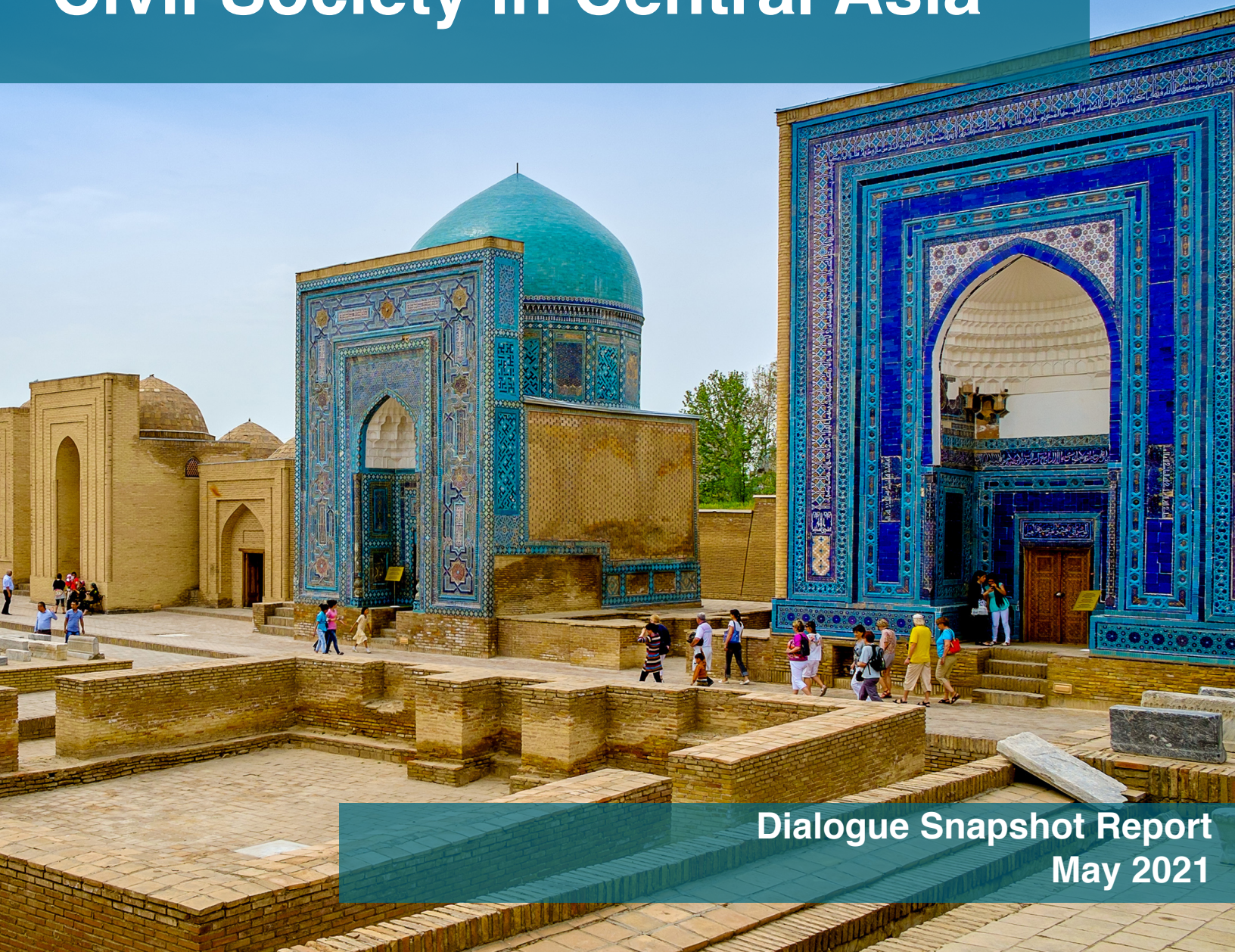


Emerging Forms of Islamic Civil Society in Central Asia



Dialogue Snapshot Report
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THE OXUS SOCIETY
FOR CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS

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Dialogue Summary

Although levels of religiosity vary, over eighty five percent of Central Asians self-identify as Muslim, with the vast majority adhering to the Sunni Hanafi school of jurisprudence and over 100,000 Pamiris in Tajikistan following Shia Isma'ilism.¹ Almost 30 years after the end of the Soviet Union, many Central Asians, in particular the younger generation, are demanding that Islam play a more central role in public and private life. But the governments of Central Asia have adopted strict secular regimes, framing certain religious activities as threats to national security and labelling them as “non-traditional” and “extremist.” Yet despite this environment, Islamic civil society actors have proliferated and are engaged in a range of activities, including education, pastoral care, peacebuilding, relief and advocacy. In a recent unpublished survey by two of the participants in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for an international donor, the majority of respondents exhibited a preference for receiving support from Islamic charities rather than secular ones.

Over the course of three dialogue sessions between February and March 2021, the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs and European Neighborhood Council gathered together a group of experts, representatives of civil society, and government officials to discuss the emergence of Islamic civil society in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, including Islamic charities, mosques, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social media. The participants addressed the following questions:

- How should we define Islamic civil society? Is it a useful concept?
- How popular is Islamic civil society in Central Asia?
- How is Covid-19 affecting the role of Islamic civil society in the region?
- Is Islamic civil society a potential source of stability, human security, and development?
- What opportunities are there for dialogue with forms of civil society and assistance offered by NGOs and the state?

Although the group had a wide array of viewpoints, they loosely converged around the following points:

- **Islamic civil society is growing in importance in Central Asia**, but remains an understudied topic.
- While there is no agreed upon definition of Islamic civil society, it **includes six types of actors: mosques, mahallas, charities, NGOs, jamaats and muftiates**,² all of whom frame their activities as being driven by Islamic norms and morality.

¹ Lipka, Michael. “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and around the World.” *Pew Research Center*, 9 Aug. 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world.

² These terms are defined further down in the report.

- **Islamic civil society was strengthened by the Covid-19 pandemic**, which uncovered the weaknesses of state governance and offered opportunities for new actors to step in to provide services to the local population.
- **Dynamics of Islamic civil society vary across the region**, with Kyrgyzstan hosting the widest array of groups and Tajikistan the fewest (Turkmenistan is not included in this report).
- **The growth of Islamic civil society in the region has been restricted by secular regimes** who view the growth of religious sentiments as an alternative source of legitimacy and potential threat to social order.



Emerging Forms of Islamic Civil Society in Central Asia

Report by: Edward Lemon, Samuel Doveri Vesterbye, Bradley Jardine

Defining Islamic Civil Society

Civil society is widely understood as the realm of associational life outside the individual or family, and the state.³ According to rational theorists, civil society refers to groups of individuals who work to overcome the collective action problem. That is, using associations to steer self-interested individuals toward common goals of interest to the larger group.⁴ For some, the concept of civil society is regarded as a specifically western European construct, which emerged from the separation of the private and public spheres of authority during the early modern period and was conceptualized by Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Charles de Montesquieu, G. W. F. Hegel, and Alexis de Tocqueville.⁵ Some scholars have doubted the possibility of the existence of civil society in the Muslim world, claiming that two central tenets of civil society, individualism and democracy, are absent there.⁶

But others have challenged this claim, arguing that neither individualism nor democracy is a precondition for civil society to exist.⁷ For many, the concept is much broader, referring to myriad forms of association, interest-group formation, mutual-support and solidarity that exist in diverse societies and political environments.⁸ Civil society is more than just a collection of organizations pursuing the interests of their members, and can be a space where citizens are empowered to express their needs. These associations also create a deeper sense of belonging. Civil society rests on solidarity which is based on notions of social justice. As Durkheim stated, “social solidarity is a wholly moral phenomenon.”⁹ Religion can be a part of this picture.¹⁰

³ VanDyck defines civil society as an ecosystem of “organized and organic social and cultural relations existing in the space between the state, business, and family, which builds on indigenous and external knowledge, values, traditions, and principles to foster collaboration and the achievement of specific goals by and among citizens and other stakeholders.” See: VanDyck, Charles Kojo. “Concept and Definition of Civil Society Sustainability,” CSIS, 2017, p.1.

⁴ Manor, James, Robinson, Mark and White, Gordon. “Civil Society and Governance: A Concept Paper.” Concept Paper, 1999, p.4.

⁵ Poggi, Gianfranco. *The Development of the Modern State: A Sociological Introduction*. Stanford University Press, 1978.

⁶ Gellner, Ernest. *Conditions of Liberty*. Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1994; Hall, John. *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison*. 1st ed., Polity, 1995.

⁷ Kamali, Masoud. “Civil Society and Islam: A Sociological Perspective.” *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2001, pp. 457–82.

⁸ Sajoo, Aryn. *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives*. I. B. Tauris, 2002; Howell, Jude. *Civil Society & Development: A Critical Exploration*. UK ed., Lynne Rienner Pub, 2002.

⁹ Durkheim, Emile. *Division Of Labor In Society*. Free Press, 2014, p.24

¹⁰ Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Religion in Global Civil Society*. Oxford University Press, 2005; Casanova, Jose. “Civil Society and Religion: Retrospective Reflections on Catholicism and Prospective Reflections on Islam.” *Social Research*, vo.68, no.4, 2001; Falk, Richard. “Global Civil Society: Perspectives, Initiatives, Movements.” *Oxford Development Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1998.

Increasingly, community organizations in Central Asia are choosing to identify themselves as “Islamic.” Islam promotes forms of associational life and mutual support, inhabiting a lifeworld that is distinct from the secular. Many actors draw on the concept of redistributive justice, based on tenets of the Qur’an such as *sadaqah* (charity) and *zakat* (alms-giving). As Moussalli notes, “the first Islamic community was referred to as *al-mujtama’ al-madani* (civil society)” a solidarity group of believers.¹¹ Islamic civil society has existed in different forms since the birth of Islam. For instance, a number of scholars have argued the existence of an independent ulama in many Muslim societies was the basis of a form of civil society.¹² They enjoyed economic independence, through *waqf* (religious endowments) and *zakat* (religious taxes), and had legitimacy through *ijtihad*, the interpretation of Quran and hadith to give people guidance. They acted as advisers to the rulers and mediators between the rulers and the ruled.¹³ At their core, these organizations pursue civil engagement in a manner consistent with religious practice, often espousing conservative ideas regarding issues like gender, or emphasizing respect for the elderly or the centrality of communitarian values over liberal individualism. Wariness of religious labels may fuel shortsightedness, with western donors failing to recognize potential Islamic paths to political reform, or how such groups can contribute to the wellbeing of Muslim populations.

Are organizations or individuals part of Islamic civil society because they style themselves as Islamic?

Is it about the sources of funding?

Should it be defined in opposition to secular civil society?

Throughout the workshop, a number of participants questioned the utility of Islamic civil society as a concept, arguing that it may be a wiser course to not create a false dichotomy between secular civil society and Islamic civil society. Others pointed out that in other parts of the Muslim world, such as Indonesia and the Middle East, when people refer to civil society, they more often than not referred to religious organizations. One participant noted the difficulties with defining Islamic civil society. Are organizations or individuals part of Islamic civil society because they style themselves as Islamic? Is it about the sources of funding? Should it be defined in opposition to secular civil society? Crucially, many participants noted the potential risks of encouraging religious labels, arguing that it could fuel societal fragmentation, or in some cases, even violence.

Often times, Islamic civil society is understood by western-oriented activists as being antithetical to traditional liberal values. But this is a simplification, according to participants who have conducted extensive fieldwork on the topic. According to them, Islamic civil society is extremely dynamic and diverse, featuring a dizzying cluster of pro-western, pro-women, and liberal-oriented groups, alongside deeply conservative and western-sceptic organizations. This

¹¹ Moussali, Ahmad. “Modern Islamic Fundamentalist Discourses on Civil Society, Pluralism and Democracy” in Norton, Richard. (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*. Brill, 1995, p. 83.

¹² Kamali, Masoud. “Civil Society and Islam: A Sociological Perspective.” *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2001, pp. 457–82; Ibrahim, Mahmood. *Merchant Capital and Islam*. Univ of Texas Pr, 1990.

¹³ Ibrahim, Mahmood. *Merchant Capital and Islam*. Univ of Texas Pr, 1990.

diversity extends beyond ideology to more practical matters, including funding structures, and organizational hierarchies. At present, there is a substantial gap in the literature regarding the application of Islamic principles and concepts within civil society activism. In order to have a serious discussion on Islamic civil society, it is crucial to move beyond western norms and concepts, and seek to understand and define a new Islamically-oriented vocabulary for civic engagement.

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Mapping the Contours of Islamic Society

Panelists suggested dividing Islamic civil society actors in Central Asia according to a six-fold typology consisting of:

1. Islamic NGOs
2. Islamic charities
3. Jamaats
4. Mosques
5. Muftiates
6. Mahallas

Each of these actors will be defined below with an overview of their distinct roles, resources, and capacity within the broader community.

Islamic NGOs

Islamic NGOs are the most diverse in Central Asia in terms of status and activities. These organizations can be official, or semi-official; locally, nationally, or internationally; and staffed by anything from a handful of people to thousands. With regards to activities, Islamic NGOs in the region are engaged in everything from charity, such as providing food, education, and Covid-19 related aid, to development, such as providing grants to local business startups.

Successful local Islamic civil society organizations include Mutakalim, a Muslim women's rights NGO in Kyrgyzstan was established in 1999, and has offices throughout the country. Another is the Aga Khan Foundation, which primarily operates in the mountainous Pamir region of Tajikistan, but that also operates in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. According to the authors of a recent field report on Islamic NGOs in Central Asia, the majority prefer to maintain low profiles, fearing that their respective governments may interfere in their activities should they become too public.¹⁴

Islamic Charity Foundations

These organizations function to collect and distribute aid, sometimes in the form of coalitions, and often with support from donors in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. According to participants, the most common activity they engage in is the construction of mosques throughout the region. In addition, foundations engage in social projects providing schooling,

¹⁴ Nasritdinov, Emil & Peyrouse, Sebastien. "Is There Room for More Engagement with Muslim Civil Society in Central Asia? Disaggregating its Multiple Components, Approaches and Goals," USIP, forthcoming



Islamic charities have played a significant role in filling gaps in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Photo: [Vladimir Tretyakov](#).

hospital services, distributing meat during Eid al-Adha and organizing traditional *iftar* dinners. Some have even been noted as providing critical infrastructure, such as irrigation and clean water supplies.

Active international organizations include the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF), an Iranian humanitarian and relief NGO based on Islamic values, which was particularly active in Tajikistan until recently, and the Turkish IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation.

Jamaats

Jamaats are a form of group adhering closely to Islamic norms, meaning their organization and activities vary widely. Jamaats play an important role in shaping group identities and providing mutual aid, which may include members disengaging from the rest of society and the state. For these reasons, Central Asian governments often view their activities with suspicion. Emphasis on normative exclusivity also means Jamaats tend to view one another as rivals, and they often seek adherents from specific demographics. According to our panelists, these groups provide crucial social functions; helping members overcome addiction, or providing professional development workshops. One prominent actor is the proselytizing movement Tablighi-Jama'at, a Sunni group which originated in South Asia and focuses on calling people to Islam. Banned across the region apart from in Kyrgyzstan, Tablighi-Jama'at (TJ) addresses the wellbeing of the umma, both spiritually and economically. While TJ is the most visible, other quietist movements

such as the Madhali Salafis in Kazakhstan or supporters of the the late Muhammad Sodik Muhammad Yusuf, Uzbekistan's first post-independence grand mufti, are also prominent, although they are careful not to define themselves as organized social movements or attempt to register as legal organizations so as to avoid too much government attention. Jamaats have been viewed as threatening by Central Asian regimes. A group of pious businessmen who called themselves Birodarlar, but came to be labelled Akromiya, were arrested in Andijon, Uzbekistan in May 2005 and accused of extremism. In the ensuing protest against their arrest and violent government crackdown, hundreds were killed.

Mosques

Mosques have established themselves as a vital channel for Islamic activity in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Where there were just over 400 officially registered mosques in the region in 1991, now there are now over 10,000. While all mosques are registered with the government, structurally speaking, mosques vary widely, with some being more institutionalized and top down, while others operate more informally, relying on grassroots networks. Revenue streams vary too. While many large-scale mosques benefit from state-funding, the majority of mosques surveyed by participants tend to operate small budgets and remain relatively limited in terms of capacity. Like with Islamic NGOs and foundations, mosques engage in community activism, distributing aid for the poor, in addition to providing a source of education for communities in need.

Crucially, mosques operate as an important hub of social activity. For example, individuals often have an evening "mashwara," which is when people gather every day to assess positive community impact from the day prior, and outline objectives for community impact the following day. The mashwara is a fundamental principle not only of mosques, but of the "mahalla" (neighborhood), and the "jamaat." According to fieldwork conducted by participants in the region, mosques tend to cater mainly to men, and especially to younger generations.

Muftiate

Muftiates are bureaucratic entities in Central Asia, charged with governing the official practice of Islam (as codified by the state), and overseeing mosques and traditional practices followed by their respective clergies. While their affiliation with the central governments varies from state to state, they are expected to coordinate closely with government committees for religious affairs and local state security services. In addition to their role as institutions of religious oversight, muftiates also manage the *hajj* pilgrimage, giving them an opportunity for raising money from bribes, carrying out charitable functions, distributing food and aid. Participants noted that these activities are poorly publicized and not widely known.

Mahalla

Mahallas, a traditional form of community organization at the neighborhood level in Central Asian cities, are also the lowest level of local government in Uzbekistan, tasked with managing daily life, surveilling the population, shaping the ethics and moral norms of small neighborhoods. Part of their community work is administered through local mosques, with the two forming a symbiotic relationship. They are most widespread in Uzbekistan, where they help with

weddings, circumcisions, funerals, and other Islamic traditions seen to be the cornerstones of a well-ordered Muslim society.

In addition to these 6 actors, there is also an important educational role played by madrasas that participants discussed. While almost all madrassas have been closed in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, many parents in Kyrgyzstan, according to one participant, prefer to send their children to them for a moral upbringing where they will not be consuming government viewpoints. Religious education offers morally vulnerable young people spiritual guidance and socializes them into the established social order.¹⁵

Differing Contexts

Regional demographics also play a role in shaping the development of Islamic civil society. Participants noted that during their fieldwork, the data showed that a large number of Islamic civil society organizations tend to be supported by the poor, or people living through personal difficulties. Other participants noted that many of these actors showed an appreciation of democratic values, including freedom of religion, but also capitalist approaches to private business. Others were distinctly anti-Western, displaying conservative cultural values even as they might prefer pro-business attitudes in contrast to Soviet economics.

The independent Central Asian governments have securitized all forms of unsanctioned religious activity, labelling them as “non-traditional” and “extremist.”

There is also a divergence between the wealthy urban, Russian-speaking intelligentsia (which tends to be progressive and Western-leaning), and the poor urban/rural communities who tend to communicate using local languages and more strongly adhere to traditional values. This is evident in Kyrgyzstan, where religious activism tends to be more prominent in the southern parts of the country, particularly around Osh and Batken. But economic trends tend to blur the boundaries between religiosity and secularism. According to participants, the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek has seen religious civil society grow as a result of migrants entering the city from the rural south.

In Uzbekistan, Islamic civil society has enjoyed increasing official support since the country began opening up 2016 following the death of president Islam Karimov and shifted its policy on Islamic organizations and promoting those closely managed by the state. But these organizations continue to operate in a top-down manner that underserves many areas, meaning there remains space at the grassroots level in which community needs are unmet by government-sponsored organizations.

Tajikistan has a relatively restricted Islamic civil society, with the state administering and monitoring the activities of Islamic civil society groups. The Aga Khan Foundation remains the most active religious civil society organization in the country, also funding the Mountain Society

¹⁵ Stephan, Manja. “Education, Youth and Islam: The Growing Popularity of Private Religious Lessons in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.” *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2010, pp. 469–83.

Development Support Programme and University of Central Asia, which has a campus in Khorog. The region's only faith-based political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, was banned in 2015. It had been involved in activities including providing relief and education.

Kazakhstan is the richest country in the region and has set itself the lofty goal of becoming one of the top 30 global economies by 2050. It has the largest non-Muslim minority, with a quarter of the population being Christian. The government claims it is a haven for ethnic and religious groups. While government restrictions remain, groups have emerged including Fund Meirim and Atameken, who provide support to the local community.

Kyrgyzstan, the region's most open country, although still authoritarian, has the most diverse set of Islamic civil society actors. Groups like Tablighi Jamaat, which are illegal elsewhere, are able to operate in the country, and established NGOs like Mutakilim, have developed sustained relations with donors.

Islamic Civil Society and the State

Central Asia, with its entrenched culture of secular authoritarianism, presents a hostile environment for Islamic civil society. The independent Central Asian governments have securitized all forms of unsanctioned religious activity, labelling them as “non-traditional” and “extremist.” In labelling certain forms of Islam a threat, governments have legitimized measures to discipline and control independent expressions of Islam. When they adopted constitutions in the early 1990s, each Central Asian state declared in Article 1 that the state was “sovereign,” “democratic,” and “secular.” After a period of relative tolerance in the early 1990s, over the next two decades the governments have used the specter of Islamic extremism to justify crackdowns on a range of political opponents, journalists and civil society representatives. This has occurred against the backdrop of authoritarian consolidation across the region. Externally, by taking part in the ‘Global War on Terror’ Central Asian countries consolidated their power “by tying domestic opposition to ‘international terrorism’, even when no links actually exist.”¹⁶

Uzbekistan was the first Central Asian state to declare Islamic extremism a major threat to national security when it introduced a new law on religion in 1998. The law required all religious associations to register with the state. Similarly restrictive laws were introduced in Kyrgyzstan in 2009, Tajikistan in 2009, Kazakhstan in 2011 and Turkmenistan in 2016. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have created the two most hostile legal environments towards religion in the region. Laws on religion place restrictions on who can register a legal religious group and where mosques can operate. Using these regulations, the governments have closed down mosques and madrassas. In 2011, Tajikistan passed a Law on Parental Responsibility, which banned under 18s from attending mosques under most circumstances and made it illegal to study Islam abroad without government permission. Following Russia's lead, the Central Asian governments

¹⁶ Khalid, Adeeb. *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2007, p.169



Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Kyrgyz President Sadir Japarov. Uzbekistan was one of the first countries in the region to declare Islamic extremism a major threat, resulting in restrictions on Islamic civil society. In contrast, Islamic Civil Society may have room to grow in Kyrgyzstan, given Japarov's conservative populist stance. Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

introduced laws on extremism and terrorism.¹⁷ Each regime has adopted similarly broad and amorphous definitions of terrorism and extremism.¹⁸ Uzbekistan, for example, defines terrorism as a “socially dangerous act.” Crimes that are considered “extremist” under the 2003 Law on Extremism in Tajikistan include insulting national dignity, unsanctioned rallies and calling for the overthrow of the government. Two of the Central Asian countries, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, are classified as “countries of particular concern” by the Department of State under the International Religious Freedom Act.

Of course, Central Asia is not a monolith, and the degree of state oversight of religious activism varies widely from country to country. While civil society is universally monitored, Kyrgyzstani, and to some extent Kazakhstani organizations have more freedom to operate while the more centralized regimes seen in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan heavily restrict sources of funding and actively interfere with day- to- day activities of civic groups.

¹⁷ Omelicheva, Mariya. *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia*. Routledge, 2014; Lemon, Edward, and Oleg Antonov. “Authoritarian Legal Harmonization in the Post-Soviet Space.” *Democratization*, vol. 27, no. 7, 2020, pp. 1221–39.

¹⁸ Horsman, Stuart. “Themes in Official Discourses on Terrorism in Central Asia.” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2005, pp. 199–213.

In Tajikistan, now the most authoritarian of the countries discussed, Islamic organizations tend to act as an arm of the state. Tajikistan takes a very restrictive and institutionalized approach to Islam, using it only to promote the regime's nationalist agenda. Traditional institutions, like the ones outlined above, are all heavily infiltrated by the state. The government also plays a role in restricting the activities of foreign actors. In 2012 and 2013, the Security Council made it more difficult for Saudi Arabian-connected foundations to operate in the country. While the Aga Khan has been able to operate in the country, the government remains concerned about its position as a rival source of legitimacy and support among Pamirs, and has curtailed its activities.

With Kyrgyzstan's authoritarian turn under national-populist President Sadyr Japarov, who came to power with the assistance of organized criminal groups following a popular uprising in October 2020, participants noted that, while Bishkek-based civil society espouses more liberal political, social and economic values, these may face additional restrictions. Islamic civil society based on traditional or conservative values -- which have been a key part of Japarov's legitimacy -- could find more space to operate.

According to participants, the relative strength or weakness of states may be the key variable for the fostering of Islamic civic networks. According to research conducted by participating scholars, weak states with high levels of poverty, such as Kyrgyzstan, may create "optimal" conditions for religious actors to provide much-needed public services and expand their networks. The Covid-19 pandemic hit Kyrgyzstan particularly hard, with the economy shrinking 10 percent in 2020. Participants pointed out how an ineffectual government response to the public health crisis and its economic effects had led to a strengthening of the role of Islamic civil society actors. For example, one participant reported how local religious leaders and groups in Aravan raised money to buy ambulances.

Islamic civil society actors with stronger connections to the state, such as the muftiates and mosques, have proven to be the most adept at gaining western funding.

Dialogue Among Forms of Civil Society

According to some participants, "normative" civil society actors which tend to receive grants from western institutions and donors, often treat Islamic civil society with skepticism and display a general unwillingness to cooperate with such actors. The differences are partly economic, with concerns over increased competition for grants, in addition to fears that cooperating with Islamic organizations may alienate donors. But there are also ideological considerations. Western-oriented civil society often presents its Islamic counterpart as being antithetical to Western values and opposed to social

progress. Contributing to these anxieties is a widespread information gap, with many secular organizations simply unaware of the broad range of philanthropic activities pursued by their Islamic counterparts.

Some tentative steps toward collaboration have been undertaken in the region however. In Kyrgyzstan, the NGO Developments and Cooperation in Central Asia (DCCA) has worked directly with Islamic communities since 2005, establishing imam-led self-help groups in the

south of the country. Islamic civil society has, for its part, shown an equal degree of skepticism toward its secular counterparts, particularly citing the widely held moral objections to oligarchic, authoritarian states that claim to represent “democratic” values. Part of this failure to establish broad coalitions is related to the weakened state of Central Asian civil society more generally, with regional governments presenting considerable obstacles to its development.

Central Asian Islamic civil society has established a diverse range of funding partnerships over the years. According to panelists, Islamic civil society actors with stronger connections to the state, such as the muftiates and mosques, have proven to be the most adept at gaining western funding. The muftiate in Kyrgyzstan, for example, has working partnerships with USAID and the Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia. But other Muslim countries have proven to be a more lucrative source of funding. In Kazakhstan, for example, the Jamaat Nursultan has established relations with Turkey, countries across the Middle East, and Azerbaijan.

Other avenues of cooperation open to Islamic civil society actors are with one another, both across the region and with similar actors in other parts of the world. In Central Asia, many organizations continue to work with partners such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, primarily for mosque construction, but also for community capacity-building too. But there is still a lot of untapped potential for large regional organizations such as the Aga Khan Foundation to develop partnerships with local Islamic civil society actors operating at a local level.

In addition to cooperation within the public sector, participants noted that heavy state control has fueled a privatization of Islamic activism, creating more space for cooperation between Islamic civil society and the private sector. Discussants noted that this development has been particularly acute in Uzbekistan, where Muslim business circles have been providing Islamic civil society not only with sources of funding, but with logistical and organizational support, helping them train staff and develop sustainable financial models, as well as encourage them to work to develop a Muslim-oriented business sector. In addition, many Islamic civil society leaders work as executives or employees of the private sector, bringing a source of technical expertise and fundraising savvy. This has also led to a commercialization of Islamic activities, with successful halal businesses springing up across the region, and mosques and jamaats serving increasingly as centers of networking between members of the business community. Some participants also noted the distinctly neoliberal influences of modern-day Islamic civil society in the region. In many ways, these actors represent a privatization of the traditional welfare state, with neoliberal governance models relying on a wide range of civil society actors to fill vacuums left by the retreat of the public sector.

Islamic Civil Society and Stability in Central Asia

For several years now, the funding landscape for western donors has primarily been focused on preventing violent extremism (PVE) and countering violent extremism (CVE), furthering the division between the various segments of civil society as secular CSOs have been forced to engage with religion, despite in many cases being suspicious towards religious actors. According to recent research on extremist mobilization, however, this suspicion represents a misunderstanding of the role Islamic networks play in many communities, meeting the needs for social support during times of personal crisis that may have otherwise left community members

vulnerable to recruitment by militant and revolutionary organizations and signaling a lack of dialogue and mutual mistrust between Islamic and liberally-oriented civil society organizations shaped heavily by Soviet-era stereotypes.

Islamic civil society has the potential to resolve conflicts in the region. The collective Islamic identity, or umma, in itself may not be sufficient to address cross-border and inter-ethnic conflicts. But when actively promoted by certain groups, it can have a positive role in addressing conflict. For example, Tablighi Jamaat played an active role in reducing ethnic tensions in 2010 in Uzgen, Kyrgyzstan. At a time when neighboring cities broke down into violence between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, ethnic conflict did not erupt in Uzgen, despite historic tensions that had led to violence in 1990 in the city.

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Conclusion

Islamic civil society is extremely diverse in aims, organizational structure, and underlying value systems, making it an often- difficult concept to pin down. Some participants in the dialogue remain skeptical as to whether Islamic civil society is a useful concept at all given the blurred boundaries between secular and religious civil society, while others thought that it is too broad and we should talk about a Salafi civil society, a Tablighi civil society Ismaili civil society and so on. Nonetheless, this series of panels has helped narrow down Islamic civil society to 6 key actors: Islamic NGOs; Islamic charities; Jamaats; Mosques; Muftiates; and Mahallas.

While not fundamentally opposed to the goals and aims of secular civil society, bridging the two to cooperate has proven a challenge, with ideological disagreements over social norms and concerns about funding approaches coming to the forefront. But the two have plenty to learn from one another. Islamic civil society has proven particularly adept at establishing funding relations with the private sector, bringing Muslim business leaders in to restructure financial models and help with long-term sustainability and capital. Furthermore, Islamic civil society actors have shown capacity to cooperate with one another.

But challenges remain, particularly with regard to relations between Islamic civil society and the state. Central Asia remains an autocratic region with secular regimes that view religion as something to be coopted and controlled. This has narrowed the space through which all forms of independent civil society -- particularly Islamic civil society -- can thrive and engage with their respective communities. But state policies are increasingly disconnected from local relations. Assertively secular policies run counter to the demands of local populations, particularly younger people, who look to religion as a source of identity, community and moral guidance. State attempts to control civil society come up against a citizenry that is increasingly organizing support and building communities of trust without the state, as evidenced by the ways in which communities took the lead in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and to the April 2021 border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan which left over 50,000 displaced.

Participants agreed that Islamic civil society remains a relevant actor and understudied topic. More exploratory research is required to map Islamic civil society groups, their work and sources of support. There is also a need for further efforts to foster dialogue between Islamic civil society and its secular counterparts to identify areas for cooperation, such as PVE. Donors could think through ways of creating new funding models that take stakeholders from Islamic civil society into account. Understanding these emergent forms of civil society will be essential to finding ways to strengthen communities of trust that increase citizen engagement, provide services that meet local needs and enhance security.

Cover Photo: Shah-I-Zinda Memorial, Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Evgeniy Agarkov.

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia, and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey.

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Founded in 2020, Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, is a Washington DC-based non-profit organization dedicated to fostering academic exchange between Central Asia and the rest of the world. Oxus Society brings together a diverse mix of academics, journalists, activists, entrepreneurs, and government officials to draw attention to underreported subjects of local and global importance. Oxus Society, in positioning itself within the framework of a rising Asia, seeks to avoid producing stereotypical Western-centric views on the region and strives to bring new voices to the fore and build real dialogue. Oxus Society provides a platform for early career researchers and established experts working on Central Asia to present their work to a broad audience via public events and publications. Oxus Society also compiles original datasets and develops analytical tools to help advance understanding of the latest developments in the region. Its programs are driven by their participants from around the world and are non-partisan in nature. Through these activities, Oxus Society aims to strengthen networks of knowledge transfer among a wide range of people and institutions.

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