



# Central Asia - The State and Islam: What it means for Christians

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## Introduction

When evaluating the relationship of Central Asian governments and Islam, it should be viewed through the prism of the authoritarian nature of these regimes, a top-down approach, as opposed to a bottom-up approach which focuses on the increasing Islamic identity of the population. In fact, the rising Islamic identity, and its resulting potential for persecuting Christians, is in part a by-product of the repression and general poor governance of these governments. This statement remains true even after the greater spread of jihadist ideologies in Central Asia since the 1990s and particularly since 9/11. Thus, the primary issue relates to one of governance and in particular how these governments should approach their societies which have a growing Muslim piety yet still a clear secular core.<sup>1</sup>

In this report, a broad regional and historic overview will be provided, followed by a brief synopsis of this relationship in each of the five nations in Central Asia, and concluding with a regional summary of the effect on Christians and threats for the future.

## Regional Overview

With the exception of Kyrgyzstan (where the government has changed twice in the last 11 years after riots) in all other countries in Central Asia, it is the corrupt and authoritarian nature of the state governments and lack of transparency that is the primary cause of the friction between the government and the governed. The first and effectively only priority of these governments is the survival of their regime, with national security a secondary but contributing priority. Ultimately, these regimes are deeply insecure and are fanatically consumed by the need to control and eliminate any potential threat to their survival.

In keeping with this view is the governments' use of the counterterror narrative to justify blanket repression. In line with the global war on terrorism, which has in part defined international relations for the past 15 years, Central Asian states have seized upon this narrative for their own domestic purposes, eager to embrace any method that justifies their use of repressive means for control. Namely, in all five countries the terms *terrorism*, *extremism*, *fundamentalism*, etc. are used interchangeably, liberally, and without distinction regarding any possible threat purportedly posed by political Islam.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the governments willfully overblow the threat of Islamism in their countries for further justification of the need to impose crackdowns. Briefly put, the tide of global terror, with its ebb and flow through the years, and most recently marked

<sup>1</sup> Coyer, Paul, Islamic Extremism In Central Asia: Witch Hunt or Genuine Threat?, Forbes, 28 February 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/02/28/islamic-extremism-in-central-asia-witch-hunt-or-genuine-threat/2/>, last accessed May 2016.

<sup>2</sup> See: Burnashew, Rustam, Why the challenge from Islamists is not the most important regional security challenges for Central Asian states, in: Norberg, J. and Holmquist, E (eds), ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan – Central Asian perspectives on regional security, FOI Report No. FOI-R-3880-SE, June 2014, pp. 56-65, available at: [https://www.academia.edu/9923096/Why\\_the\\_challenge\\_from\\_Islamists\\_is\\_not\\_the\\_most\\_important\\_regional\\_security\\_challenges\\_for\\_Central\\_Asian\\_states](https://www.academia.edu/9923096/Why_the_challenge_from_Islamists_is_not_the_most_important_regional_security_challenges_for_Central_Asian_states), last accessed May 2016.

by the arrival of the Islamic State (IS), gives these governments the necessary cover to continue their repression now under the premise of internationally justified means.

Naturally, each government has reacted over the past year with a predictably heavy hand, accusing numerous Islamic groups and leaders of extremism with weak or non-existent evidence.<sup>3</sup> The overarching commonality among all the regimes is that any non-government sanctioned Islamic activity or movement (or any religious, political, or social movement for that matter) is demonized and strictly suppressed. In reality, however, there is truly very little threat of radicalism due to the success of secularism across the entire region over the past five centuries, despite a recent resurgence in piety since the collapse of the Soviet system. Furthermore, secularism continues to minimize the appeal of true radicalism to larger swathes of the population.<sup>4</sup>

## Historical relationship of Islam and the state

In summary, for the past 500 years, Islam in Central Asia has been “dominated by a formal religious hierarchy appointed or sponsored by a ‘secular’ ruler”.<sup>5</sup> Islam has long been viewed by the state, and particularly over the past 100 years during the Soviet and post-Soviet period, as a potentially destabilizing force which the people may turn to personally and politically and therefore has always been effectively controlled. On the other hand, religion has also been used by the state as a socially binding and pacifying force controlled under government-sanctioned terms. Viewed from the bottom-up, Islam in the region has been historically moderate, guided by the teachings of the more liberal Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Likewise, while Salafi clerics have always been present, Salafism as a movement has never played a prominent role in forming the belief system of the population or clerics.<sup>6</sup> This pre-existing and enduring historical framework only adds to the illegitimacy of the government’s blanket labels and recriminations of radicalization and related terms.

More recently, during the Soviet period the most important development was the elimination of any formal or public role for religion, including the banishment of Sharia law and the closure of madrassas and thousands of mosques. The post-Soviet period quite similarly resembles the structural relationship of the governments to Islam as existed in the late Soviet period. From the vantage point of Islamic groups, the bottom-up pressure against political Islam in the post-Soviet period has been maintained as the Hanafi tradition has been able to revive its legitimacy in this new period of greater religious liberty and combat the influence of Wahhabism in the 1990s and today. These Hanafi leaders, who willfully acknowledge the state’s supremacy, now constitute the approved Islamic leadership in each Central Asian state. Moreover, the clearly increased

<sup>3</sup> Numerous examples in each country, discussed below in more detail in the country overview sections.

<sup>4</sup> See: Heathershaw, John and Montgomery, David W., *The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics, Russia and Eurasia Programme*, Chatham House, November 2014: [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20141111PostSovietRadicalizationHeathershawMontgomery.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141111PostSovietRadicalizationHeathershawMontgomery.pdf), last accessed May 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See: Olcott, Martha B., *The Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia*, Carnegie Endowment, Washington, undated, available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/olcottroots.pdf>, last accessed May 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

religious piety since the fall of communism has not translated into more radical versions of Islam and violence.<sup>7</sup>

Specifically in the past year, these states have felt increasingly insecure in light of the departure of Western forces from Afghanistan and, primarily, from the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and the potential for the spread of its ideology and violence into Central Asia. Clearly there is reason for concern; however, the threat of radical Islam remains very limited: there is little evidence for significant popular discontent with the secular state in any of these countries, and religion remains tied to ethnic identity as opposed to a source of political mobilization.<sup>8</sup> In addition, as further proof of the inaccuracy of these government's claims of burgeoning violent Islamist activity is the lack of a significant presence of Islamic violent organizations in the region, currently or historically. Only two groups from the region, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its splinter group the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), are on the US State Department's Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations list of 51 total organizations. Between 2001 and 2013, there were three attacks reportedly claimed by violent Islamist groups, with a total of 11 deaths; from 2009 through 2014, there have been no confirmed successful or failed attacks by these groups north of the Amu Darya River.<sup>9</sup>

## Country Overview

Considering the clear existence of the external threat in light of developments in the southern periphery over the past two years, very direct repression of any potential Islamic militancy (or at least uncontrolled and/or unsanctioned Islamic religious activity) has clearly risen across Central Asia. Any threats arising from IS or Afghanistan linked in any way to a Central Asian state is interpreted by the regimes as a potential threat to all the countries, creating a heightened and more tense security environment with ostensible threats abounding. On the domestic front, for each of these countries, it is understood that the governments each have approved religious activity and groups which the overwhelming majority of the population adhere to, and anything outside of that is deemed "extremist" and a threat to be controlled in this high security environment. Each state views the threat of Islamization, or truly any form of Islam not officially condoned, as emanating to a greater or lesser extent from either internal or external origins, or some combination thereof. Generally speaking, for those states that view the threat as being more external, the government response tends to be concerned more with keeping out external forces that could radicalize their population or conduct terror operations within their territory. Those countries that view the threat as more internal, or at least having a significant internal element, tend to be even more repressive of their population. It is important to of course bear in mind that the repression can serve as both a partial cause and partial effect of greater Islamization.

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<sup>7</sup> See footnote 4: Heathershaw/Montgomery, *The Myth of Post-Soviet Radicalization in Central Asia*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## Tajikistan

Tajikistan is the Central Asian nation most commonly deemed to be under threat from Islamism due to the fragility of the state, its geographical proximity to (and historic involvement in) Afghanistan, the relatively high participation of Tajiks in IS, and the homegrown religious element in the bloody civil war of the 1990s. As a result, unlike some of the other countries of Central Asia, Islamist ideology as well as militancy is viewed by the state as a threat via both internal (civil war experience) and external (Afghanistan and IS) forces.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, while these concerns are legitimate to a certain degree, as with most other countries in the region, they are mostly exaggerated for the government's purposes of legitimizing state repression. The rise of Islamic activism in Tajikistan (and neighboring Uzbekistan) in the early 1990s should not be overestimated for its ideological strength and therefore its enduring threat. This movement was far less related to the vitality of more political Islam but rather to the collapse of the state and political institutions, which created a major vacuum for nearly any group to fill.<sup>11</sup> In this environment arose the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) which participated in the civil war, proof of the rise of an increasing Muslim identity in the region. Yet this group has been well incorporated into the state since then, dropping their armed struggle and surviving as the only registered Islamic opposition party in Central Asia while opposed to developing a theocratic policy program. Similarly, violent, radical Islamist groups were only marginal players during the war and their significance declined quickly after the war and particularly by the early 2000s, when they were forced abroad or underground.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, this history serves as validation of the potential of radical Islam and the required government repression to combat it. Aside from validating repression, the government also gains continued financial and armaments support from Russia.

Likewise, on the external side, varying estimates of Tajik fighters active in IS exist: the government claims between 200 and 300, a Tajik leader in IS claimed about 2,000 Tajiks fighting in IS (with 500 killed), while an independent analysis reports 160.<sup>13</sup> These Tajik fighters have in fact threatened to bring the Islamist fight home but Baghdadi has refused them, telling them to wait since the central theater of jihad is IS in Syria/Iraq.<sup>14</sup> Considering the number of fighters in a country of over 8 million people, the threat of returning Tajik fighters is real but has been exaggerated by the government.

To be discussed in further detail below, the real threat to Christians emanating from this state/Islam dynamic is a strengthening of the Islamic identity, which in turn would increasingly view Christians in a hostile light. Christians by their nature exist as a threat to the Tajik ethno-

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 2: Burnashew, Why the challenge from Islamists is not the most important regional security challenges for Central Asian States.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 5: Olcott, The Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Lemon, Edward, The Taliban and Islamic State Haunt Tajikistan, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Jamestown Foundation, 28 May 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43959&cHash=b69caf581012b8d749a3bdfa162f56a2#.VeGMBfIViko](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43959&cHash=b69caf581012b8d749a3bdfa162f56a2#.VeGMBfIViko), last accessed May 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Paraszczuk, Joanna, IS Militants Asked Baghdadi For Permission To Fight 'Infidels' In Tajikistan, Radio Free Europe, 5 January 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/isis-tajikistan-syria-jihad-fighters-repatriated/26777220.html>, last accessed May 2016.

religious identity. As anecdotal evidence suggests, the repressive and corrupt government is seen as the central problem in the country and Islamist-oriented groups (like Hizb ut-Tahrir) are seen as the only alternative to this. Therefore, by extension, the government's poor governance makes anti-Christian groups appealing.

## Uzbekistan

Unlike the other Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan sees the threat of Islamism as mainly internal. To an even greater extent than its neighbors, Uzbekistan effectively whitewashes all distinctions of Islamic activity not government sanctioned (or truly any group not directly in line with the policies of the current regime) as radical and terrorist.<sup>15</sup> Within the region, Uzbekistan is perhaps the most strict and repressive in its relationship with Islam in linking broadly defined "religious extremism" with internal political threats.<sup>16</sup> The Karimov regime is particularly paranoid and security-minded as compared to other Central Asian governments due to the large potential for unrest on account of the comparative large size in Central Asia (accounting for roughly half the population of the area), greater ethnic diversity, as well as the independent development of jihad within its territory. This helps explain why the regime is even more repressive against its population at large than its neighbors (with the possible exception of Turkmenistan).

In the most infamous episode, what has been described as a purely anti-government peaceful protest, the Karimov regime justified its severe crackdown in Andijan in May 2005 (in which some 500 people were killed) with the need to resist the radical Islamic uprising there that threatened to overthrow the state.<sup>17</sup> In the years following 9/11 and then again more recently, the police have reportedly arrested thousands of purported members of Islamist groups and closed their meetings.<sup>18</sup>

Karimov's exceptionally repressive stance is rather predictable considering the development of jihad within his territory. Uzbekistan's Islamists in the 1990s saw in the Tajik Civil War an opportunity for jihad and participated in that war aligned with the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, as they were powerless to struggle for Islam in their own country. In the aftermath of the Tajik civil war the radical Islamist groups were forced out of Tajikistan and rejuvenated themselves in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan, from whence sprang the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir, both of which have officially sought the overthrow of the Karimov

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 2: Burnashew, Why the challenge from Islamists is not the most important regional security challenges for Central Asian States.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Shirin Akiner, Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An independent Assessment, Silk Road Studies Program, Washington, 2005, available at: [http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2005\\_akerin\\_violence-in-andijan-13-may-2005.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2005_akerin_violence-in-andijan-13-may-2005.pdf), last accessed May 2016.

<sup>18</sup> See: Central Asia: Region Returns To Muslim Roots, Radio Free Europe, 4 August 2005, Part 1: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060413.html>; Part 2: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060449.html>; Uzbekistan: Muslim Dissidents Jailed and Tortured, Human Rights Watch, 29 March 2004: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2004/03/29/uzbekistan-muslim-dissidents-jailed-and-tortured>; Krausen, Erik, Central Asia: Can Secular Islam Survive?, The Diplomat, 10 April 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/central-asia-can-secular-islam-survive/>, last accessed May 2016.

regime to be replaced by a caliphate.<sup>19</sup> Since the period immediately following 9/11, both groups have effectively been extinguished in the region, with IMU regrouping in northern Afghanistan and the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region and most recently subsuming itself to IS.<sup>20</sup> An independent analysis has listed the number of Uzbek fighters in IS at around 500, the highest number of fighters from a Central Asian country fighting in IS.<sup>21</sup>

Predictably, this repressive stance since the end of the Soviet period has likely fueled the fire of militancy rather than helped stamp it out. Emblematic of the overall poor governance and tense relationship these Central Asian regimes have with the populations at large and in particular with non-conformist political, social, and religious activity, the Karimov regime is contributing to the radicalization of certain segments of Uzbek society.<sup>22</sup> Likewise as in the neighboring states, this repression then serves as a potential indirect threat to Christians by fomenting greater Islamist identity, which is an entirely avoidable result as the overwhelming majority of the population are decidedly secular and have no interest in sacrificing their secular identity for a theocracy.<sup>23</sup>

## Kyrgyzstan

The threat of Islamization in Kyrgyzstan is significantly weaker than in the above two nations, nevertheless the government has taken a notably harsh stance. To a greater extent than most of its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan views the threat from Islamism almost exclusively as external, with the overriding fear being that of militants from Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iraq/Syria returning to radicalize the population through its ideology and destabilize the state through its violent doctrine. The regime further recognizes the underlying weakness within Kyrgyz society – its high poverty levels, poor economic growth, weakness of the state, etc. – as proving the latent potential for an Islamist movement to gain traction, thereby engendering a current hard security response out of national security concern.<sup>24</sup> Numerous examples over the past year indicate both the excessiveness and baselessness of this harsh security crackdown.<sup>25</sup>

The government is generally correct in evaluating the threat of Islamism as being primarily an external one. Even with regard to Kyrgyzstan's experience with Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), the group has clearly shown some ability to attract followers within the country; however, the majority of those members are Uzbek nationals and HuT is viewed generally as a foreign import and is

<sup>19</sup> See footnote 5: Olcott, *The Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia*.

<sup>20</sup> Sharipzhan, Merhat, *IMU Declares It Is Now Part Of The Islamic State*, Radio Free Europe, 6 August 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/imu-islamic-state/27174567.html>, last accessed May 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Neumann, Peter R., *Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000: surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s*, ICSR, 16 January 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>, last accessed May 2016.

<sup>22</sup> See footnote 18: Krausen, *Central Asia: Can Secular Islam Survive?*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See footnote 2: Burnashew, *Why the challenge from Islamists is not the most important regional security challenges for Central Asian States*.

<sup>25</sup> Trilling, David, *Kyrgyzstan: Extremism Charges, Vague and Secretive, Open Door to Abuses*, Eurasianet, 29 June 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74061>; Saipov, *Shockhruk, Kyrgyzstan Silences Popular Imam with Extremism Charges*, Eurasianet, 17 February 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72116>; Leonard, Peter, *Kyrgyzstan: Trial Marks Escalation in Religious Crackdown*, Eurasianet, 13 August 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74671>, last accessed May 2016.



currently very weak in the country. Moreover, despite the activity of HuT and the political instability since 2005, there has been minimal domestic Islamist mobilization.<sup>26</sup>

Rather, over the past year and a half, the government has been responding harshly internally over fears of local Islamic leaders encouraging young Kyrgyz men to join IS, which in turn would create a long term problem of returning militants. By a few estimates roughly 100 Kyrgyz nationals have joined IS in Iraq/Syria;<sup>27</sup> according to data provided by law enforcement agencies, likely exaggerated, as many as 230 Kyrgyz nationals are now fighting in Syria.<sup>28</sup> The authorities in 2015 have justified their strong response by continually noting that the country faces imminent danger from militants returning home from fighting with IS who are ideologically radicalized and militarily experienced.<sup>29</sup> The irony is that through repressing its population in such an indiscriminate and arbitrary manner, the country may be generating a domestic threat of greater Islamization that had not been there previously.

## Kazakhstan

The government views the threat of Islamization as being primarily external and is less concerned about the ideological radicalization of its people but rather about the pure military threat of terrorist violence. Despite the very minor threat of internal Islamization, like its neighbors, Kazakhstan has stepped up its control over the religious sphere, implementing more stringent rules on religious groups and activity and cracking down harshly against any potential for extremist (or truly non-government sanctioned) religious activity. President Nazarbayev likewise generalizes effectively all non-sanctioned religious activity as being extremist and links extremism directly to terrorism.<sup>30</sup>

The history of political Islam in Kazakhstan is minimal and even an apparent string of possibly Islamist-inspired terror attacks earlier in this decade have proved to be an aberration. In truth, these attacks are better explained as belonging to the power struggles between special interest groups rather than Islamism,<sup>31</sup> though it remains a riddle why they would opt to use the 'mask' of Islam for this. Hence it is fitting that the government looks to outside influences for assessing the real Islamist threat, since Islam within the country is viewed as being well managed by the government.

Prior to 2015, the Islamist threat was seen as stemming from the extended Central Asian region, - specifically from Afghanistan and the Central Asian elements there. More recently, the concern

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 4: Heathershaw/Montgomery, The Myth of Post-Soviet Radicalization in Central Asia.

<sup>27</sup> Rickleton, Chris, Welcome to The Wild East and Vocativ.com's Kyrg Republic: A Land That Does Not Exist, Global Voices, 7 January 2015, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2015/01/07/welcome-to-thewildeast-and-vocativ-coms-kyrg-republic-a-land-that-does-not-exist/>, last accessed May 2016.

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 25: Shockrukh, Kyrgyzstan Silences Popular Imam with Extremism Charges.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See footnote 2: Burnashew, Why the challenge from Islamists is not the most important regional security challenges for Central Asian States; and Lillis, Joanna, Kazakhstan: Astana Jolted by Terror Incidents, Eurasianet, 16 November 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64529>, last accessed May 2016.

<sup>31</sup> See footnote 2: Burnashew, Why the challenge from Islamists is not the most important regional security challenges for Central Asian States.

has shifted from the spillover from Afghanistan to Kazakh militants active in IS. While the government in late 2014 estimated that some 300 Kazakh citizens were in IS, half of whom were reportedly women, the more recent estimates of around 250 citizens are more likely to be accurate.<sup>32</sup> The government is clearly fearful of these elements returning.

In addition, the government's attitude towards Islam will likely become increasingly conservative and reactionary in light of the recognized coming economic downturn and its potential social and political repercussions. Kazakhstan will struggle from massively declining growth in 2015 and the next several years which the government fears could evoke anti-government sentiment among the people, including a possible gravitation towards Islamism. The mere threat of this will likely encourage the government to be proactive on the matter via greater repression against any signs of potentially destabilizing religious activity.

## Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is unique in the region in that it has not suffered a terror attack linked to Islam nor has there been an internal Islamist movement. Thus, the threat of Islam is viewed by the government primarily as being a foreign phenomenon that could destabilize the country, not via an enduring ideological movement that gains local support, but rather as an extension of violent Islamist activity emanating from the Middle East or elsewhere in Central Asia. In particular, this threat could manifest itself in the return of the comparatively significant number of Turkmen fighters (some 360) who have joined IS.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most isolated and closed off countries in the world, Turkmenistan rivals Uzbekistan in terms of general repression and specifically with regard to any non-sanctioned Islamic activity. Despite both the existence of any real history of Islamist activity and the moderating effect of tribal traditions on religion, the regime still demonstrates concern over the possibility of Islamist extremist parties that could threaten the political order in the country. The government, more so than most its neighbors, is determined to control religion completely (like nearly all politico-social behavior). Effectively all religious behavior is controlled and Turkmen worship nearly exclusively in government built and controlled mosques.<sup>34</sup> The controlling nature of the government is likely best seen in the fact that former President Niyazov, notorious for his authoritarianism, in essence created his own Koran (the Ruhnama) to be used as spiritual guidance.<sup>35</sup> This extreme example also clearly demonstrates that the underlying motivation of

<sup>32</sup> Paraszczuk, Joanna, Kazakhstan Intelligence: 150 Kazakh Women Are Members of IS, Radio Free Europe, 18 November 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/under-black-flag-kazakhstan-kazakh-women-islamic-state/26698040.html>, last accessed May 2016.

<sup>33</sup> See footnote 21: Neumann/ICSR, Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000: surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s.

<sup>34</sup> See footnote 2: Burnashew, Why the challenge from Islamists is not the most important regional security challenges for Central Asian States; also Fergana, Anna, Turkmenistan's Islam: Between Religion and State, Global Voices, 20 March 2015, <https://globalvoicesonline.org/2015/03/20/turkmenistans-islam-between-religion-and-state/>; and Turkmenistan, in: World Almanac of Islamism, American Foreign Policy Council, updated 2 October 2013, <http://almanac.afpc.org/Turkmenistan>, last accessed May 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Morton, Ella, Golden Statues and Mother Bread: The Bizarre Legacy of Turkmenistan's Former Dictator, Atlas Obscura/Slate, 6 February 2014,

the Turkmen regime, like its neighbors, is to control its population for the purposes of regime stability.

## Implications for Christians

In each of the five Central Asian countries, the primary driver of persecution against Christians remains the authoritarian government, the difference being merely in intensity. As mentioned, these regimes exist to ensure their own survival and repress any political, social, or religious movement that could be potentially destabilizing. In essence, the state repression does not target those religious societies (whether Muslim or Christian) that have been accepted historically and have a known, stable, predictable relationship with the government in which they formally recognize themselves as subject to the state and interested in perpetuating the regime's control and stability. This marks the direct form of Christian persecution.

As it pertains to this report, Christians are also indirectly impacted by the relationship of these governments to their overwhelmingly Islamic populations. Thus, the ultimate threat to Christians resulting from this relationship is the potential for fostering a stronger, more conservative Islamic identity. Christians by their nature across Central Asia are viewed as being a threat to the existing ethno-religious identity and so are potential targets of both vertical persecution (direct: from the authorities) and horizontal persecution (indirect: from a potentially increasing Islamic society).

This "horizontal" potential is not ultimately country-specific. It cannot be oversimplified as being the result of one more repressive government (e.g. Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan) or as being the result of weak, impoverished, unstable states (e.g. Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan). Each of these countries have experienced some level of Islamization evidenced by either the internal development of Islamization or by the number of individuals who have gone to fight in Afghanistan/Pakistan or Iraq/Syria. Surely, all forms of poor governance (repression, corruption, ungoverned regions, weak economies, poverty, instability, etc.) play a contributing role in this. Therefore, the threat of a possibly growing Islamist population (which could develop into becoming a major factor of persecution) cannot be identified as being significantly greater in one country more than in another.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, this threat seems to exist more in theory than in practice. Anecdotal evidence and the example of numerous other authoritarian nations suggest that many people perceive the state as being the primary impediment in their lives and are therefore willing to consider alternative movements that could address this. In nations that lack veritable pluralism and democratic institutions, movements that tap into their ethno-religious identity, like varying

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[http://www.slate.com/blogs/atlas\\_obscura/2014/02/06/saparmurat\\_niyazov\\_former\\_president\\_of\\_turkmenistan\\_has\\_left\\_quite\\_the\\_legacy.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/atlas_obscura/2014/02/06/saparmurat_niyazov_former_president_of_turkmenistan_has_left_quite_the_legacy.html), last accessed May 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Keep in mind here that I am talking about not simply the phenomenon of Islamic militancy, which exists to an extent in all these countries, but the potential for this militancy to become substantially stronger as a direct result of the indiscriminate and arbitrary repression by the government which then fosters a greater Islamist identity in society.

degrees of conservative Islam, can become increasingly appealing as a result.<sup>37</sup> Thus, if radicalism were to emerge from its very low base in Central Asia, it would likely arise from excessive and arbitrary government repression – akin to the extent of radicalism developing in the North Caucasus in Russia – more so than from an indigenous movement that has managed to gain a groundswell of support and momentum outside the control of the regime.

Nonetheless, despite warnings for years of the potential for extremism to result from repression, none of this has come to fruition. A popular academic warned years ago after 9/11 that the extreme repression of the Central Asian regimes and impossibility of political expression would naturally radicalize the population and assuredly drive them over time to join extremist groups.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, considering the enduring moderate brand of Islam as well as the very weak development of jihad and Islamist groups in the countries to date, this prediction has not materialized.

There may however be something unique about today's climate that, unlike in the past 15 years or so, indeed poses a threat. The entire region will likely be undergoing years of worsened economic outcomes, based particularly on the prolonged low price of oil, reductions in government spending, falls in remittances, and the return of migrant workers from Russia back to Central Asia. Add to this the potential political disruptor of looming succession crises in nearly all these regimes, and the coming several years do indeed appear to be ushering in a new and possibly unstable political and economic era. Thus, the perennial and persistent complaint of pervasive corruption continues unabated, now complimented by extended poorer living standards, less government assistance, and perhaps political fragmentation. Seen from the view of a failing political-social contract, an increase in perceived unjust repression is no longer being matched by improved living standards, yet remains replete with the standard corruption and lack of transparency, leaving the people utterly dissatisfied with the situation.

Regarding the external threat the governments are so concerned about, there exists the legitimate fear of returning Central Asian militants from the battlegrounds of Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria. In light of the coming difficult years ahead within Central Asia, it is particularly worrisome to add such groups and ideologies to the mix. For a variety of reasons, the experience of militants returning from Afghanistan and Iraq in the past decade have shown that concern over this threat should be more measured. To a significant degree, a high proportion of these militants end up either dead or disillusioned, remain in the region, move to another battlefield, or are arrested by authorities upon re-entry,<sup>39</sup> the last of which is more of a reality in light of the greater focus on security and improved counterterrorism forces in Central Asia (yet major issues with regard to porous borders and corrupt law enforcement clearly continue). Certainly, many of these militants will attempt to return with their experience, weapons, and radical ideologies and this threat needs to be taken seriously.

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<sup>37</sup> Kholov, Normahmad, Central Asia: Radical Islamists Challenge Governments Efforts At Control (Part 3), Radio Free Europe, 8 August 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060505.html>, last accessed May 2016. This is one simple example but I have seen this elsewhere and also from conversations with individuals from the area and academics.

<sup>38</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Byman, D. and Shapiro, J., Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists, in: *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, November/December 2014 Issue, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2014-10-01/homeward-bound>, last accessed May 2016.

Whether all this translates in the future into increased threats to Christians from the government and the Islamic society remains to be seen. It will remain particularly important in the coming year or two to monitor the government's response to Islamic developments since overplaying the Islamist threat and utilizing the repressive method based on the old Soviet model are not long-term strategies for success. Rather, this path can develop many negative, undesired yet unknown outcomes for society at large and Christians in particular.