nonstate religious specialists, who rely on a combination of historic genealogical lineage—in particular, descent from a Sufi order—and modern economic success as their source of authority. Such figures use this authority not only to cultivate a national following, bolstered by the growing need for spiritual advice that can be easily transmitted via the Internet and other media, but also to routinely ignore the directives of state-trained and -appointed religious specialists.

While the two aforementioned chapters underscore the fact that

religious authority in Central Asia is diffuse, they also suggest that it is localized. Alisher Khamidov (chapter 9) demonstrates how local informal ties and dispute resolution mechanisms developed under Soviet rule can both preserve the authority of local religious leaders vis-à-vis government officials and prevent violent confrontation between pious communities and the secular state. He argues that the Kyrgyzstan government's efforts "to tighten controls over religion" since the late 2000s have increased the likelihood for clashes between the local population and officials charged with implementing these unpopular regulations. Where local "power brokers" could work together amicably, however, they could find a peaceful resolution.

Exaggerated Influence of Transnational Islam

Finally, the chapters that compose part IV suggests that the influence of transnational Islam on Central Asia's "Islamic revival" is grossly overstated and offer a more nuanced portrayal of the way in which "foreign Islam" has affected Central Asia's Islamic transformation. Mukaram Toktogulova (chapter 10) introduces a common theme across these chapters by examining the efforts of global Tablighi Jama'at activists in Kyrgyzstan to adapt their message and approach to the local context. This process of "localization," she argues, has enabled the global Tablighi Jama'at network to promote beliefs and practices that are associated with scripture-based understandings of Islam, which have heretofore been considered "foreign" or "alien." In her account of the establishment of Islamic banking in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Aisalkyn Botoeva (chapter 11) also emphasizes the crucial role of domestic actors in "fram[ing], translat[ing], and implement[ing]" transnational Islamic institutions for the local context. She argues that the motivations behind support for Islamic banking and other sharia-compliant businesses, moreover, vary across these actors: whereas state regulators are driven primarily by the political and economic benefits, entrepreneurs are driven by the desire to align their business practices with their religious identity as pious Muslims. Similarly, Manja Stephan-Emmrich (chapter 12) highlights the diversity of motivations in her analysis of the growing trend among young Tajiks to study abroad despite the threat of state persecution upon return. She finds that young Tajiks seek foreign religious training in order to better secure their livelihoods, for example, by improving their marriage prospects and elevating their social status in the community, rather than as an expression of individual piety.

The Pluralism of Piety

While all these collective insights improve our understanding of the extent, nature, and meaning of Central Asia's Islamic revival and its impact over time, perhaps the most important message that this edited volume conveys is the need to reconsider the presumed linkage between this revival, rising levels of religiosity, and particular social or political attitudes and behaviors. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of mosques multiplied, religious artifacts became more visible, and conservative dress proliferated among Muslims in Central Asia. Many predicted that this revival would lead to higher levels of religiosity among Central Asian Muslims, and in turn, that higher levels of religiosity would foster support for radical Islamist movements.⁴

Recasting what has occurred in Central Asia as not merely a revival but rather a transformation, however, makes drawing such links not only difficult but also counterproductive. Rising levels of religiosity in Central Asia have manifested in a diversity of beliefs and practices that cannot be measured simply in terms of Islamic orthodoxy. Thus, we also need to develop more appropriate measures of religiosity that capture this diversity and, in turn, use this diversity to rethink existing theories of how religiosity affects attitudes and behaviors (Jones Luong 2014). The variation in government policy toward Islam across the Central Asian states, moreover, further complicates these presumed linkages because we should expect these policies to have different effects—both on levels of religiosity and on the propensity for higher levels of religiosity to foster support for radical solutions. At the same time, the finding that there are multiple and competing sources of religious authority—even where government policies are the most repressive—suggests that we can expect higher levels of religiosity across these states to continue to be expressed via multiple beliefs and practices that often combine scriptural/textual and mystical/traditional interpretations of Islam. Finally, the revelation that the threat of so-called foreign Islam has been exaggerated should provide some solace to those who are concerned about the unfiltered influence of transnational groups. In order to mobilize the Central Asian population, these groups will need to build domestic constituencies, which requires a message that resonates locally. The pluralism of piety in Central Asia, however, makes it difficult for any single group or ideology to dominate.