

MAPPING ISLAMIC CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC



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**THE OXUS SOCIETY
FOR CENTRAL
ASIAN AFFAIRS**

**PROGRESS
ARAVAN**

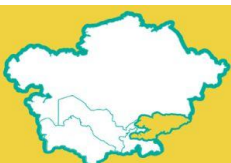
Progress
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Islamic civil society, a term used to denote a wide array of actors who promote forms of associational life and mutual support, is becoming an increasingly present force in the lives of people in the Kyrgyz Republic. As levels of religiosity rise and the state continues to fail to provide basic services, the Kyrgyz Republic, the region's most open country, has developed a robust and diverse civil society based on principles of Islam. In order to find ways to engage with 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. It is these organizations that often have reach and rapport with communities in the Kyrgyz Republic. To assess the situation with Islamic civil society in the Kyrgyz Republic, we conducted 15 interviews with stakeholders and profiled 30 organizations. We analyze the role of seven categories of actors, including mosques, the muftiate, NGOs, foundations, media organizations, jamaats and madrassas.

Participants agreed that Islamic civil society remains a relevant actor and understudied topic. Its role in society is hotly contested, with some viewing it as an essential to building mutual-support and solidarity, while others label it as a tool for politicians to gain supporters and conservative individuals to impose their values on others. This is part of a broader debate over the role of Islam in society and the proper relationship between the state and religion should be, with some arguing that it should leave religion alone, others that it should tightly regulate religion to avoid the emergence of "extremism" and others arguing that it should actively promote Islam.

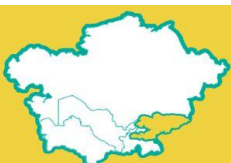
While not fundamentally opposed to the goals and aims of secular civil society, our respondents highlighted that bridging the two remains a challenge, with ideological disagreements over social norms and concerns about funding approaches coming to the forefront. There is a need for further efforts to foster dialogue between Islamic civil society and its secular counterparts to identify areas for cooperation, such as preventing violent extremism, poverty alleviation, anti-corruption, women's rights and healthcare. 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.



The participants recommended that our current project, as well as future projects:

- Train religious leaders in the use of social media to help provide accurate information to young people about religion.
- Build the capacity of religious organizations and NGOs to improve their online messaging and develop more educational content.
- Most respondents thought more needs to be done to strengthen dialogue among different viewpoints, with some citing successful examples of collaborative projects which built friendship and understanding.¹
- Develop positive messaging campaigns about the positive aspects of religion in society in order to build tolerance between communities.
- Enhance religious education in schools, ensuring that this covers not only Islam, but other religions too, with a strong emphasis on the need for tolerance.
- Build the capacity of religious organizations to fundraise and adopt appropriate policies to track financial transactions.
- Provide more opportunities for secular and religious communities to collaborate on projects.
- Enhance the legal literacy of Islamic organizations.
- Work to change public opinion about civil society, which is currently viewed as a Western-backed phenomenon implanting alien ideas into the country's population. Such an information campaign could highlight the diversity of civil society and spotlight local organizations whose work is grounded in local needs.
- Conduct more dialogue and trust building within Islamic communities, where different sects are often at odds with one another.
- Donors could think through ways of creating new funding models that take stakeholders from Islamic civil society into account.

¹ Interview with Eliana Sattarova, founder and manager of Umma.kg, Bishkek, July 2022.



INTRODUCING ISLAMIC CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is the realm of associational life outside the individual or family, and the state.² For some scholars, the concept of civil society is unique to the Western European experience; it emerged from the separation of the private and public spheres of authority during the early modern period and was theorized during the enlightenment.³ These scholars doubt 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.⁴

But others have challenged this claim, arguing that neither individualism nor democracy is a precondition for civil society to exist.⁵ 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.⁶ *In this view, civil society can be religious or secular, democratic or authoritarian.*⁷

Increasingly, community organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic are choosing to identify themselves as “Islamic.”⁸ Islam promotes forms of associational life and mutual support. Many actors operating within Islamic civil society draw on the concept of redistributive justice, based on tenets of the Qur’an such as *sadaqah* (charity) and *zakat* (alms-giving). In doing so, they draw on traditions that have long been rooted in Central Asia’s sedentary and nomadic cultures. These organizations pursue civil engagement in a manner consistent with religious practice.

² 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.

³ Poggi, Gianfranco. *The Development of the Modern State: A Sociological Introduction*. Stanford University Press, 1978.

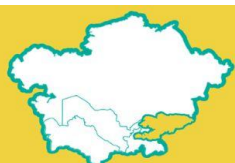
⁴ Gellner, Ernest. *Conditions of Liberty*. Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1994; Hall, John. *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison*. 1st ed., Polity, 1995.

⁵ Kamali, Masoud. “Civil Society and Islam: A Sociological Perspective.” *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2001, pp. 457–82.

⁶ 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.

⁷ See: Lewis, David. “Civil society and the authoritarian state: Cooptation, contestation and discourse” *Journal of Civil Society*, 9(3), 2013, 325–340.

⁸ See: Peyrouse, Sebastien and Nasritdinov, Emil, “Engaging with Muslim Civil Society in Central Asia: Components, Approaches, and Opportunities,” *USIP*, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/12/engaging-muslim-civil-society-central-asia-components-approaches-and>; “Dialogue Summary: Emerging Forms of Islamic Civil Society in Central Asia,” *Oxus Society*, 2021, <https://oxussociety.org/emerging-forms-of-islamic-civil-society-in-central-asia/>

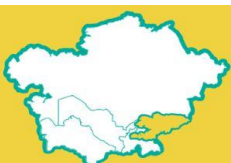


Oftentimes, Islamic civil society is understood by western-oriented activists as being antithetical to traditional liberal values. Wariness of religious labels or conservative values may fuel reticence, with western donors failing to recognize potential Islamic paths to political reform, or how such groups can contribute to the wellbeing of Muslim populations. But this is a simplification, our respondents warn. According to them, Islamic civil society is extremely dynamic and diverse, featuring a range of pro-western, pro-women, and liberal-oriented groups, alongside deeply conservative and western-skeptic organizations. In order to have a serious discussion on Islamic civil society, it is crucial to move beyond western stereotypes and seek to understand and define a new Islamically-oriented vocabulary for civic engagement. We attempt to do so in this report.

MAPPING THE CONTOURS OF ISLAMIC CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

In order to assess the situation with Islamic civil society in the Kyrgyz Republic, we conducted 15 interviews with stakeholders and profiled 30 organizations. The Kyrgyz Republic, the region's most open country, has the most diverse set of Islamic civil society actors in Central Asia. While some actors are anti-Western, others show an appreciation of democratic values, including freedom of religion. Some embrace capitalism as a means for Muslims to achieve self-determination, while others criticize capitalism as a tool of Western imperialism. In terms of those who engage in Islamic civil society, there is 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. But respondents noted this urban/rural divide is being broken down as internal migrants have moved to Bishkek from the rural south. Participants also pointed to the different attitudes towards religion among Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks who make up a fifth of the population, with many framing Uzbeks as more religious. Islamic civil society serves both men and women, although often activities are gender-segregated.

When asked about prominent actors in the Islamic space, respondents most frequently referred to government bodies (the Muftiate or State Commission for Religious Affairs), prominent NGOs such as Mutakalim, madrassas, mosques, Islamic influencers or foreign charities.



Emil Nasritdinov and Sebsten Peyrouse suggested dividing Islamic civil society actors in Central Asia into the following six types:⁹ Islamic NGOs; Islamic charities, jamaats (a form of group adhering closely to Islamic norms), mosques, muftiates (charged with governing the official practice of Islam) and mahallas (a traditional form of community organization at the neighborhood level). We supplement this typology by adding in madrassas, Islamic banking and media organizations. All of these are present in the Kyrgyz Republic.

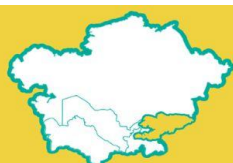
ISLAMIC NGO's

Islamic NGOs are the most diverse in Central Asia in terms of status and activities. These organizations can be official, or semi-official; local, national, or international; and staffed by anything from a handful of people to thousands. 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.



Figure 1: Participants pray during a Mutakalim training workshop in Bishkek, 2018.
Source: <http://mutakallim.kg/>

⁹ 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*, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/12/engaging-muslim-civil-society-central-asia-components-approaches-and>



Successful local Islamic civil society organizations include Mutakalim, a Muslim women's NGO in the Kyrgyz Republic which was established in 1999, and has offices throughout the country in Osh, Balykchy, Karakol, Jalal-Abad, Naryn, Toktogul, and Aravan. Mutakalim promotes women's rights and has formed partnerships with a range of international donors, including the UN and USAID. The organization has developed a diverse portfolio of activities, including peacebuilding, preventing violent extremism, women's rights, prisoner rehabilitation and public health. Most other organizations have not achieved this level of success, with most remaining "charitable funds" (*blagotvoritel'nyye fondy*), limited to humanitarian assistance rather than longer-term programming.

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, Kuwait and Qatar. Active foreign organizations include the Kuwaiti Al-Safa Charitable Foundation, which has funded healthcare projects in the country, the Aga Khan Foundation, which funds the University of Central Asia campus in Naryn and various Saudi foundations, such as the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, which has funded the construction of 200 mosques in the country.¹⁰ These foreign organizations were generally painted in a negative light, forming tools by which foreign powers could manipulate the Kyrgyz people. Reflecting common narratives, activist Abdykarimov argued that foreign powers were using religion as a means to gain influence with the "Arabs" building mosques and the Aga Khan Foundation spreading Shiism.

¹⁰ "«Всемирная ассамблея мусульманской молодежи» построила 4 современных школы в Кыргызстане," *Asia TV*, 6 August 2017, <http://asiatv.kg/2017/08/06/vsemirnaya-assambleya-musulmanskoj-m/>

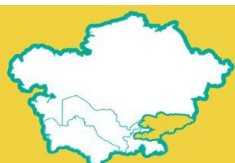


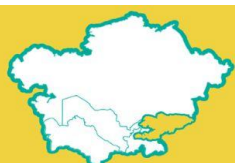


Figure 2: The website of the Al-Safa Foundation highlights the work the charity has carried out in the healthcare sector in the Kyrgyz Republic. Source: alsafakw.com/ar

Increasingly, according to our respondents, Kyrgyz citizens are founding their own charities. Although their financial resources are more minimal, they do fund projects locally and have even funded safe water projects in Muslim communities in Africa. However, the most common activity that charities engage in is the construction of mosques throughout Central Asia. In addition, foundations engage in social projects providing schooling, 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. For example, communities have raised money to build houses for abandoned, divorced and widowed women. Following the practice of *ashar*, a local practice where communities come together to bear costs of goods and services that cannot afford them, businessmen provide construction materials and laborers work for free.



Figure 3: Iftar dinner organized by the Salafi-linked Ethar-Zharkyn Zhashtar Foundation. Source: www.instagram.com/etharkyn/?hl=en



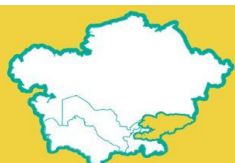
JAMAATS

Jamaats, or religious “societies,” are a form of group adhering closely to Islamic norms whose 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.

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. Jamaats have been viewed as threatening by Central Asian regimes. Another group is the Fetullah Gulen-backed Hizmet movement, which has also faced crackdowns in neighboring countries. The movement operates a network of 13 schools in the country, which offer a blend of religious and secular education, and are revered as some of the best educational institutions in the country.

MOSQUES

Mosques are the cornerstone of Muslim communities. Where there were 39 mosques in 1991, now there are over 2,000. 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. 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. While officially registered with the government, most mosques operate with relative autonomy from the muftiate, unlike in neighboring countries.



Mosques operate as an important hub of social activity. They offer classes in Qu'ran and hadith for both women and men. They also are sites for politics according to our respondents. Politicians compete to build the largest mosques in efforts to promote themselves and demonstrate their largesse.

MUFTIATE

The muftiate (also known as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan-SAMK) is charged with governing the official practice of Islam and overseeing mosques and imams in the country. While formally independent from the government, it works closely with the State Commission on Religious Affairs and the security services. In addition to their role as institutions of religious oversight, it also manages the *hajj* pilgrimage and Halal Certification Agency, giving them an opportunity for raising money from bribes. The previous mufti was removed for misusing funds.¹¹ The muftiate is responsible for carrying out charitable functions, distributing food and aid. Participants noted that these activities are poorly publicized and not widely known.

MADRASSAS

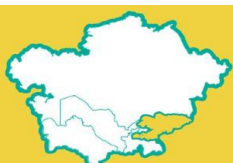
Religious education offers morally vulnerable young people spiritual guidance and socializes them into the established social order.¹² Officially, as of 2020 there were 110 madrassas registered in the country, with 6,175 boys and 3,761 girls studying there, up from 47 in 2008.¹³ The true number is likely higher as not all madrassas are registered with the government as is required by the 2008 Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations. They form part of a broader network of Islamic education including *ta'lim* (lessons in the Qur'an and hadith, the life of the Prophet) offered at mosques, kindergartens and informal study circles.¹⁴ Madrassas are usually linked to jamaats, putting forward their interpretation of Islam. But they are united in their promotion of piety, determination and respect for elders among their students. While some madrassas are funded by foreign

¹¹ "A brewing Islamic scandal in Kyrgyzstan," Eurasianet, 21 February 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/a-brewing-islamic-scandal-in-kyrgyzstan>

¹² 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.

¹³ Kurmanbekova, Aichurek. "Unveiling Girls' Madrasahs in Kyrgyzstan." *CAP Paper*, 228, January 2020, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CAP-Papers-228-Aichurek-Kurmanbekova.pdf>

¹⁴ See Doolotkeldieva, Asel. "Madrasa-based Religious Learning: Between Secular State and Competing Fellowships in Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asian Affairs*, vol.7, no.3, 2020, pp.211-235.



foundations, many are funded by local private entrepreneurs in their effort to establish a positive reputation in their communities.¹⁵

MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

Many of the participants framed the problem of violent extremism and intolerance towards difference as stemming from an incorrect reading of Islam rooted in the sources of information people have access to. A public relations manager for the Al Safa Public Foundation summarized a sentiment held by most of the respondents: “to adhere to religion, a person needs knowledge. If a person with insufficient knowledge comes to a religion where there are rules and requirements, he cannot fulfill them to the fullest extent and brings incorrect information to people.”¹⁶ The internet was singled out as a space where dis/misinformation proliferates. Yet, at the same time, many respondents said that the internet offers opportunities to reach a wider audience and so cannot be discarded. Instead, they argued that influencers and media organizations need more training in detecting fakes.

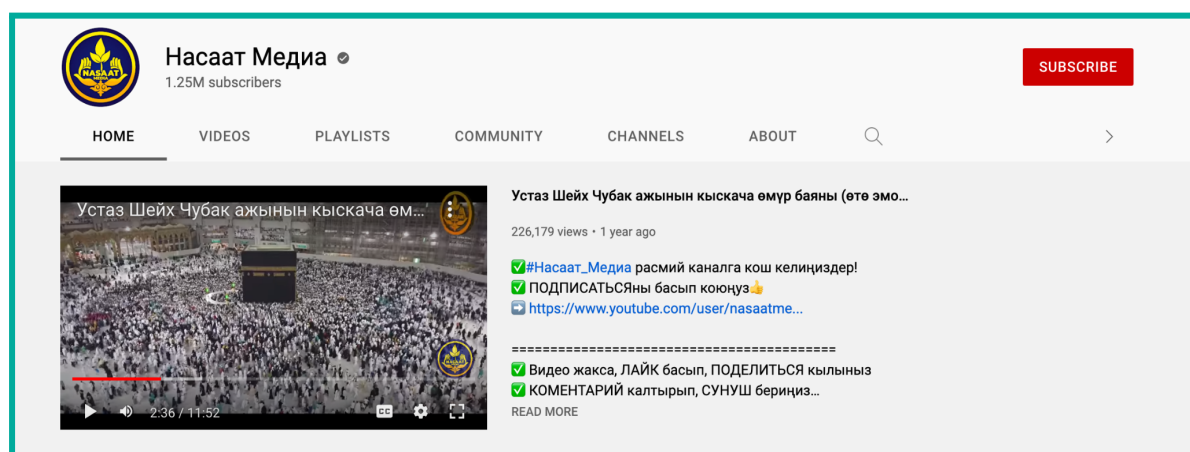
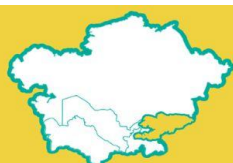


Figure 4: Nasaat Media's YouTube Channel. Source:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwAvzVA_F383Oko8RXnZ0bA

¹⁵ “Islamic Education in Kyrgyzstan: Madrasah System in Urgent Need for Reformation.” *Bulan Institute*, 7 April 2017, <https://bulaninstitute.org/islamic-education-in-kyrgyzstan-madrasah-system-in-urgent-need-for-reformation/>

¹⁶ Interview with public relations manager for Al Safa Public Foundation, Osh, July 2022.



Respondents were critical of the “impact of influencers, who turned to Islam not long ago, since they have access to the large audience, but their religious knowledge is low.”¹⁷ They commented on the rise of *YouTube*, *TikTok* and *Instagram* as the sites most young people gain religious knowledge from. While some channels like Nasaat Media (a YouTube channel with 1.2 million followers) and prominent clerics like the late former chief mufti Chubak Ajy,¹⁸ Abdushukur Narmatov,¹⁹ Shamil Alyuatdinov,²⁰ and Uzbek cleric Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf²¹ were singled out as reliable sources by the respondents, most believed that the online information space was causing more harm than good. One journalist “would advise that people not watch different videos or listen to the Quran from the internet. Because everything comes out without a filter, there may be information that you listen to that is not correct, etc.”²² When asked for specifics, respondents did not mention specific channels either because they did not know them or they were afraid of being accused of accessing extremist materials online by the security services. Instead, they recommended using official sources like Muftiat.kg or listening to trusted imams like the ones listed above.

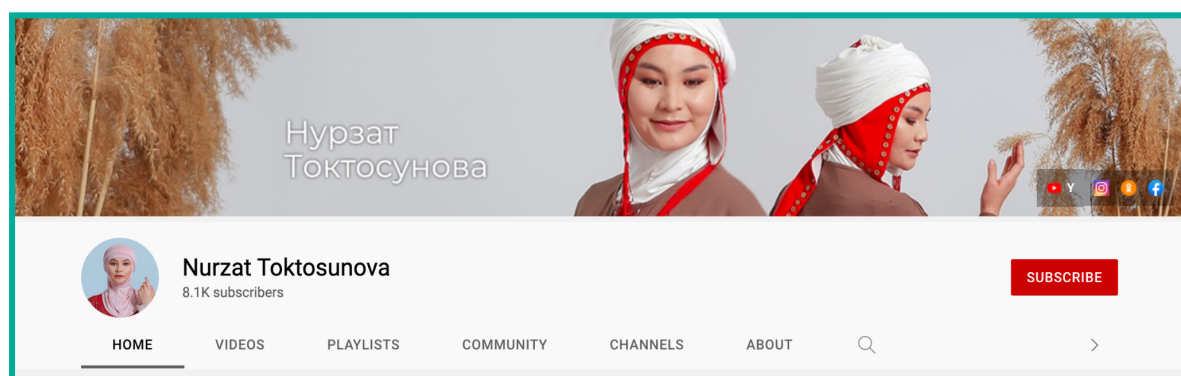


Figure 5: Nurzat Toktosunova's YouTube channel. Source:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8pO-uISpCH1wEWzzy5jvgw>

¹⁷ Interview with a theologian, Bishkek, July 2022.

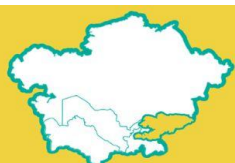
¹⁸ Born in Bazar Korgon, Chubak ajy Jalilov was Head of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan from 2010 and 2012, and a member of the Ulema Council. He remains one of the most influential religious leaders in the country despite dying from Covid-19 in 2020.

¹⁹ Narmatov has been imam of various mosques in Bishkek and was rector of the Islamic Institute from 2000 to 2003.

²⁰ Alyautdinov is imam of Moscow's Memorial Mosque. His website umma.ru is one of the most popular in the Russian-speaking world.

²¹ Muhammad Sadiq (1952-2015) was mufti of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. He was Uzbekistan's first mufti after independence and became the most prominent religious leader in the Uzbek-speaking world. Despite being deceased, his influence remains through a network of at least 20 YouTube channels reposting his sermons.

²² Interview with a journalist, Osh, August 2022.



Recently, there has been a rise in women influencers like journalist Nurzat Toktoshunova and founder of Mutakalim, Jamal Frontbek Kyzy. On her channel, Nurzat Toktoshunova discusses finding harmony within families, how to be a happy wife and mother, and the importance of developing a relationship with God. Participants said that these channels are key sources of information for women, particularly in rural areas, who often do not have access to mosques or imams.

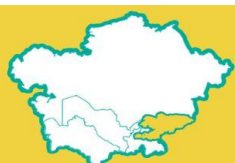
ISLAMIC FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Islamic banking operates based on principles of sharia, prohibiting interest (although not fees) and the use of funds for *haram* (forbidden) products and services like tobacco, gambling and alcohol. The Kyrgyz Republic was the first country in the region to develop Islamic banking. In 2006, with assistance from the Islamic Development Bank, Eco Bank was registered. Three years later principles of Islamic banking were written into the legislation “On Banks and Banking.” By 2018, Islamic financial institutions (four banks and four microfinance institutions) controlled 1.6% of the banking and 6% of the microfinance sector.²³

Respondents reported that Islamic banking is growing in popularity for both religious and pragmatic people. As society becomes more Islamized, people are looking for ways to ensure that different aspects of their lives follow Sharia. These transactions share risk and are socially conscious. At the same time, Islamic banking is appealing for more pragmatic reasons.



²³ “Why Would Kyrgyzstan Develop Islamic Banking?” *CABAR Asia*, 19 September 2018, <https://cabar.asia/en/why-would-kyrgyzstan-develop-islamic-banking>



THE RELIGIOUS SPHERE IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

A debate continues to rage in the Kyrgyz Republic over what the proper relationship between the state and religion should be, with some arguing that it should leave religion alone, others that it should tightly regulate religion to avoid the emergence of “extremism” and others arguing that it should actively promote Islam. Of the 15 respondents, 12 framed the situation with religious freedom

in the Kyrgyz Republic as free, referring to the constitution and country’s situation relative to its neighbors. They noted that under president Sadyr Japarov, who came to power in 2020, there has been a growth in traditional and conservative values, offering Islamic civil society more space in which to operate.

Many argued that religion has a positive influence on society, arguing it brings people “closer together,” promotes strong family bonds, gives people morals of charity, kindness towards others and politeness.²⁴ Reduced rates of public drunkenness were attributed by many respondents to the rise in religiosity. One journalist stated that in Suzak “before, alcohol was sold in all shops. Now there are only one or two small liquor stores left. They belong to the Kyrgyz. Uzbeks do not sell alcohol. There are few among them who drink alcohol, they read *namaz* [prayer].”²⁵

Only four believed that the situation had gone too far, with three arguing that there was too much freedom of religion and one arguing that religion remains repressed. One activist claimed that “religious people do what they want, put any demands on society” claiming that the “people are ruled by illiterate moldos” [informal religious leaders].²⁶ Similarly, an Osh-based NGO leader argued that the government “are not guided by the norms of a secular state, but rather emphasize the norms of religion.”²⁷ She pointed to the example of the lack of progress on women’s rights. Another respondent, a theologian, also argued that religious freedoms had gone too far, citing examples of restrictions on women’s access to education and freedom to work.²⁸ On the issue of women’s rights other respondents disagreed. A religious teacher from Batken argued that “previously, women did not know their rights and could not resist when their husbands married two or more other women. Now they are more religiously informed and know what rights they have due to religion and can require their husbands to abide by these rules.”

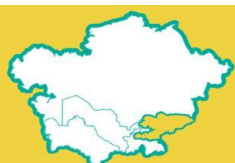
²⁴ Interview with director, Mutakalim, Aravan, July 2022; Interview with theologian, Bishkek, July 2022.

²⁵ Interview with a journalist, Jalal Abad, August 2022.

²⁶ Interview with civic activist, Batken, July 2022.

²⁷ Interview with a NGO leader and GBV activist, Osh, July 2022.

²⁸ Interview with theologian, Bishkek, August 2022.



A Jalal-Abad based journalist argued that the system “only reflects the opinion of the majority,” arguing that minorities are repressed.²⁹ He cited examples of Muslim proselytizers being tolerated while Christian missionaries are not. At the same time, he recognized that the government can sometimes go too far, for example, “there are cases when, for liking certain information, people can be accused of extremism and summoned for interrogation, even those who are not terrorists or radicals.” Critics of religion also relayed prominent stereotypes of the appearance of foreign “Wahabbi” or “Arab” values in their community, pointing to the visible signs of Islamization and the way that religious people impose their values on others.³⁰ For example, one respondent stated that “what worries me is that schoolgirls are allowed to wear headscarves, which creates the conditions for the transition to the Arab ideology.”³¹ He could not define what this ideology was beyond being something he perceived to be foreign to Kyrgyz culture.

Some respondents discussed the state’s restrictive and repressive policies towards Islam. A theologian argued that “we do not fully have religious freedom in practice, with the government listening “to the phone calls of people working in the religious service, watching them in, generally speaking, not letting them live in peace.”³² Indeed, the Kyrgyz government has securitized all forms of unsanctioned religious activity, labeling 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. A restrictive law was introduced in Kyrgyzstan in 2009. The law on religion places 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.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Most of the respondents argued that Islamic civil society was strengthened during Covid-19. As the state struggled to deal with the fallout of the pandemic, which had officially killed 2,991 by October 2022 and led the economy to contract by 8.6% in 2020, religious leaders played a key role in filling the gaps left by the weak state. On the one hand, participants argued that the pandemic created more unity among people facing a common challenge.³³

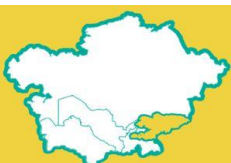
²⁹ Interview with a journalist, Jalal Abad, August 2022.

³⁰ McBrien, Julie., & Pelkmans, Mathjis. “Turning Marx on his head: missionaries, ‘extremists,’ and archaic secularists in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.” *Critique of Anthropology*, vol.28, no.1, 2008, pp.87-103.

³¹ Interview with civic activist, Batken, July 2022.

³² Interview with theologian, Bishkek, August 2022.

³³ Interview with designer, Bishkek, July 2022; Interview with founder and manager of Islamic media outlet, Bishkek, July 2022; Interview with psychologist, Osh, August 2022.



Second, it led to religious actors playing an increasing role in supporting communities and fulfilling the role of civil society to help become a bridge between the state and society. One journalist concluded that:

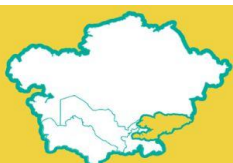
Our mobilization was admired by the whole world. Despite the weakness of the state, society was able to mobilize itself and solve problems in a timely manner. In truth, the role of the religious community in this matter was important. Yes, in the north, of course, there was a lot of youth activity, but in the south, religion had a strong influence. Religious figures constantly called for charity. They explained that no wealth can save a person from death. They gave sermons [about this] and, one might say, thereby became the cause of the awakening of society. As a result, as good deeds, people bought ventilators, put beds in mosques, and collected and distributed humanitarian aid.³⁴

Others gave examples of religious communities raising money for an ambulance in Aravan or the Mutakallim Foundation holding a marathon among women. They also mentioned that religious communities raised money to help those displaced by the border war with Tajikistan in Batken in April 2021 and September 2022 which has killed over 150 from both sides and left 10,000 people from Batken displaced.



Figure 6: Ak Zhooluk Azhari give out 800 kg of meat to needy families during Eid in 2020. Source: <https://ru-ru.facebook.com/akjooluk.kg/>

³⁴ Interview with a journalist, Jalal Abad, August 2022.



Only one respondent, an Osh-based NGO leader, criticized the religious communities.³⁵ She argued that they spread false information about the efficacy of vaccines and causes of the pandemic. She stated that “there are many religious people who helped with large sums of money, but we do not know what goals they pursue, to what extent they help. The state strictly checks NGOs, but I have never heard that organizations that do charity work were checked.”

DIALOGUE AMONG FORMS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

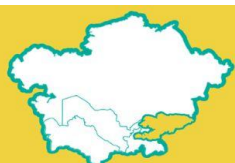
Secular civil society actors, which tend to receive grants from western institutions and donors, often treat Islamic civil society with skepticism and display a general unwillingness to cooperate with such actors. The differences are partly economic, with concerns over increased competition for grants, 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 within Islamic civil society has, for its part, shown an equal degree of skepticism toward its secular counterparts, particularly arguing that democratic states breed immorality and greed.

Most agreed that mutual tolerance is the cornerstone of a stable and peaceful relationship between the religious and secular communities in the country. Most argued that dialogue between the communities was possible, with one third of the participants concluding that at present relations are very tense. One journalist for example, argued that “religious and secular education are like two wings of a person. Like two legs.”³⁶ But argued that in reality mutual understanding does not exist.

Nonetheless, there was an underlying narrative of blaming by both sides, an insistence that the other side needs to be more tolerant. A journalist argued that “the number of those who treat the values of Islam with respect and understanding, those who read namaz, is growing in society. There is also growing respect for the imams of mosques, representatives of the *kazyyat* [Islamic Center and seat of the chief Islamic judge] by the people.” On the other hand, those with a more secular worldview criticized those who are religious for imposing their views on others.

³⁵ Interview with a NGO leader and GBV activist, Osh, July 2022.

³⁶ Interview with journalist, Osh, August 2022.



According to the Osh-based NGO leader, “people who adhere to other religions also face discrimination. I’m not blaming religion here, no religion says anything like that or not to love people of other religions. It’s just that people themselves came up with these rules and imposed them on others.”³⁷ On the other hand, religious people blamed secular people for their ignorance of religion. One respondent argued that “a religious person has information about religions and a secular person knows little about religions,” framing this as a source of misunderstanding.³⁸ Some framed this as a clash between Western secular culture and Islamic Arab culture, with differing opinions as to how Kyrgyz culture related to these two imagined paradigms.³⁹

Social media is a key site for some of the tensions between the secular and religious communities, with “conflicts, confrontations, and negative attitudes becoming more frequent.”⁴⁰ It was identified as a site where most young people go to receive their information and shape their worldviews. But at the same time a place where mis/disinformation circulates and people are becoming increasingly polarized.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Islamic civil society is extremely diverse in aims, organizational structure, and underlying value systems, making it an often-difficult concept to pin down. Nonetheless, it is entrenched within social structures in the Kyrgyz Republic and its role appears to be growing as the country’s population embraces Islam in growing numbers. While not fundamentally opposed to the goals and aims of secular civil society, bridging the two remains a challenge, with ideological disagreements over social norms and concerns about funding approaches coming to the forefront.

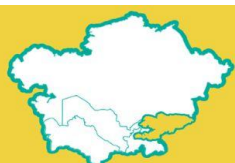
Participants agreed that Islamic civil society remains a relevant actor and understudied topic. There is a need for further efforts to foster dialogue between Islamic civil society and its secular counterparts to identify areas for cooperation, such as preventing violent extremism, poverty alleviation, anti-corruption, women’s rights and healthcare. 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.

³⁷ Interview with a NGO leader and GBV activist, Osh, July 2022.

³⁸ Interview with journalist, Jalal Abad, September 2022.

³⁹ Interview with activist, Batken, August 2022; Interview with psychologist, Osh, August 2022.

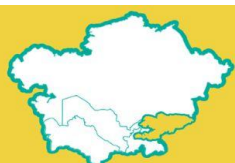
⁴⁰ Interview with journalist, Jalal Abad, September 2022.



The participants recommended that our project and future projects:

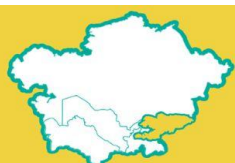
- *Train religious leaders in the use of social media to help provide accurate information to young people about religion.*
- *Build the capacity of religious organizations and NGOs to improve their online messaging and develop more educational content.*
- *Most respondents thought more needs to be done to strengthen dialogue among different viewpoints, with some citing successful examples of collaborative projects which built friendship and understanding.⁴¹*
- *Develop positive messaging campaigns about the positive aspects of religion in society in order to build tolerance between communities.*
- *Enhance religious education in schools, ensuring that this covers not only Islam, but other religions too, with a strong emphasis on the need for tolerance.*
- *Build the capacity of religious organizations to fundraise and adopt appropriate policies to track financial transactions.*
- *Provide more opportunities for secular and religious communities to collaborate on projects.*
- *Enhance the legal literacy of Islamic organizations.*
- *Work to change public opinion about civil society, which is currently viewed as a Western-backed phenomenon implanting alien ideas into the country's population. Such an information campaign could highlight the diversity of civil society and spotlight local organizations whose work is grounded in local needs.*
- *Conduct more dialogue and trust building within Islamic communities, where different sects are often in conflict with one another.*
- *Donors could think through ways of creating new funding models that take stakeholders from Islamic civil society into account.*

⁴¹ Interview with founder and manager of Islamic media outlet, Bishkek, July 2022.



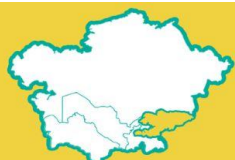
Appendix I: List of Respondents

	Occupation/ Organization	Location	Gender
1	Theologian	Bishkek	Male
2	Designer	Bishkek	Female
3	Founder and manager of Islamic platform	Bishkek	Female
4	Religious teacher	Uch Korgon/ Batken	Female
5	Psychologist at Crisis Center for Women	Osh	Female
6	Lawyer, NGO	Osh	Male
7	Madrassa Teacher	Aravan	Male
8.	Director, Mutakalim Aravan	Aravan	Female
9.	Journalist	Osh	Male
10.	NGO, GBV activist	Osh	Female
11.	Journalist at EITR, PR manager in the south for Al Safa Public Foundation	Osh	Male
12.	Journalist	Jalal Abad	Male
13.	Public activist, Ex - Chairman of Public Foundation Kara Darya Izi	Batken	Male
14.	Imam at mosque in Dostuk town, in Jalal Abad	Jalal Abad	Male
15	Prevention.KG media portal with news on CVE/PVE	Bishkek	Male



Appendix 2: List of Islamic Organizations

Name	Type	Location	Website
Mutakalim	NGO	Bishkek	http://mutakallim.kg/%d0%b3%d0%bb%d0%b0%d0%b2%d0%bd%d0%b0%d1%8f-%d1%81%d1%82%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%86%d0%b0/
UMMA Magazine	Media Organization	Bishkek/Osh	http://ummamag.kg
Nasaat Media	Media Organization	Osh	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwAvzVA_F383Oko8RXnZ0bA
Muslimbiz.kg	Media Organization	Bishkek	https://muslimbiz.kg
Elim Barsinbi	Foundation	Bishkek	https://www.elimbar.kg
Rahmat	Foundation	Osh	https://rahmat.kg
Biz el Uchun	Foundation	Uzgen	https://www.facebook.com/bizeluchunkg
Irfan	Media Organization	Bishkek	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4fwroiJC3T4Z2228HW2HVQ
Nurzat Toktosunova	Media Organization	Bishkek	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8pO-uISpCHlwEWzyy5jvgw?app=desktop
World Assembly of Muslim Youth (Saudi Arabia)	Foundation	Riyadh	https://arab.org/directory/world-assembly-muslim-youth/
Al-Salam (Kuwait)	Foundation	Kuwait City	https://www.ngoplatform.org/node/3763
Al-Safa Center (Kuwait)	Foundation	Kuwait City	https://alsafakw.com/ar
Nama Foundation (Malaysia)	Foundation	Kuala Lumpur	https://namafoundation.org/
Aga Khan Foundation (Switzerland)	Foundation	Geneva	https://www.akfusa.org/
Ala Too Development Center	Foundation	Bishkek	https://www.facebook.com/people/Volunteers-of-PF-Dev



			elopment-Center-Ala-Too/100068782639731/
Ak Jooluk	Foundation	Bishkek	https://ru-ru.facebook.com/akjooluk.kg/
Ethar- Zharkyn Zhashtar Foundation	Foundation	Bishkek	https://www.instagram.com/etharkg/?hl=en
Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan	Muftiate	Bishkek	https://muftiyat.kg/
Ayimdar	NGO	Bishkek	https://www.instagram.com/ayimdar_kg/
Imam Azam	Foundation	Jalal Abad	None
Ikhsan-Hairia	Foundation	Bishkek	https://www.osoo.kg/inn/01904200010176/
Islamic Financial Center (Bakai Bank)	Financial Institution	Bishkek	https://ifcenter.kg/en/
Eco Bank	Financial Institution	Bishkek	https://eib.kg/
Mol Bulak	Financial Institution	Osh	https://www.devex.com/organizations/m-bulak-151992
Bailik Finance	Financial Institution	Bishkek	https://bf.kg/en/
Kompanion Invest	Financial Institution	Bishkek	https://www.kompanion.kg/
Ak Karzhi	Financial Institution	Osh	https://banks.kg/microcredit/ak-karjy/branches
Bereket Finance	Financial Institution	Bishkek	http://iic.kg/en/
Zam Zam Travel	Business	Osh	https://www.instagram.com/zamzam_travel.osh/?hl=en
Jazira Travel	Business	Osh	None

