Constructing the Uzbek State
CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL ASIA:
SOCIETIES, POLITICS, AND CULTURES

Series Editor

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Over the past few decades, Uzbekistan has attracted the attention of the academic and policy communities for several reasons. First, its geostrategic importance—the country is located between Russia and China, borders Afghanistan, and has the largest army in Central Asia (although Kazakhstan is rapidly gaining on it). Second, it plays a critical role in shaping or unshaping Central Asia as a region, as Uzbekistan borders all other Central Asian states and has an ethnic diaspora in each of them. Tashkent’s views on regional integration and its choice of isolationism have impacted the whole region. Third, it hosts the largest population in Central Asia: every other Central Asian is Uzbek (thirty million inhabitants of the region’s sixty million), therefore Uzbekistan’s political, social, and cultural evolutions largely exemplify the transformations of the region as a whole. Moreover, Uzbekistan is rich, at least potentially, in terms of energy, minerals, and agriculture; it has maintained some industrial production and has important trade potential.

More than twenty-five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, evaluating Uzbekistan’s post-Soviet transformation remains complicated. Practitioners and scholars have seen access to sources, data, and fieldwork progressively restricted since the early 2000s. On the one hand, the country shows signs of progress in terms of infrastructure development and integration into international systems. Uzbekistan is now part of major international organizations, through which it demonstrates its capacity for independent decision-making in the face of various influences and pressures. However, its system of governance seems to have reached its limit and now faces serious challenges in terms of “inventing” a new economic future, reformulating the state–society social contract, and integrating social and cultural changes into the state-centric grand narrative.
This volume analyzes the transformations of post-Soviet Uzbekistan using a multidisciplinary perspective, drawing on political science, international relations, political economy, anthropology, geography, and cultural studies. This collective discussion is neither final nor nondebatable. Rather, it represents an attempt to engage in an analysis of the empirical evidence and theoretical assumptions in an academic setting.

A POST-KARIMOV UZBEKISTAN

From 1989 to 2016, Islam Karimov presided over Uzbekistan and its destiny. His death, announced on September 2, 2016, reopened the future of the country and multiple possible paths of development. One year after the death of the “father of the nation,” there have been modest yet enlightening changes, more significant than those that occurred in Turkmenistan after the sudden death of President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006.

The new Uzbek president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, is a member of the country’s political elite. He became prime minister in 2003 and held that post until he assumed the presidency in 2016. He is emphasizing continuity and has issued a decree to immortalize Islam Karimov’s memory by proclaiming his birthday, September 30, as National Commemoration Day and his death, September 2, as First President’s Commemoration Day. Twenty-five roads, factories, airports, and universities have been renamed in Karimov’s honor, including the Tashkent Airport and the capital’s Technical University, as well as the General Motors plant located in the small city of Asaka in the Fergana Valley. In addition, Mirziyoyev also ordered a memorial complex built around Karimov’s tomb in his native town of Samarkand.

As expected, the new president’s political style is quite similar to his predecessor’s, although considerably less focused on his own persona. For the time being, Mirziyoyev is promoting a more collegial and less personalized style. Just as the Turkmen regime did when a new president came to power in 2007, Uzbekistan released a few symbolic political prisoners in late 2016. Mirziyoyev also made an obvious overture to members of the elite who had been arrested by the previous administration by rehabilitating several of them. These political developments demonstrate the aging elite’s continued stronghold and the return to power of shady personalities. They also confirm Mirziyoyev’s need to secure the elite’s loyalty by renewing relations with those who had been partially cast aside and whose confidence he needs to gain.

The biggest changes have been in regional policy and occurred swiftly, just a few days after Karimov’s death. As soon as Mirziyoyev assumed power, he
announced that the country’s regional policy would be his priority and, so far, he seems to have kept his word. As early as September 2016, official contacts with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan resumed at the highest levels, with an increasing number of state visits. Several points of contention, such as delimitation at the Uzbek–Kyrgyz border, are in the process of being resolved, and flights between Dushanbe and Tashkent, stopped since 1992, have resumed. Relations with Kazakhstan have also consolidated, while Turkmenistan earned the privilege of being the first foreign country visited by the new Uzbek president.

Changes are not as noticeable on the international scene, for several reasons. First, the new president has almost no experience in this field and has been cautious in his initial efforts. Yet, he enjoys a degree of leeway, since he can establish relations with foreign leaders on a new footing. Second, and more importantly, it is unlikely that Uzbek foreign relations will undergo a major shift. In the medium term, the country’s zigzagging policy was a relevant choice as it guaranteed autonomy vis-à-vis both Moscow and Washington, while at the same time positioning Uzbekistan as a strategic country capable of having its own relations with each of the great powers.

Domestic policy has shown contradictory signs of changes. Mirziyoyev appears to have a renewed concern for his countrymen’s daily problems. This is a classic populist technique that most new presidents use to assert their legitimacy and show that they are close to the people without necessarily modifying the political system itself. The government created, for instance, a “virtual cabinet” with a hotline and a website where Uzbek citizens can share their problems in the hopes they will be solved. Some real improvements seem to have been made. First, the government has decreased the administrative burden on small businesses by reducing audits and other indirect opportunities for racketeering and extortion by the fiscal police in the bazaars and kiosks. This is an efficient and rapid way of lowering the risk of popular discontent in a critical domain such as the small private sector.

The authorities are also preparing to reform the national currency, the sum, which faced one of its biggest devaluations in spring 2017. The government’s goal is obviously to attract new investors without jeopardizing what is really at stake—the currency’s convertibility. Without convertibility, foreign investors will be reluctant to settle in Uzbekistan because they want assurances that they can reinvest their capital in the same place. However, the new law has not passed and seems to be blocked by the National Security Service (SNB), which controls the exchange rate in order to maintain its considerable financial power. Yet, a new law allows all Uzbek citizens to leave the country with up to US$10,000. This is a welcome gesture for the business community and shows the government’s desire to facilitate local, regional, and international
trade. Individual entrepreneurs will also be authorized to trade with foreigners without having to register as corporations and will be allowed to purchase foreign currency. If the law is fully implemented, small Uzbek businesses will no doubt benefit, as well as foreign investors.

Two other measures, which were announced by the Uzbek government early on and warmly received by the international community, have been delayed or suspended. In January 2017, a preliminary version of a presidential decree included a clause that suspended Uzbek citizens’ obligation to obtain an exit visa when traveling abroad, but this clause was withdrawn from subsequent versions of the decree. This step backward is evidence that the authorities want to maintain control over the population, making the Uzbek regime one of the most repressive in the world in terms of freedom of travel.

Second, the president had announced that visa requirements for twenty-seven (mainly Western) countries would be dropped to stimulate trade and tourism, but implementation has been delayed from 2017 to 2021, again probably due to pressure from the security services.

The coming months will give us a better idea of whether the new president will try to adopt substantive reforms or superficial changes. The key players themselves will probably remain in flux because they need to strike a balance between necessary reforms and curtailing instability. The government knows that the country needs reforms, above all to attract foreign investors, but also to satisfy popular demand (in particular the merchant class), and, finally, to encourage the West to regard the new president as a reformer. At the same time, Uzbek political elites have not forgotten the lessons of the fall of the USSR. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev embodied all the elements of what not to do; he was a reformer who drowned in the sweeping wave of reforms he launched. Indeed, Uzbek authorities are concerned that sudden broad and rapid changes could backfire, creating money flows that the security forces can no longer control and thus undermining political stability. It is not clear whether the leadership is fully aware of the country’s actual social conditions and popular discontent or whether it is cut off from public opinion and intoxicated by its own propaganda, especially when it comes to so-called Islamic extremism.

One of the major challenges in the near future will be whether President Mirziyoyev, Prime Minister Rustam Azimov, and SNB Director Rustam Inoyatov consolidate their power as a triumvirate, or whether either Azimov or Inoyatov will gradually be pushed aside under pressure from his respective competitor. Should the trio disappear, future trends would become more predictable: a more reformist approach if Azimov stays in power and supports Mirziyoyev; or the status quo, if not a more repressive approach, should Inoyatov win the battle and force Mirziyoyev to keep reforms at a minimum.
Introduction

As foreign observers have noted for several years, the SNB is the backbone of Uzbek state power, not only in terms of security and sovereignty, but also in economic and financial terms, and this commercial empire will not fall apart of its own accord. Future economic and financial reforms, in particular the currency law mentioned above, will shed light on the balance of power between Mirziyoyev and the security services. The fact that some mafia-like figures have returned to power does not bode well for the democratization of the regime, but, at the same time, it does not necessarily mean that the situation has gotten worse: the Karimov regime simply liquidated the older Mafioso elites and replaced them with more submissive figures. The return of the first group does not fundamentally alter the power structure.

Although domestic changes will probably be slow, regional policy could evolve more quickly and this is the most hopeful area for the time being. The region as a whole, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular, welcome the softening of Uzbekistan’s regional policy, which could gradually breathe new life into regional trade and strengthen cooperation among Central Asian states vis-à-vis the neighboring great powers. In the long term, Uzbekistan could gradually reclaim its leadership position in Central Asia and even challenge Kazakhstan, whose economy has significantly slowed. In foreign policy, the key element to watch closely will be Uzbekistan’s relations with Russia; a possible rapprochement would end the isolationist Karimov era.

Yet beyond President Mirziyoyev’s political decisions, certain fundamental structural elements will shape the country’s future and its socioeconomic trends in the decades to come. The first is long-term demographics: with more than thirty million inhabitants, Uzbekistan is, and will remain, the region’s demographic powerhouse. Its population increased by one-third during the first quarter century of independence, from twenty million to thirty million. More than 55 percent of the population is under twenty-five years of age, meaning that more than fifteen million people are entering an already saturated labor market. Migration flows will remain a critical channel to absorb excess labor over the next two or three decades. Having said this, demographic transitions are underway, with gradually declining birth rates that will progressively stabilize the population in the coming decades. The country’s youth could be both a benefit for and a political and social risk to the country, unless positive measures are taken to facilitate their integration into society.

In theory, the Uzbek economy is wealthy; however, it is nearing exhaustion after two decades of stagnation and isolationism, and it cannot absorb the current demographic influx. While the country’s GDP has been climbing steadily and even remarkably since the beginning of 2010 (from US$ 22 billion in 2000 to 45 billion in 2010 and 66 billion in 2015)—with the caveat that data provided by national institutions to international organizations...
such as the UN is unreliable—it appears that the per capita rate has slowed recently. According to some sources, such as the CIA World Fact Book, the per capita GDP rate has been hovering at around US$2,000 over the last few years. As mentioned, the positive trends in Uzbek growth are insufficient to absorb the demographic pressure, while the standard of living has not only stagnated but even declined for some.

Unlike neighboring Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan has the good fortune of a diversified economy. The state budget still relies to a great extent on natural resources, but nowhere near as much as its neighbors. Natural resources revenues depend largely on world energy and raw material prices: when prices are high, natural resources make up one-quarter, and sometimes even slightly less than one-fifth, of GDP. When prices are low, this proportion drops to 10 percent, where it has stayed since 2015. This number does not include the price of cotton, which is the country’s second “currency” on the world market. Nonetheless, the country has a robust services sector, made up principally of small street vendors and bazaars. It has also preserved a part of its industrial plant inherited from the Soviet Union.

On paper, Uzbekistan has a balanced economy and should be an appealing partner for both regional and world trade. In practice, however, since the beginning of the 2000s, its isolationist policy has profoundly altered the regional balance and has put the brakes on the country’s trade prospects, although not to the extremes of Turkmenistan. Nonetheless, it would be naïve to simply attribute this policy to a fear of opening up the country and to favoring security over trade. Isolationism has its own financial logic: the security services built up a large share of its commercial empire by controlling taxes and customs duties. In the end, isolationist measures, which have adverse effects on the rest of the country, produce financial benefit for the intelligence services.

Compared with its three neighbors, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan has a relatively good balance in terms of regional wealth and standard of living. This is true despite the large gulf between the urban capital and the remote rural areas, found in so many areas of the world. Moreover, regional disparities seem to be increasing. The autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, on the banks of the dying Aral Sea, is the most marginalized and impoverished. Khorezm to the north and Sukhandarya and Kashkadarya to the south are agricultural regions where reforms are difficult to implement because they have few resources to lean on. The Fergana Valley, the country’s agricultural heart, is the wealthiest region in terms of production and irrigation capacity, but it is overpopulated, and there is not enough land to distribute to new generations. The area has always been one of lively popular discontent. Navoiy has succeeded in preserving and even developing
its Soviet industrial heritage; with its extraction and processing industries, it is the industrial heart of the country. Bukhara, Samarkand, Jizzakh, and the Tashkent region have relatively well-balanced economies.

**THE VOLUME**

To better grasp the challenges facing post-Karimov Uzbekistan, it is necessary to review nearly three decades of independence. In the first part of the volume, we discuss the political construct of Uzbekistan under Karimov, based on the delineation between the state, the elite, and the people, and the tight links between politics and economy.

Matteo Fumagalli opens the discussion by focusing on Uzbekistan’s foreign policy, especially its Central Asia policy, known as “Fortress Uzbekistan.” The country’s isolationism was justified by the—alleged or real—risk of instability and spillovers from its neighbors, as well as from the Uzbek minorities living abroad, particularly southern Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan’s 2012 Foreign Policy Concept made explicit the so-called four no’s: no foreign bases on Uzbek territory; no participation in military blocs; no involvement in peace-keeping operations abroad; and no mediation by any external power of any conflict in Central Asia. However, in the post-Karimov era, the new elites may resort to ethnic nationalism to boost their legitimacy domestically, which would change Uzbekistan’s policy stance dramatically.

Next, Nick Megoran addresses the issue of geography as the core of Uzbekistan’s nationalism—understood in the sense of nation-state affirmation. As nation-states are inherently spatial, materializing borders has been a critical issue for asserting sovereignty over territories. The Fergana Valley has been the most transformed by the emergence of new borders between republics: fences, check points, and administrative controls have disrupted the historical flows of people and goods in the Valley, as exemplified in the village of Check. However, the territorialization of state sovereignty is not a product of a supposedly illiberal Uzbek regime, but was an approach widely supported by civil society, foreign donors, and international organizations.

Uzbekistan’s political system has been stable for more than two decades thanks to its close control over economic development. The country’s wealth essentially derives from a few major industries and resources—cotton, gold, uranium, and hydrocarbons—with a limited private sector, which contributes to consolidating elites around few rent-seeking opportunities. The Karimov family monopolized the most profitable economic sectors, especially the national mineral industries and Gazprom’s gas sales, as well as niches such as construction, cement production, trade with China, and communications
and entertainment. However, the commercial empire of Gulnara Karimova, the president’s daughter, was dismantled in 2013–2014. In chapter 3, Alisher Ilkhamov investigates the telecommunication sector, which was rocked by several corruption scandals involving European and Russian firms, providing great insight into the contradictory policy of developing the telecommunications and information technology sector while simultaneously imposing strict political control over information content.

The Uzbek authorities under Karimov not only skillfully liquidated any potential opposition, but they also used large-scale coercive tools in order to maintain stability. Restrictions on the freedoms of speech, the press, and association, as well as an isolationist policy aimed at limiting external influences of all sorts, successfully secured passive popular support for two decades. Yet it would be a mistake to think this popular support was obtained by coercion alone. Citizens participate in building politics and should be seen as co-creators of some of the political values they may integrate, accept, or claim; at the same time, they may show resilience, even resistance, against some concrete practices. In chapter 4, Morgan Liu addresses the “political thinking” of Uzbekistan from a grassroots perspective. He looks at how power operates through the spread of some values associated with national identity (such as patience and endurance, but also seeing the president as a khan, a benevolent despot), as well as through practices of gift-and-favor exchanges, in particular in the framework of the mahalla, the neighborhood community, and how it both validates and contradicts patronal politics.

The second section of the volume delves into the social and cultural changes related to labor migration and one specific trigger—the failure to reform agriculture. Russell Zanca shows us how Uzbek peasants paid a high price for the regime’s inability to develop more sustainable agriculture with training and expertise; access to land, inputs, and water; and crop diversification. Cotton remains the backbone of agricultural production, but it is so poorly remunerated and creates so few opportunities for annual improvement that millions of rural Uzbeks left the country in search of better lives. In Uzbekistan’s main agricultural areas, especially Khorezm and the Fergana Valley, at least 30–40 percent of the working-age male population has left to work abroad.

This migration flow heads mostly toward Russia. With about three million jobseekers, Uzbekistan is the leading migrant-sending country in post-Soviet space, even if the authorities refuse to recognize this massive trend. Migrants themselves must decide whether their exodus is permanent (should they stay for a long time and integrate somewhat into Russian society?) or temporary (accumulate some capital and then go back home). In his chapter, Sergey Abashin uses migrants’ life stories to explain how migration became an intrinsic part of family coping strategies, involving all household men
Introduction

and sometimes women. Migration shapes new relationships and hierarchies between sons and fathers, between brothers, and between genders. While abroad, migrants adapt to new life conditions while maintaining bonds with the homeland and their social duties through networks revolving around kinship, region of origin, or ethnic affiliation. Rustamjon Urinboyev explores how migrants’ transnational lives reinforce the mahalla tradition and the mahalla-based moral economy, which emphasizes traditional modes of trust, hashar (noncompensated community project) obligation, shame, and neighborliness during migration.

Labor migration also plays a critical role in changing an individual’s relationship to Islam and Islamic practices. The third part of this volume explores the place of religion in Uzbekistan, both at the state level and in society. Johan Rasamayagam invites us to move away from overemphasizing the distinctiveness of Uzbekistan’s policies toward Islam by discussing a similar securitization mechanism in the United Kingdom. In both cases, state structures delineate a “good” and a “bad” Islam and portray the supposed radicalization of Islam as an existential threat to state sovereignty and to the nation’s “traditions.” In Uzbekistan, the “good” Islam is tolerant, nonpolitical, and in tune with “Uzbekness” (O’zbekchilik), while “foreign” forms of Islam are portrayed as dangerous, counter to Uzbek spiritual values, and politically motivated. This vision of Islam impacts the way the state tries to control Islamic education, imposing on it a restrictive legislative and institutional framework and avoiding any religious content in the public school curriculum. Sebastien Peyrouse analyzes the Uzbek Islamic education system, looking at institutional actors that monitor the right to teach religion, higher education institutions offering theology classes, and unofficial classes arranged by families or underground circles.

The Uzbek state’s tight control over religious matters has prompted varied responses from different segments of society. Some support the state vision of being a secular fortress against Islamic destabilization. Others prefer to confine to their religious practices to the home. This is the case of many Sufi groups, studied here by Maria Louw. The Uzbek state promoted the main Naqshbandiyya shrines as national cultural heritage sites while becoming increasingly suspicious of Sufi groups and their out-of-state-control spiritual chain of authority. While state-controlled forms of Sufism exist, they are viewed as part of Uzbekistan’s nation-branding efforts, and the majority of groups “re-privatize” their practices to protect religion from state intrusion. Another way to react to the state stranglehold over Islam is to embrace international jihadism. This solution, chosen by a very limited number of people—mostly migrant Uzbeks living in Russia or Turkey or as part of the Uzbek ethnic minority in Southern Kyrgyzstan—cannot be correlated to the lack of religious freedom in Uzbekistan, as motives for jihadism can be di-
verse. In his chapter, Noah Tucker analyzes how the war in Syria altered the Uzbek Islamist militant movement and made Uzbeks the largest group among Central Asian violent extremist organizations (VEOs), with about two thousand fighters. This situation of deterritorialized and denationalized jihadists creates challenges for the Uzbek state’s counterextremist messaging, showing the need for the authorities to cooperate with Islamic authority figures who advance an anti-Salafi and/or anti-jihadist agenda.

The last part of the volume looks at the renegotiation of identities in several senses of the term. Peter Finke untangles the puzzle of Uzbek identity by looking at diverging ethnic configurations in different regions of the country and among Uzbek diasporas. He shows that “Uzbekness” is not a unifying theme but rather the sum of a number of different local practices and ideas, which can interact differently with other ethnic groups, such as Tajiks or Karakalpaks, and which defines a “core” identity (Bukhari, Qipchaks, Oghuz, etc.) based on diverse elements—mostly linguistic, genealogical, or based on former socioeconomic practices. Marlene Laruelle moves the focus of Uzbek identity to the state-sponsored narrative and academic production, exploring the multilayered construction of a grand narrative of the nation. The latter concept is based on pre-Soviet and Soviet legacies updated for the post-independence era, and on crafting an historical trajectory—obviously stretched and distorted, as any national metanarrative is—that makes the independent state born in 1991 the “natural” result of the nation’s millennia of history.

Gender identity has also been one of the driving elements of social and cultural changes in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, with women and their agency shifting dramatically following the Soviet collapse and the subsequent new socioeconomic and cultural context. In her chapter, Svetlana Peshkova follows female religious teachers and leaders (otinlar) in their role as social actors actively engaged in shaping their communities. These women modify the perception of the division between public and private spaces by providing (often unsanctioned) religious instruction, officiating at various ceremonial occasions, performing healing rituals, or providing advice on mundane matters of individual community members. Rano Turaeva continues the discussion by looking at women entrepreneurs and migrants, shedding light on the transformation of labor markets and family structures between the Soviet and the post-Soviet periods.

Chapters of this volume were previously presented at a conference organized in Stockholm, Sweden, in June 2015 by The George Washington University’s Central Asia Program (CAP) and the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. The conference would not have been possible without the generous funding of the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ) and the invaluable help of Johann Engval and Timur Dadabaev. Both are warmly thanked here.
Part I

UZBEKISTAN’S
POLITICAL CONSTRUCT
Chapter One
When Security Trumps Identity
Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy under Islam Karimov
Matteo Fumagalli

It is difficult to underestimate the strategic importance of Uzbekistan. Located in the heart of Central Asia, bordering all other post-Soviet states of the region and Afghanistan, Uzbekistan is Central Asia’s most populous state (thirty-one million), the largest market, and fields the largest army (with some fifty thousand troops). Despite a large Uzbek ethnic majority (over 85 percent) it is also home to various ethnic minority groups. Almost three million ethnic Uzbeks are clustered in the border regions of the other post-Soviet Central Asian republics, and another three million live in Afghanistan, making Uzbeks the largest ethnic community in the region. Despite the many challenges the country faced in 1991, including a total lack of experience in conducting foreign affairs, Uzbekistan has been an important strategic player in the region throughout the entire post-Soviet period. Moreover, President Islam Karimov’s Uzbekistan was a predictable international actor. Its international partners knew what to expect from him.

The death of Karimov in September 2016, after twenty-seven years in office, raises questions about the domestic political order and the evolution of state–society relations. It also opens space to uncertainties about the country’s foreign policy and the continuity of the path undertaken under the country’s first president. This chapter uses Uzbekistan’s reaction to the 2010 violence in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, to explore Tashkent’s foreign policy under Karimov. The case study demonstrates that Uzbekistan did play a role in maintaining Central Asian security and stability by refraining to support Uzbek co-ethnics abroad and more generally refraining from linking ethnic nationalism and foreign policy. Security trumped identity under Karimov’s rule. As the country moves into the post-Karimov era, the key questions are: (1) whether or not the new president will resort to ethnic nationalism in foreign policy as a way to boost legitimacy at home and (2) will Tashkent renounce its long-held policy
of non-alignment, especially in relation to ties with Russia? Will the Uzbek people continue to “not be dependent on anyone,” as President Karimov himself maintained in the aftermath of the Andijon events in 2005, when a government crackdown on protesters led to hundreds of deaths and thousands of people seeking refuge beyond the border.1

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I draw on President Karimov’s own writings and speeches as well as other official policy documents to highlight the Uzbekistani leadership’s worldview and the key tenets of the country’s foreign policy to date. Preserving the country’s sovereignty and independence, nonalignment, and regime security and survival defined Uzbekistan’s foreign policy under Karimov. Consequently, ethnicity hardly played any role in Uzbekistan’s relations with its neighbors. The second part of the chapter is an empirical illustration of those foreign policy pillars. In analyzing popular reactions to Uzbekistan’s handling of the 2010 Osh violence, I review a number of Uzbek-language discussion forums and blogs to demonstrate that Tashkent’s long-held position came under criticism at the time. This is important to the broader argument I make; namely, that in the post-Karimov era, as the new leader(s) seek to boost their legitimacy domestically, resorting to ethnic nationalism might be a relatively easy card to play. That is to say, should the tragic events of 2010 repeat themselves, Uzbekistan’s traditional policy of nonintervention is likely to come under stress.

STABILITY AT ALL COSTS: SOVEREIGNTY, SECURITY, AND NONALIGNMENT IN UZBEKISTAN’S FOREIGN POLICY

Uzbekistan has been a predictable, if difficult actor in early twenty-first-century global and regional politics. Three main debates concerning Uzbekistan’s foreign policy have emerged in the scholarly and policy literature.

Domestic Drivers

The first debate concerns the key drivers of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy. Although some observers have noted the importance of the regional strategic environment, itself in flux, and more systemic-level factors,2 most acknowledge the overwhelming importance of domestic factors,3 such as regime security and survival,4 centralization of decision-making,5 the role of the security services,6 and prestige.7 What is perhaps disputed is whether this was the result of a clear articulation of the country’s national and security interests or instead the product of “strategic confusion.”8 In sum, stability (the preservation of peace and order within the country’s territorial borders) has become
the mantra of Uzbekistan’s geopolitics. Beyond the fences of “Fortress Uzbekistan” lies the realm of instability and disorder that Karimov prevented from spilling over into Uzbekistani territory. In Uzbekistan, preservation of stability has implied protection from spillover of instability and violence from neighboring countries, which might have come in the form of civil wars (in Tajikistan, from 1992 to 1997), regime change (in Kyrgyzstan, in 2005 and 2010), or ethnic strife (Kyrgyzstan 2010). Islam Karimov’s book Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century: Threats to Security, Conditions of Stability and Guarantees for Progress probably best exemplifies the Uzbekistani regime’s preoccupation with fear of instability:

[w]hat kind of period will the 21st century be for the inhabitants of Uzbekistan? [. . .] Are we aware of difficulties on the road to reform [. . .]? [A]re we aware of the threats to our stability and security?"

Sudden Shifts

The second debate, which attracted considerable attention given the significant geopolitical implication of such moves, revolved around the country’s sudden and abrupt turnarounds in its international alignments. Strategic partnerships have alternated with sudden reversals. After seeking to delink from Russia in the first decade after independence—while retaining membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—Uzbekistan leveraged its position on Afghanistan’s doorstep to take an active role in the U.S.-led war on terror. Not only did Tashkent allow Washington to use its base at Qarshi-Khanabad in 2001, it also engaged in active intelligence collection and sharing. Only a few years later, in 2005, growing Western pressure on issues of human rights abuses and the lack of political and economic reform convinced the leadership in Tashkent that vulnerability to Western pressure risked jeopardizing regime security. That fall, a few weeks after Tashkent evicted U.S. troops from its base, Uzbekistan and Russia signed a new strategic partnership agreement. Ties with Russia intensified and with the West cooled down for a few years, but in 2008–2009 Tashkent was ready for a change of direction. Karimov agreed to allow the transit of nonlethal supplies to (and later from) Afghanistan on the Northern Distribution Network, while opposing any Russian attempt to increase the military component of the CSTO through the establishment of a rapid reaction force, ultimately suspending its participation (but not the membership) in the organization. Before his death, President Karimov’s opposition to the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union grew more vocal. Amid all this, the relationship between Uzbekistan and China, an increasingly important economic partner of the Central Asian republics, also
intensified, while security cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) remained limited due to Tashkent’s reluctance to participate in military exercises and peace-keeping operations. Overall, however, a consensus has emerged that regardless of the specific partner, Karimov’s top priority has always been non-alignment, whether described as “self-reliance,” a “multi-vector foreign policy,” or “omni-balancing.” Whatever the exact terminology, Karimov was keen that Uzbekistan’s security—including that of his own regime—would not become vulnerable to external pressure. Or, as he aptly put it himself: “The Uzbek people will never be dependent on anyone.”

Uzbekistan’s 2012 Foreign Policy Concept restates this point through the formulation of “four no’s”: no to foreign bases on Uzbek territory; no to participation in military blocs; no to involvement in peace-keeping operations abroad; and no to mediation by any external power of any conflict in Central Asia. These four no’s are just another way of articulating Tashkent’s well-known foreign policy stance, hostile to the deployment of any foreign troops on its territory (post-U.S. eviction in 2005) or close to it, which explains Uzbekistan’s hostility to any attempt to change the charter of the CSTO and launch a rapid reaction force (possibly accompanied by the opening of a Russian base in Southern Kyrgyzstan, next to the Uzbek border) which would intervene in local conflicts.

The Role of Identity

The third debate, central to the analysis below and quite possibly to the future course of Uzbekistan’s international conduct, examines the link between identity and foreign policy. In the first decade after independence, scholars focused more on the possibility that contested borders, territorial oddities like the enclaves in the Fergana Valley, and cross-border minority groups might trigger the intervention of their respective patron states, leading to domino effects of territorial claims and possible separatist and irredentist claims. Karimov was acutely aware of this himself. In his 1997 book, Karimov outlined his vision of security: “The support for indivisibility of security as a permanent process with no limits, the threat posed by ethnic, regional, and local conflicts and aggressive separatism, the lack of a collective security system in Uzbekistan’s proximate environment, terrorism, drug-trafficking, arms trade, and ecological problems.” A separate mention is reserved for a particular kind of threat: Uzbekistan’s “encirclement by countries burdened with ethnic, demographic, economic, and other problems.” Uzbekistan’s geopolitical environment is elevated to the level of a problem, and Uzbekistan is the only bulwark against chaos. What seemed to worsen the situation is the
fact that “these [Afghanistan, Tajikistan] where the Uzbek diaspora are the most numerous among foreign ones [sic].” Later in the volume, Karimov outlined a way out of the quagmire: the inviolability of borders, the importance of a country’s multiethnic character to its stability and security, and the significance assigned to the links with Uzbek communities living outside Uzbekistan: “The unity of any nation, the Uzbek nation included, implies close linkages with its ethnic brothers, living in other sovereign states, including the Central Asian countries.” The question of cross-border minorities (or “separated nations”) is primarily discussed as a source of threat:

The ongoing conflicts give some people a possibility to exaggerate the problems of “separated nations.” Often a deliberate selection of arguments in favor of, for example, the unification of Tadjiks or Uzbeks and Pushtun tribes on both sides of the border with Afghanistan. It is terrible to imagine the consequences of any attempt to change the existing borders using the ethnic principles of division.

Uzbekistan’s attitude toward Uzbeks abroad illustrates this point well. Uzbekistan’s leadership has made respect for state sovereignty a key dimension of its domestic and foreign policy. Uzbekistan’s attitude toward cross-border Uzbek co-ethnics has defied predictions dating back to the early post-independence period that Tashkent would engage in irredentist policies, or at the very least would act as the patron of Uzbeks abroad. Contacts with Uzbeks abroad have been limited, and officialdom has traditionally refrained from commenting on the conditions of the co-ethnics in the neighboring republics, preferring underground operations and contacts. Not only has Tashkent not intervened, but it has also looked at Uzbek co-ethnics with caution and even suspicion. Uzbeks abroad are not seen as Uzbekistan’s “own Uzbeks,” and thus are not of Tashkent’s concern.

Uzbekistan’s leadership has not contemplated irredentism, instead remaining focused on domestic state-building. Tashkent has sought to insulate the country and the population from the rest of the region, construed as a constant source of problems and threats, fellow ethnic kin included. In this respect, Uzbekistan’s attitude radically differs from that of Kazakhstan or the Russian Federation, which have diaspora policies either openly encouraging the resettlement of co-ethnics (the oralmandar) on their own territory (Kazakhstan) or at least pledging support for the “compatriots” (the sootechestvenniki) in the Russian case. The rationale behind the adoption of such diaspora policies is different in the two states. Kazakhstan’s interest in the diaspora was primarily aimed at re-establishing demographic superiority in the country, whereas the Russian diaspora has mainly been used as a rhetorical tool in the domestic political debate in the 1990s and only in the 2000s—as in the South Ossetian and Abkhaz cases—support for Russian citizens abroad was used as
a rationale to intervene beyond its borders. With security concerns paramount and the elaboration of a public discourse that construes Uzbekistan as a “fortress” encircled by threats to the integrity and stability of the state, Tashkent has emphasized the consolidation of the state rather than the strengthening of ties with co-ethnics as the country’s paramount policy concern.

Taken together, all three debates (what drives Uzbek foreign policy; the sudden shifts; and the link between identity and foreign policy) are relevant to the case discussed next, namely Uzbekistan’s response to the clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in and around the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. What emerges from a study of two-and-a-half decades of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy is the paramount role of domestic issues, such as preserving the country’s sovereignty and independence and regime concerns, from security to survival. To ensure those goals, specific foreign policy stances were adopted. These included severing links with Uzbek co-ethnics, out of concern for domino effects, as well as a strong stance on nonalignment in international affairs. This translated into reluctance to take part in regional organizations, a preference for bilateralism over multilateralism, and for dealing with state actors over nonstate ones; the apparent abandonment of Uzbek co-ethnics should be read in this light. How Karimov’s Uzbekistan reacted to the unfolding violence between groups of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh in June 2010 well illustrates Tashkent’s firm adherence to these tenets.

THE 2010 OSH EVENTS, UZBEKISTAN’S RESPONSE, AND THE UZBEK BLOGOSPHERE

This section examines Uzbekistan’s response to the June 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan. It uses those tragic events as a vantage point to illustrate the application of the broad tenets and principles of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy over the past twenty-five years. The events served as a “stress test” of one of the cornerstones of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy. The discussion will show strong elements of continuity in the government’s unwavering focus on stability, the status quo, and noninterference. As Uzbekistan’s own media are censored, and open criticism of the authorities will be met with an immediate crackdown, it is not easy to gauge popular reactions to official policy in the Uzbek context. To do so, I rely on an analysis of Uzbek-language blogs, discussion boards, and forums.

Here I am specifically interested in “Uzbek perspectives,” and thus I leave perspectives from Kyrgyz or others aside. While most of the analysis focuses on the period during the violence and immediately after it, I also followed up on some of the blogs and assessed retrospective reactions about the 2010 events to find out how these incidents were framed.30
After escalating in May, interethnic tensions in Kyrgyzstan erupted in June 2010. Clashes between groups of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz sparked in the city of Osh and its immediate surroundings in southern Kyrgyzstan during the night of June 10. As Kyrgyzstan’s authorities struggled to regain control, violence continued until June 14, costing the lives of several hundred Kyrgyzstani citizens—Uzbek and Kyrgyz alike. This section briefly revisits the events, before turning to Uzbekistan’s official response.

In the spring of 2010, after the fall of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s regime in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan was slow and reluctant to engage the new Kyrgyz leadership. Despite explicitly pointing to the domestic nature of the April 2010 events, Uzbekistan was—as it had been with President Askar Akayev’s downfall five years before—alarmed by how easily regimes collapsed “next door.” Following the latest “revolution” in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan kept its border with its neighbor tightly sealed.

On June 12 Uzbekistan agreed to take refugees in, following increasing domestic and international pressure and facing a situation where thousands of people were desperately trying to leave Kyrgyzstan. The border stayed open until June 14, when the Uzbek authorities decided to close it again. Officially set at 45,000, the actual number of refugees turned out to be much higher, possibly reaching 75,000. Initially, families fleeing the violence were welcomed in private homes in Andijon province. This move was soon reversed by the authorities, and refugees (only women and children were allowed into the country) were placed in camps. The Uzbek authorities restricted their movements in an attempt to prevent individuals from leaving the camps and possibly become untraceable.

By then two things had happened. Russia’s support for Bishkek dwindled, possibly because of the interim authorities’ decision to continue the agreement with the United States over the use of the Manas airbase. Crucially, it became clear that the new government had lost control of the situation in the south. Then interim leader Roza Otunbayeva asked Russia to intervene. Moscow’s initial response revealed hesitation, suggesting that while direct Russian intervention was not possible, action under the aegis of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was a possibility. In the end, Russia, and by extension the CSTO, rejected Kyrgyzstan’s call for help.

Uzbekistan’s Official Response

Uzbekistan’s reaction toward the violence ravaging southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 was consistent with its broader attitude toward its neighbors and Uzbek co-ethnics in the region. While condemning the clashes, Tashkent emphasized that these constituted Kyrgyzstan’s domestic affairs and did not reflect the historical spirit of harmonious coexistence in Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations.
The crisis unfolded while a Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit meeting was taking place in Tashkent. On that occasion, President Karimov pointed out that Uzbekistan’s position on events in Kyrgyzstan was “clearly reflected in the statement of the Uzbek Foreign Ministry made on April 9, 2010.” Emphasizing that this was “an internal affair of Kyrgyzstan,” Karimov laconically concluded, “that says everything.” Apart from President Karimov’s brief remarks, the only official statement was delivered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on June 12. The statement conveyed two main messages. First was the condemnation of “unpunished killings, violence, pogroms,” noting that these were primarily perpetrated against members of the Uzbek community. Second was the interpretation of the events. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs concluded that, rather than being a spontaneous outbreak of interethnic violence, the actions have “an organized, manipulated and provocative nature,” with the aim to instigate (rather than being driven by) interethnic animosities. The statement emphasized the long tradition of friendly relations between the many ethnic communities living in Kyrgyzstan. Later that year at a United Nations meeting in New York, President Karimov returned to the issue of the Osh events and reiterated the interpretation conveyed by the Foreign Ministry in June that the events had been orchestrated by unspecified “third forces” (uchinki ko‘chlar):

Today we have every reason to claim that the Kyrgyz themselves and the numerous Uzbeks living in the south of that country, fell hostage to a deeply thought-out and well-organized action on the part of third forces. The action was aimed not only at instigating chaos and unruly situation in the country, but also pursued far reaching goals of drawing Uzbekistan into this brutal massacre and in the end turn the interethnic standoff into an interstate confrontation of the two neighboring nations, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Attending a Collective Security Treaty Organization summit in Moscow in December that year Karimov’s remarks stroke a similar tone:

I am convinced that had we not maintained the situation under control at that critical period of time, the interethnic confrontation in southern Kyrgyzstan could have turned into an interstate conflict between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. [. . .] Uzbekistan does not intend to take part in peacekeeping operations outside its territory.

This short review of Uzbekistan’s official response to the crisis reveals that President Karimov’s reading of the events was informed by two key considerations. First, although unspecified further, ascribing responsibility to “third forces” shifted the framing of the events from ethnic to externally induced, with the possible aim of getting Uzbekistan involved. The Osh events are
construed as Kyrgyzstan’s own domestic affairs and, as such, consistent with the policy positions laid out earlier (and later conceptualized in the 2010 Foreign Policy Concept) of nonintervention. Uzbekistan’s refusal to intervene, the argument goes, prevented intercommunal violence from escalating into interstate war. Although much of Karimov’s positioning was geared toward demonstrating Uzbekistan’s wise posture in regional policy, his position during the Osh events was heavily criticized online.

**Beyond Officialdom: The Uzbek Blogosphere**

An analysis of the discussions held in the Uzbek blogosphere during and in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 events reveals a high degree of heterogeneity of views concerning the Osh violence and specifically Uzbekistan’s response. A clear tilt toward the Uzbek regime was readily recognizable. The majority of blogs were clearly oppositional, and, from what was possible to evoke, the bloggers appeared to live outside of Uzbekistan and, in most cases, also outside of Central Asia.

An initial distinction can be made between those that blamed the inability of Kyrgyzstan’s interim authorities for stopping the violence and those that instead focused on official Uzbekistan. This was clearly evident in the Kundalik and Uzbek Wounds fora:

- Who can guarantee that such things [bloodshed] won’t be repeated in the future again? Rosa Otunboyeva? This woman who proclaims a true democracy might not be able to install democracy in Kyrgyzstan but rather bring about anarchy.\(^{41}\)

  The interim government of Kyrgyzstan took no precautions to prevent the killing.\(^ {42}\)

  Why was the government of Uzbekistan not invited by the temporary government of Kyrgyzstan to help arrange peace and to find a way of punishing the guilty ones?\(^{43}\)

Others, such as O’zbek Olami, saw a Russian plot behind the events:

- Islam Karimov claimed that the conflict in Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks was caused by third forces. Indeed, it cannot be denied that third forces played a crucial role here: The economic embargo which started on 7–8 April and was imposed by Uzbekistan and also partly by Kazakhstan is one reason for the outbreak of the socio-political conflict. Naturally, Islom Karimov, Nursulton Nazarbayev and Vladimir Putin use any means to prevent liberalism and democracy in their countries.\(^{44}\)
Chapter One

Contributors to the Ponauz blog took a similar line:

These mass killings and ethnic genocide are orchestrated by Russian special services and current Interim government of Kyrgyzstan. Russia who has lost its influence in Central Asia has been trying to make plans to restore political and military influence.45

Many active Uzbekistan National Security Service personnel and co-worker officers from the Fergana Valley, who are outraged with mass killings of Uzbeks are sending me numerous messages to my old electronic address and are pleading to tell international community the truth. According to them, Uzbekistan president has ordered to gather security forces in the Fergana Valley, but not to intervene into Kyrgyzstan events. Many officers from Valley and soldiers in Uzbek army, Internal Affairs Ministry and National Security Agency disagree with this order.46

Russia is keen to escalate the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan and to spread it around Fergana Valley.47

Turning now to Uzbekistan, there are multiple grounds for criticism of that country’s leadership. Many contributors complained that Uzbekistan opened its borders too late, while President Karimov was allegedly enjoying a lavish banquet with other members of the SCO:

Yet, [instead of planning a revenge, as assumed by some people] Karimov did not react to the bad news about the bloodshed on the 10th of June which probably reached him secretly during the SCO summit but rather listen with interest to concerts, had a banquet until late with his colleagues, had joyful toasts with them and visited other spectacles.48

Others noted that Karimov could have done more to prevent the conflict, although the impression one gets from the online discussion is that support for a direct military intervention was scarce to nonexistent.

These [referring to his speech in Bukhoro after the events] are the thoughts Islam Karimov shared one week after the events [in Kyrgyzstan] took their course. Yet, he does not talk about how such incidents can be prevented in the future and what kind of practical measures could be taken. Thus, in the end the events benefit his dictatorship and his ideological movement [such as the discourses on conspiracy theories] is strengthened once again.49

However, a more assertive diplomatic role was expected.

Why was the government of Uzbekistan not invited by the temporary government of Kyrgyzstan for helping to arrange peace and to find a way of punishing
the guilty ones? The army should not be sent there, yet, is there no other practical help which can be given?50

They also saw no indication that the intellectuals in both countries had gotten involved and tried to mitigate the conflict:

Why wasn’t it possible that the Uzbek and Kyrgyz intellectuals come together and go to Osh and Jalalabad for organizing a meeting with the people?51

Others contributors pointed to the role of Uzbekistan’s security forces in various respects. One contributor on Ponauz claimed to know that many officers of the Uzbek security forces disagreed with Karimov’s order not to interfere, although no evidence is provided to support the claim. Another blogger (O’zbeklar olami) assumes that “third forces” were indeed involved. However, instead of supporting Karimov’s claim, (s)he alleged that Uzbekistan was part of such forces. Karimov is then blamed for taking advantage of the situation and making his dictatorship internationally look good and further strengthen it. The metaphor of President Karimov “playing once again the Osh card again (O’sh kartasi)” is used. Furthermore, there is a general impression that Karimov’s decision to take in refugees initially was driven by a desire to appear in control and also to acquire information about the refugees themselves, which Tashkent’s security forces suspected included some oppositional figures. In Turonzamin, one contributor noted that:

This [the fact, that Uzbekistan already started his own investigations] could be interpreted as a positive gesture of Toshkent. Yet, one could also say that the interrogation of the refugees is kept under control in order to detect those people among the refugees which are in opposition to the government in Toshkent and prevent that something inadvertently is brought to light.52

In his listing of the possible factors behind the Osh events the blogger on “Jahonnoma2” points to the role of outside forces, including Uzbekistan.53

Lastly, among the many critical voices, however, one could also find some expressions of support for Uzbekistan’s leadership (on Dabronbek’s blog and on Uforum.uz):

The Uzbek government helps them [Osh Uzbeks] and takes care of their needs.54

The Uzbek people and the Uzbek government offer to our countrymen [from Kyrgyzstan] all the help they can.55

To summarize, as the tragic events of June 2010 unfolded, Uzbekistan acted consistently with its prior positions on questions of territoriality, sovereignty,
and citizenship. It has reaffirmed that whatever takes place within the territory of a neighboring country falls within the remit of that state’s domestic affairs. The ethnic links between Uzbeks on either side of the border were not activated and, in the end, Uzbekistan’s refusal to intervene on Kyrgyzstan’s territory helped mitigate the conflict. Such caution has been accompanied by an uneasy balance between concern over a possibly uncontrolled flow of refugees who would then disperse across the country, and pressure from both international and local humanitarian organizations to provide a more proactive form of humanitarian relief. Thus a debate on how to best deal with the crisis has emerged, revealing how Uzbekistan’s official stance may not meet everyone’s expectations. I am aware that the sample of the online discussion fora and blogs reviewed above is not representative and that in most cases it is impossible to gauge whether the discussion involved Uzbeks based in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, or third countries. At the same time, what clearly emerges is an impression that Uzbeks do not speak with one voice and intragroup variation is considerable. A review of Uzbek-language blogs and discussion fora in June 2010 (and monitored in subsequent years) shows that Uzbekistan’s leadership came under intense criticism for not intervening on behalf of Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbeks.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION:
WHITHER UZBEKISTAN AFTER KARIMOV?

Although much discussion will cluster around domestic policy issues, elite politics, and state-society relations, the death of President Karimov raises a number of questions about Uzbekistan’s foreign policy and, more broadly, Central Asian security. Two issues merit close monitoring. Uzbekistan’s response to the Osh events was a clear demonstration of Tashkent’s worldview and how the country would, and should, behave in international affairs. The first concerns nonalignment, specifically the reluctance to tie itself too closely to any external player or even to participate actively to any regional organization. Tashkent’s refusal to intervene militarily or even to support the role of any regional organization (SCO or CSTO) or that of a specific country (Russia) to stop the violence and mediate between the parties in 2010 was clearly restated in the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept. Karimov’s position was adamant, and his opposition to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and even the alleged—from Tashkent’s perspective—transformation of the CSTO into a military bloc was equally indisputable. Uzbekistan’s international partners, including Russia (which will hope for a reversal of this position), China (a close commercial partner), and the United States will follow
the moves of the new leadership closely. The second key area to watch again relates to the Osh response. Ethnicity has played a negligible role in shaping Uzbekistan’s foreign policy to date. This might be Karimov’s single largest contribution to Central Asian security.

Karimov was able to present himself as the “father of the nation,” the guardian of its sovereignty and independence. Specifically, he sought to create and project an image of strong statehood. Although Uzbekistan’s nation-building strategy blurred the lines between ethnic and civic understandings of the nation, Tashkent’s foreign policy was driven by a statist approach to nationalism. The new leadership, as it consolidates power, could rely on the appeal of ethnic nationalism and possibly make it the basis of its foreign policy. I am not suggesting this is a likely course of action, and in fact, one has to note the overtures made by President Mirziyoyev to Uzbekistan’s neighbors in his first months in office. If that were to occur, though, it would be a dramatic reversal of over two decades of foreign policy, and likely to have dramatic consequences for regional stability. At the same time, support for Uzbek co-ethnics abroad, and even irredentism, a policy stance Karimov long abhorred for the fear of domino effects, might suddenly be implemented to boost domestic popular support, as the cases of Crimea and the Donbass demonstrated in 2014.

To boost legitimacy at home, the new leadership could opt to portray itself as the “head of all Uzbeks.” If so, Uzbekistan’s traditional posture toward Uzbeks abroad might come under severe stress.

NOTES

1. Islam A. Karimov, O’zbek xalqi xech kachon xech kimga qaram bo’lmaydi (Tashkent: O’zbekiston, 2005).


10. Matteo Fumagalli, “Uzbekistan’s Response to Violence in Kyrgyzstan between Caution, Concern, and Criticism,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus Analyst* (June 24, 2010); Teles Fazendeiro, “Keeping Face in the Public Sphere.”


12. Tolipov, “Flexibility or Strategic Confusion?”

13. Teles Fazendeiro, “Keeping Face in the Public Sphere.”


15. Fumagalli, “Alignments and Re-alignments in Central Asia.”


21. Ibid., 11.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 25.

24. Ibid., 59.

25. Ibid., 71.


30. Only blogs and sources written in Uzbek were considered here. Blogs and discussion groups accessed comprise the following: Davronbek’s Blog (http://davronbek.ziyouz.com/?p=452), Ponauz (https://ponauz.wordpress.com), Jahonnoma (http://jahonnoma.com/2010/06/), Turonzamin (http://turonzamin.org/2010/07/), Yodgor Turlibekov (http://turonzamin.org/2010/06/25/farzin/), Kundalik (https://kundalik.wordpress.com/tag/osh/), Uzbek Tragedy (http://uzbektragedy.com/uz/), IslomDini (https://islomdini.wordpress.com/page/6/). While the list is by no means exhaustive, an analysis of the opinions expressed on those sites is nonetheless sufficiently varied to capture both the heterogeneity of Uzbek views and voices and highlight the main clusters of opinions. The search was carried out for relevant key words in Uzbek (e.g., “o’zbeklar qirg’iziston janubida 2010,” “o’sh millatlararo 2010 qonli,” etc. both in Cyrillic and Latin letters) were used. I am grateful to Seraphine Maerz for her assistance with data collection.

Other websites consulted include Uforum.uz (available at http://uforum.uz/archive/index.php/t-13153.html), Forumuz.uz (http://www.fromuz.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=18165&st=30), and Forum Uzbekistan (http://forumuzbekistan.forum2x2.ru/t92-topic). As the interest was explicitly in the Uzbek-language blogosphere, common Uzbek oppositional online media such as “Amerika Ovozi,” “Ozodlik Radiosi,” and “Fergananews” were omitted from data collection and analysis.


33. Likewise, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which was holding a summit in Tashkent at the time, refrained from intervening and in fact remained rather


40. The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Seraphine Maerz with the collection of data from Uzbek-language blogs and discussion fora.


42. “Qirg‘iziston muvaffaqat hukumati qatliomni to‘xtatish uchun hech qanday choragani [...],” Kundalik, June 14, 2011.


46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.


57. Fumagalli, “Stateness, Contested Nationhood, and Imperiled Sovereignty.”

58. This has also traditionally applied to the views of Uzbeks abroad toward Uzbekistan’s leadership; see Fumagalli, “Ethnicity, State Formation and Foreign Policy” and “Usbekische Zwickmühle.”

59. Fumagalli, “Usbekische Zwickmühle.”
Chapter Two

The Magic of Territory

Remaking of Border Landscapes as a Spatial Manifestation of Nationalist Ideology

Nick Megoran

INTRODUCTION: THE MAGIC OF MAPS

Can you remember the first time you ever saw a map of your country? Are you able to recall the awe, shock, terror even, that you felt when you realized that the places where you lived, moved, and had your daily being should be caught up in this extraordinary vision, transformed into an irregular, annotated, multicolored, two dimensional shape with black line edges, a capital city, and illustrated by a pretty colored flag in the margins? If you can’t remember experiencing that moment of cartographic vertigo, then you have been seduced by the magic of national territory.

This chapter is about that magic, that dark art.

Bill Shatoff, the American anarchist activist, recalls his own exhilaration as he helped in the techno-geopolitical creation of Soviet Central Asia. Anna Louise Strong, an American traveller passing through Uzbekistan in the late 1920s, fell into conversation with her exiled countryman. Shatoff had fled a U.S. federal indictment for publishing a pacifist tract of Tolstoy’s and was helping the Soviets by pioneering railway construction over the difficult mountain terrain into the heart of Turkestan. As he talked to Strong, he moved from his description of technical challenges to the geographical imagination that animated him:

I have a big map of the Turk-Sib Railway, marked with all the discovered resources of the region. And I sit there when the day’s work is done and the midnight hour when I talk over the radio to all our stations has not yet arrived. And I look at that map when I’m tired, and the room is dark and still.
Chapter Two

And the map seems to come alive! I see on it the railway running, and the wheels turning. The freight trains and the one fast passenger train daily, with sleeping cars. I see the copper factories working in one place, and the lead and zinc mines in another. I see wheat coming in along new roads. I see the Ily Valley grow green with irrigated rice fields. I see the new workers’ settlements go up. I even see the faces of the people, as if they were folks I knew sometime in some other life. Russians, Kazakhs [sic], Chinese, Uzbeks—they move through the stations buying tickets or working along the railroad.

Of course I don’t believe in any spiritualism. But sometimes it almost seems as if the shade of old Ghengis Khan was looking at that map along with me.²

Shatoff’s invocation of Genghis Khan reminds us both that maps can be seductive and magical, but also that territory is made—by officials, ideologues, cartographers, and engineers. The idea that the surface of the earth should be divided into a series of nonoverlapping legal entities, each of which embodies the destiny of a given set of people and is governed by a set of institutions that claim a monopoly of legitimate violence over them, is a remarkable modern geopolitical vision. The technical term for this vision is “nationalism.”

This chapter is about how that vision was spatialized in the Fergana Valley. In the first part, it sketches out what nationalism is and argues that although nationalism is inherently spatial, its geographical dimensions have frequently been overlooked in the literature. In particular, it suggests that international boundaries are productive sites for the study of nationalism. This argument is made in reference to the study of Central Asian nationalism. The second part of the chapter examines this in practice, tracing how the ideology of nationalism was written into the landscape of the spaces where Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan brush up against each other, and in so doing squeezed a community whose very existence challenged the logic of nationalism: the village of Chek. In the final part of the chapter, I discuss how this vision of nationalism ought not to be seen as an illiberal peculiarity of the leadership of the new states, but as an ideology shared among civil society, foreign donors, and international organizations. Material is drawn from two decades of ethnographic research conducted in the Fergana Valley borderlands and interviews and textual research undertaken in metropolitan centers over the same period.

NATIONALISM

The materialization of an international boundary between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1991 is a geographical manifestation of *nationalism*. “Nationalism” is used here in the technical sense of meaning, as Graham Smith
puts it, a “political ideology which holds that the territorial and national unit should be allowed to coexist in an autonomously congruous relationship.” Independent Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were “born” into a world structured by this ideology. Although some thinkers, such as Kyrgyz author Chyngyz Aytmatov and Osh Uzbek poet Ghanijon Holmatov, advocated instead the creation of a broader Turkestani confederation, it would have been difficult to buck the trend of worldwide decolonization and create new nonnational states.

Under nationalism, the *raison d’être* of a nation state is to embody and express the character and defend the interests of the territorialized nation. In Central Asia this has meant the “titular” nation: thus, for example, state legislation in the Kyrgyz Republic has promoted the use of the Kyrgyz language, given preferential access to citizenship for ethnic Kyrgyz immigrating from abroad, required that the president be fluent in the Kyrgyz language, adopted a flag with explicitly Kyrgyz ethnic symbols, and so on. Nonetheless, nationalism is not simply chauvinistic. It has been the engine of liberation movements across the world, and, as Jonathon Hearn argues, it is “part of the normal functioning of democratic regimes.” Liberal theorists like Liah Greenfeld see it as a humanistic worldview based on the principles of popular sovereignty and egalitarianism by which individuals can find meaning through investing their dignity in their nationality.

In Central Asia it has allowed a recovery of the sense that ethnic and religious traditions and practices are not the politically dubious by-products of subjugation to feudal overlords, as Soviet Marxist ideology would have it. Nonetheless, nationalism’s great weakness is that the ideology of a congruent territory and ethnic nation is almost always a fallacy. In turning second-class Central Asian citizens of the Soviet Union into masters of their own domains, it inevitably intensified pre-existing problems for a new tier of second-class citizens—ethnic minorities. Valery Khan argues that because the region knows no ethnically “pure” territories, the model of promoting the political dominance and language of titular majorities and reimagining past histories around their historic command of modern territory (what he calls “titular ethnicization”) is deeply problematic for minorities.

**Understanding Nationalism: Classical and Postclassical Approaches**

Given the importance of nationalism as the primary political ideology of the modern world, it is unsurprising that an extensive body of scholarly literature has been generated in the attempt to understand it. “Classical” theories set out to trace the historic origins of particular nationalisms. “Primordialism”
sees nations as communities marked by common descent, territorial belonging, shared language, and underlying emotional attachments that together form enduring essences that remain substantially unchanged over extended periods of history. Nationalist projects are thus the flowering of suppressed nations that are finally achieving what they have historically yearned for. Rejecting this, “modernism” follows Kedourie’s argument that “nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.” Subsequent thinkers developed Kedourie’s argument by highlighting particular sociological aspects of modernity as generative of nationalism such as industrialization (Gellner),

"modernism" follows Kedourie’s argument that “nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.” Subsequent thinkers developed Kedourie’s argument by highlighting particular sociological aspects of modernity as generative of nationalism such as industrialization (Gellner),

capitalism (Nairn),

growth of the printing industry and state bureaucracy (Anderson),

democratization (Hobsbawm). For modernists, nationalism is the creation of nations rather than their flowering.

The third main school of thought within the classical tradition is the “continuationist” or “ethnosymbolist” approach. Like modernism, this rejects primordialism, but sees the modern nation as having roots in pre-existing categories of sociological organization and affective identification that nationalism built upon rather than “invented.” Anthony Smith argues that some (but not all) nations are developed upon “fairly cohesive and self-consciously distinctive ethnies,” which later became the “ethnic cores” of subsequent nations.

Until relatively recently, the study of nationalisms in Central Asia has been dominated by these “classical” approaches whose primary interest is the question of historical origins. Within post-Soviet Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan the Soviet-era tradition of exploring the “ethnogenesis” of nations exerts a powerful influence. This variant of “primordialism” seeks to identify the “ethnos” as an essence that persists over time, impervious to changing socioeconomic transformations. This endeavor was given a fillip by independence and the newer freedom to make assertions about the historical importance of different nationalities. Foreign scholars have more commonly adopted modernist approaches. Allworth sees the Soviet system as creating nations “where none existed before,” an argument echoed by a range of newer theoretical perspectives in the 1990s.

Roy even attributes a measure of sadism to “the Soviets,” whom he supposes “amused themselves by making things more complicated” during National Territorial Delimitation. Many scholars have critically engaged with the nation-building projects of the governments of the newly independent republics, faulting what Akbarzadeh calls “the gross falsification of history.” The continuationist approach of seeing contemporary Central Asian national groups as Soviet creations but based on recognizable pre-existing social groupings is more marginal, but Ilkhamov and Weller have produced accounts that attempt to straddle ethnos and modernist
The Magic of Territory

theories. Whatever labels are used, the multiple traditions of scholarship on nationalism in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been dominated by the classical question of when modern nations originated.

However, there are a number of weaknesses in the classical approach. First, it can easily deteriorate into an argument about semantics: the origins of both “nation” and “nationalism” depend upon how they are defined. Second, the focus on origins obscures many other interesting questions. Yiftachel parodies the pivotal debate between Gellner and Smith, focused on when a nation was “created,” as akin to asking, “Do nations have a navel?” Third, it is ethnocentric, studying nationalism in Asia and Africa through arguments developed largely in historical sociological debates about European modernity. As Tønnessen and Antlöv insist, national forms in Asia are no mere reflection of European models. Fourth, it often involves a troubling politics of knowledge, as modernist arguments have been deployed in colonial societies to delegitimize the claims of indigenous groups to a range of political and cultural rights. The use of history to attack nationalist projects is as much a political strategy as the use of history to support them: the ethics of the former are questionable when unequal power dynamics come into play.

To address these shortcomings, “postclassical” approaches to nationalism have sidestepped the terms of the classical debate. These ask not “When did a particular nation or nationalism develop?” but “How is nationalism invoked as a form of social consciousness, and how do individuals become national in everyday contexts?” For Brubaker, the study of nationalism is to be “re-framed” by inquiring “How is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalized within and among states?” For Billig, what he terms the “banal nationalism” of everyday life—how the nation is figured in otherwise mundane weather maps, postage stamps, newspaper circulations, and so on, is vital to the ongoing subtle process of becoming national.

If 1990s Anglophone scholarship on Central Asian nationalism was dominated by the agendas of “modernist” historiography that frame “classical” approaches to nationalism, the twenty-first century has witnessed a profusion of postclassical approaches to the subject. These have particularly proliferated within disciplines that use fieldwork. Scholars within this tradition have enhanced our understanding of Central Asian nationalism by sidestepping the classical question of the provenance and authenticity of contemporary nationalism, instead exploring topics such as the creation of post-Soviet militaries, youth culture, new currencies, postconflict peace-building operations, music, dance, sport, TV soap operas, oral poetry, independence celebrations, and even food. This work has shown how the nation is produced as a form of social consciousness, political strategy, and quotidian practice.
Chapter Two

Geographies of Nationalism

One productive postclassical approach to the study of nationalism is the geographical insistence upon the importance of space. Geographers like Yiftachel fault classical debates about nationalism for their “spatial blindness.” He argues that classical theorists see homeland and territories—so crucial to modern nationalist projects—as the passive nests of nations, rather than active determinants of national trajectory and identity.

Some of the most productive work on Central Asia in recent years has drawn on this conception of geography as an active ingredient in nationalism. Horsman shows how the renaming of toponyms featured prominently in 1990s Central Asian nationalisms. Liu suggests that the social codes embedded in mahalla neighborhoods in Osh provide their inhabitants with ways of negotiating their relationships with Tashkent and Bishkek. Féaux de la Croix underlines the importance of invocations of jailoo (summer pasture) as the last refuge of pure Kyrgyz traditions. Diener demonstrates how imaginations of whom the “homeland” is for structure migration patterns and conceptions of national belonging. Anacker shows how the relocation of Kazakhstan’s capital city to Astana functions as “the centerpiece of the official nation-building project in Kazakhstan.” Koch extends Anacker’s analysis by elaborating the nationalist implications of Astana’s design and showing how its impact is enhanced through its proliferation in miniature reproductions throughout the republic. Considering domestic presentations of Turkmenistan’s doctrine of “Positive Neutrality,” Anceschi elucidates how geopolitical imagination is used in nation-building. These diverse examples from anthropology, geography, and political science show that “the nation state” in Central Asia is encountered, negotiated, and represented through specific local places and geographical imaginaries.

International Boundaries and Nationalism

Perhaps the most productive sites for the geographical study of nationalism are international boundaries. International boundaries are best conceived of not as two-dimensional lines but as invisible vertical planes marking the legal extent of territorial states, extending upward into the airspace and downward into the subsoil. As such, they are distinct from international borders, the institutions and practices that manage cross-boundary interactions, and the landscapes that arise from their presence.

Peter Sahlins’s work on the Cerdanya Valley Franco–Catalan borderlands and Joseph Nevins’s research on the U.S.–Mexico interface have shown how national identities are often created and reworked at the border. Although physically at the extremity of a state, metaphorically boundaries may be at
the heart of national imaginations. A number of scholars of Central Asia have shown how drawing borders and territories led to spatialized national identities in the early Soviet period. More recently, Christine Bichsel and Madeleine Reeves have demonstrated convincingly the importance of post-independence borders at the southern margins of the Fergana basin as sites where social identities and the limits of the state are performed, contested, and inscribed onto space. Located within this postclassical approach to studying nationalism, the remainder of this chapter will use the materialization of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary to denaturalize the magic of the post-Soviet Central Asian map.

**BORDERS AND NATIONALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA**

As is well known, the current international boundaries of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were created as interrepublican boundaries between what would become the Uzbek and Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republics during the 1924–1927 process of National Territorial Delimitation (NTD). Abdullaev identified the two core principles of NTD as creating a congruence between nationality and territory and paying attention to economic relations (including transport and irrigation networks). Although designed as internal boundaries, according to the legal principle of *uti possidetis* (that colonial boundaries become those of the successor state upon independence), they became international boundaries upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, the leaderships of the nascent independent Central Asian republics did not plan to formally delimit and demarcate their new mutual boundaries, and they certainly did not envisage introducing tight border controls. Thus in 1992 Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov stated that he intended to preserve open borders and free travel in Central Asia, which he believed was to the state’s and the region’s collective advantage. Likewise, Kyrgyzstan’s first president, Askar Akaev, repeatedly spoke about his desire for regional economic planning and “a single informational space” based on the cultural and spiritual unity of its peoples. However, these visions have not been fulfilled: quite the opposite, the imperatives of nationalism have driven multiple forms of boundary materialization as a striking new border landscape has emerged. Rather than discuss this process and its effects at the general level, they will be narrated through the experiences of the inhabitants of one village that literally straddles the boundary. Located where Uzbekistan’s Andijon and Kyrgyzstan’s Jalalabat regions meet, it is, appropriately, named Chek, which literally means “border” in both Kyrgyz and Uzbek.
Chek

A village of some 8,500 ethnic Kyrgyz and 5,000 ethnic Uzbeks, Chek is typical of rural Fergana Valley border communities that date to the Soviet period, with good relations among intermingled ethnic groups. The majority of people have links by work, study, descent, or marriage to people and places on both sides of the border. Its economy is primarily agricultural, but some residents are employed by the state (in schools, clinics, inspectorates, police, and the like) or commute to work in factories in neighboring towns. Small-scale, transboundary shuttle-trading is an important source of income, as is cross-border agricultural day labor.

A striking political geographical feature of Chek is that part of the village is located in disputed territory. The Fergana Irrigation Canal winds through it, and all homes east of the canal are indisputably Kyrgyzstani Chek. Over the canal and away from it to the west, part of Chek indisputably falls under Uzbekistani sovereignty and is known as Yangi Chek. However, because of a discrepancy between maps produced by border commissions in the 1920s and 1950s, it is not clear under whose jurisdiction the middle section falls. This neighborhood is informally called “the neutral zone.” I visited Chek on many occasions between 2000 and 2015, staying with both a Kyrgyz and an Uzbek host family while conducting ethnographic research in the Fergana Valley.

Citizenship in Chek certainly gave few clear indications as to state sovereignty. On one street in the neutral zone, for example, along the same side of the road, the inhabitants of the first house are citizens of Uzbekistan, the second Kyrgyzstan, the third Uzbekistan, and the fourth Kyrgyzstan. Many people have moved employment and residence backward and forward between the two Soviet republics/states over their lifetimes. Numerous households have at least one member who has spent more time in one republic than the other. Marriage with someone “over the border” has been typical for generations. Thus it is common to find members of the same family under the same roof having different citizenships. As one resident said to me: “Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan don’t mean anything to us, we go back a long way, into the Soviet Union. No one here really cares who is Uzbekistani and who is Kyrgyzstani.”

An influential tradition in state theory identifies the ability to project “legitimate violence” over a given territory as the crucial factor in state sovereignty. The reach of law-enforcement agencies also reflects the indeterminacy of sovereignty over Chek. Uzbekistan established a permanent customs and control post at the western extremity of the neutral zone, while Kyrgyzstan placed one that was manned from time to time on the east side of the canal. But what about the disputed zone, in between? Over the years I asked many border guards, police, and customs officials, both Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani, as well as citizens without any official positions, about where and
what each state’s forces were allowed to do. Every answer I received, from officials as well as residents, was different, indicating a lack of consensus. As one Kyrgyzstani police officer who knows the neutral zone well said, “There is no law here—Uzbekistan claims that it is its land, and Kyrgyzstan claims that it is its land.” The Uzbekistani Chek mahalla (parish or neighborhood) committee representative to Uzbekistani citizens in the neutral zone, who was responsible for tasks such as distributing social provision to the poor, insisted that “this is a neutral zone—neither Uzbekistan’s nor Kyrgyzstan’s border guards can touch us here.” He added that he answers to the Chek village mahalla committee, overseen by a Mr. Solimirza. I protested that he cannot do this as Solimirza is a Kyrgyzstani citizen and resides in Kyrgyzstani territory, but he replied that “this is one village, with one mosque.” If effective government is a criterion for identifying statehood, it really wasn’t clear which state Chek was in.

Theorists of the state regard the development and existence of a general postal service as an important step in building the infrastructural capacity of modern states, and it is taken by boundary scholars as an “act of sovereignty” that is evidence of the claims of one state in proving title to territory.63 In 2004 I wrote two letters to the same friend in the neutral zone. This friend had family members of both citizenships. He himself was recorded as a different ethnicity than his parents (with whom he shared common citizenship), and his children held a different citizenship (with whom he shared formal common ethnicity). On each letter I wrote his name and Chek village, but one was sent via Kyrgyzstan (Nooken region, Jalalabad oblast) and one via Uzbekistan (Paxtaobod region, Andijon oblast). Fittingly for a village where not only territory and nationality but also state are indeterminate, both letters reached him. Chek was not exclusively “in” one country or the other.

Residents of the village commonly spoke both Uzbek and Kyrgyz, often mixing the two languages as they spoke to each other. However, Chek is not merely marked by cultural interchange that leaves two distinct identities intact, while demonstrating a familiarity with each other’s food, music, and languages. Below the surface, Chek exhibits a fluidity of ethnic ascriptions that undermines the attempt to script Chek as being simply a place of meeting of preformed and clearly fixed identities. Take, for example, the two families I spent most time with. The father of the “Uzbek” family, a Kyrgyzstani citizen of formal Uzbek language and formal nationality, told me that his grandfather was a Kyrgyz who had been a moldo (mullah) in the mosque here. Although a “Kyrgyz” whose relatives spoke Kyrgyz, he studied at a madrassa in Andijon, and because he spent so much time in an Uzbek-language and cultural environment, he was given the name Uzbeki, an ascription passed to his children in their formal nationality status. The experiences of my main Kyrgyz host
family in the village mirror this. The father is Kyrgyz, as are his wife, children, and grandchildren. However, it turned out that his father was Uzbek and his mother Uyghur. His birth certificate thus recorded him as “Uzbek.” As a youngster he spent considerable time helping look after livestock and thus associated with Kyrgyz people. So, he recounted, “when it came time for me to get a passport, my parents wrote Kyrgyz in it,” at his request, and that it has remained ever since in his descendants. These are not isolated examples, as even cursory genealogical digging reveals even recent generations of many “Kyrgyz” in the village identified themselves as Kypchaks, and many Uzbeks were apparently descended from Muslims who came from Kashgar and who would now generally known as Uyghurs. “We are all one uruk [tribe, seed] here in this mahalla,” said an Uzbek elder whose nickname was “Kyrgyzbai.” This fluidity is true of people across the Valley, but it is more marked and more readily remembered in a place like Chek where daily interaction with families from both groups continues.

Economically, the “neutral zone” affords ample opportunities for informal trading activities that exploit both the price effects of divergent macroeconomic policies in the two republics, and the limited reach of state agents. It also allows the flourishing of a hybrid culture that transcends clear ethnic divisions and created loyalty to a place—the mahalla—that oftentimes trumped loyalty to the singular claims of nation states. After spending an evening with a representative of the Uzbek government at his home, he escorted me outside to bid me farewell. He paused, looked out across the fields as the sun set over them, and sighed, “This place is paradise.” Here, he continued, “The air is fresh and clear,” and he had no desire to go and live even in a nearby Uzbekistani town. This prospect was clearly troubling him, and for good reason: the historic interconnectedness of the Fergana Valley’s border communities was being threatened by the political geographical visions of mapmakers in faraway capital cities.

The Pressures of Nationalism

As the first decade of the twenty-first century progressed, there were alarming reports from other sections of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan border of barbed-wire fences being erected by Uzbekistan—in some places, the fences even slicing rural communities in two. Rumors abounded that borderland dwellers were even threatened with the destruction of their homes and relocation away from the boundary zone. However, while Uzbekistan was busy planting concrete posts along its boundary, stretching barbed wire between them, as well as digging parallel ditches, Chek seemed to escape this. The border fence stopped at either side of the village. Likewise, while Uzbekistan was demolishing or blocking up bridges up and down the frontier, the bridge over
the canal that linked Chek together remained unscathed. This was undisputedly due to the village’s disputed status. Over time it led people to believe that Chek was special, and perhaps it might escape the fate of other border communities.

However, Chek could not escape the restrictions on mobility that were imposed on the borderland populations. A new Uzbekistani customs and border guard checkpoint was constructed on the west side of the disputed zone, and the road from Chek into Uzbekistan proper was closed off with concrete blocks. People could drive as far as the post, walk across it, and get in a different car for the next leg of their journey. But this was a huge adjustment for people used to driving to the market town of Paxtaobod. A woman originally from that Uzbekistani town, who had moved to Chek to marry, bemoaned the effect of these orders as they meant “I can’t go in a car to see my family anymore.” As a visa regime came into force, a Kyrgyzstani Uzbek lamented:

When we were 15 countries, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Latvia, Bulgaria, and whatever, it was great, it was easy for us to travel around and see different places, and no one ever harassed you about passports etc. We could sleep in the train station, or stay in a hotel, and go wherever we wanted. Now, if I want to go to Tashkent, I have to spend three days going to Bishkek to get a visa, and when I eventually get into Uzbekistan they say, “You’re from Kyrgyzstan,” want to look at my visa and passport, and give me a hard time. They even have checkpoints at every viloyat [administrative region] now.

Although Chek had not been fenced off or its bridge destroyed, these new limits on mobility were a form of violence. Similarly, Chek was subjected to other forms of more subtle violence—for example, the new citizenship regimes, as older, Soviet era-passports needed replacing and residents were forced to take Uzbekistani or Kyrgyzstani passports, forced to declare within the terms of the nation state where they belonged. Likewise, children were forced to attend school in the country of their citizenship—Hamza school in Uzbekistan, Ergeshali in Kyrgyzstan—whereas previously the choice had been made on the basis of language of instruction, regardless of which side of the border the school was on. New citizenship was disciplining social life to the conformity of the new boundary.

In 2009 Uzbekistani pressure on Chek increased markedly. In April, Tashkent established a new border post in Chek, right on the west side of the canal. The neutral zone was thus effectively hemmed in between two Uzbekistani posts. When I visited in the November of that year, I was not allowed through this post to see friends in the neutral zone. Policing in Chek became the subject of tetchy diplomatic exchanges and put residents under a new degree of pressure. “Now we are surrounded, as the Uzbeks have set up
a frontier post at the outskirts of the village,” one villager told IWPR. “They won’t allow any of our relatives to visit us, and we can go across only if we show our passports.”

As pressure increased over time, so too did distress for the present and fears over the future. As Chek residents discussed rumors about Uzbekistan clearing the border zone in other places, they became ever more anxious—would this happen to us, too? “What if we can’t stand it, the stress, the uncertainty?” complained one resident of the neutral zone. In all this was a sense of helplessness, that neither government would listen to them or help them—indeed, the governments were the problem. So to whom else could they turn? As one Chek resident put it to me in a vulgar proverb, “If the kozy (Islamic judge) f***s your mother, to whom can you complain?”

Resistance

Despite the anxiety produced by the impinging political geographies of nationalism, people up and down the length of the border found creative ways to evade or circumvent new restrictions on the movement of people, goods, and livestock. Chek can be seen as a microcosm of resistance to the border regime; but because of its unique “neutral zone” condition, its inhabitants were also able to develop more politicized communal forms of resistance to the state violence of the border.

Thanks to the time I spent in the village and the trust I developed, I was privy to many illuminating examples of evasion, deception, co-option, direct resistance, and the like, that occurred in villages all along the boundary. However, I have no desire to incriminate villagers, border guards, and other officials. Suffice it to say that some people claimed the peculiar liminal condition of the “neutral zone” afforded opportunities not as readily available elsewhere—for example, in storing large quantities of goods for further onward transport.

What I can safely draw attention to is that the liminal space of the neutral zone has inculcated among Chek inhabitants an attitude of “a plague on both your houses.” Villagers knew that their community was threatened by materializations of the boundary, and in many cases they sought to resist the visions and work of both Kyrgyzstani and Uzbekistani mapmakers and map-enforcers (if that is what border guards, customs officers, and various other local officials can be called). Kyrgyzbai Olimov, a former mahalla committee head, recounted that Uzbek officials had warned the villagers that they were going to forcibly relocate them elsewhere in Uzbekistan, without compensation. He recounted that the qosqols [respected male village elders] were angry, called a village meeting, and decided that they did not want to move. This was conveyed to the authorities in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.
The topic that came up most commonly in Chek accounts of resistance to “both houses” was that of electricity supply. The whole of Chek has had electricity supplied from the Kyrgyzstan grid. A transformer had been built by Uzbekistan just on the Uzbekistan side of the customs and control post it had established, and this was apparently linked by cable to the Uzbekistan grid, but Uzbekistani homes in the neutral zone had not been connected.

However in 2003 Kyrgyzstan apparently decided to shut off the electricity supply to the neutral zone. In response, community representatives visited local officials in both states. Letters of protest, signed by some 170 residents of the village, were sent to both state administrations. I saw a reply from Kyrgyzstan signed by B. Saliev, deputy head of the Jalalabad Oblast State Administration, and dated October 10, 2003. The letter suggested that the situation would remain as it was until the border question was resolved. It stated that the sale of electricity to homes in certain regions on the Uzbekistan side of the boundary contravened the Kyrgyzstani Customs Code, statutes 301 and 193. A local member of the mahalla committee told me that this was electricity from Kyrgyzstan and supplied to the Uzbekistan control post, which did not pay for it. One activist recounted that, after visiting the two administrations to request that they resolve this situation:

We returned to the village, but the Kyrgyz engineers had already left. We got 200 meters of cable from Uzbekistan and temporarily set up a supply. We told people only to use the minimum, for example for lighting, not for cooking. The next day, the Kyrgyzstani came and put it right. For three days we were without electricity. Now, the post still gets electricity from Kyrgyzstan, I think, but I don’t know if they pay for it.

The successful resumption of electricity supply to the neutral zone evidences determination by key members of the village—Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani, Uzbek and Kyrgyz—to protect its integrity and to fight together, against the authorities on both sides of the border. The idea of a neutral zone was invoked to reinforce this resolve: that neither state had the right to lord it over the community or to dictate its future. At times, the language was bullish. As one resident put it, “If I leave, the whole place will explode. I won’t leave without me and my sons going down in a fight, blowing ourselves up and Uzbekistan as well, and we will die defending our home.” Drawing a geopolitical comparison with tiny Hong Kong, which had preserved a degree of autonomy between the once mighty British Empire and the current power of Beijing, he said that Chek “is Hong Kong. Neither America nor China can really rule.”

Chek embodied, in a thousand quotidian interactions, the sense that the transgression of ethnic and political geographical divisions of the valley was
more real than the nationalistic visions of mapmakers and map-enforcers. Chek simply must continue. This clash of geopolitical visions, and the resolve of its inhabitants to resist the nationalization of space, would soon be tested to the extreme.

The Triumph of Nationalism

The end of Chek came the following summer. In June 2010, as the cities of Osh and Jalalabad were still in shock following three days of horrendous ethnic-based violence, I received phone calls from anguished Chek friends telling me that their village was going to be destroyed. They were asking, was there anything I could do?

Alas, there wasn’t. On June 30, 2010, Uzbek officials visited the inhabitants of Chek’s neutral zone and informed them that their homes would be demolished within a week. Uzbekistani households were offered new plots within Uzbekistan, on the Madaniiat–Andijon highway and would be given compensation. Kyrgyzstani families took apart their homes and salvaged what construction materials they could, hauling them over to the Kyrgyzstani part of Chek. They were joined by every single ethnic Kyrgyz Uzbekistani citizen, all of whom apparently chose to forego the offer of relocation within Uzbekistan. They preferred to move to Kyrgyzstan as stateless migrants than to remain in Uzbekistan as a stranded minority while the shadow of ethnic violence loomed over the valley. For example, one young man, Janybek, made a final visit to his workplace in Uzbekistan, said farewell to his colleagues, posed for a last photograph, and returned to Chek. Having spent years building a home in his father’s compound for his new bride, he knocked it down to salvage the most usable materials (in particular wooden beams) to start all over again in Kyrgyzstan.

He completed this heartbreaking task just in time. In the second week of July the bridge over the canal was razed and, in the words of one media report, the village was then “demolished and destroyed completely.” The barbed wire fences along the canal edge that had stopped at either side of the neutral zone for a decade were finally joined, and when the bulldozers had finished their assignments a second line of barbed wire was erected a few meters further back. Chek, this vibrant neutral zone that embodied a pre-1991 reality of the historically interconnected valley and its people, was no more.

NATIONALISM: A SHARED VISION

Chek was destroyed on the orders of the Uzbekistani government. However, it would be misleading and unfair to single out Tashkent as uniquely culpable
for violently imposing a damaging and alien border regime. It is true that Uzbekistan initiated the creation of a tightly controlled border landscape. But this was an outgrowth of the political geographical vision of nationalism shared by both Kyrgyzstani and Western elites as well as Uzbekistani officials.

For example, in November 2011 I interviewed Kurbanboy Iskandarov, head of the Kyrgyz Prime Minister’s Office on Territorial Issues, and chief representative of Kyrgyzstan on the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan bilateral boundary commission formed in 2000. He recounted that:

I recently went to [the] Ferghana [Valley] with the head of the Uzbekistan delegation. We met an elder who said, “My grandfathers have always lived here, so why should I move?” So I asked him, “What is your name?” He told me, such-and-such. I said, “No it isn’t, that person over there is such-and-such.” He looked cross and insisted, “No it’s me!” I again stated that it was that other person, so he took out his passport and said, “Hey, look, I’ll prove it!” So I said—“yes, ah, I see—and that is how we decide whose land this is, on the basis of documents.” Then he understood.

This exchange between someone who lives directly alongside the course of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary and someone else whose job it is to decide where that boundary lies illustrates the main point of this chapter—a clash of political geographical visions. On the one hand, we see mapmakers and map-enforcers, redrawing the Fergana Valley according to a nationalist vision of clearly demarcated state territories. On the other, we see borderland dwellers whose geographical imagination is formed by the historic spaces of kinship formed by dwelling in mixed and fluid communities on the Uzbek–Kyrgyz interface. These are spaces and routes of movement that transgress neat divisions of state, territory, and even ethnicity.

These two visions disagree diametrically on the nature of the problem in the borderlands. For the state-makers (from chairs of boundary commissions down to the humblest border guard), the key problem is that the boundary’s location is uncertain. Thus in 2006 I interviewed Salamat Alamanov, a geography professor, and Kurbanboy Iskandarov’s predecessor at the Kyrgyz Prime Minister’s Office on Territorial Issues. After an extended discussion about international comparisons and experiences from boundaries around the world, I asked him whether there was anything unique about Central Asia’s situation in respect to boundaries.

SA: Yes, for example the way in which the 1924 borders were drawn up. In theory, there were four principles. What were they now, er, population number, er...
NM: economic area . . .

SA: . . . yes, that too, and some others. However, none of them were used properly. As a result, for example enclaves have appeared, and the legacy of this poor division has brought many difficulties for us today.69

In this understanding, lack of clarity in the documents and hence uncertainty on the ground is the “problem” he is tasked with resolving. This perspective was put most colorfully to me by Solijon Madanenov, an ethnic Uzbek in charge of agriculture for the Suzak regional government whom I interviewed in 2000.

People say all sorts of bad things about the border, but in fact an independent country needs one. When we have enough money, we’ll put in a border too. . . . Our people have learnt to just come and go as they please, but now we need borders. We need a border to stop idiots fighting across it over some stupid issue—we need a long one, as we have many idiots here.70

This nationalist state-making vision is not only the domain of state employees. The French aid organization ACTED wrote a report for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2006 entitled “Borders of Discord,” which concluded that “contested territories remain a problem in the border zones.” Its most detailed case study was that of Chek, whose “area of disputed land” allegedly “served as a dangerous source of tensions.”71 The same year I interviewed Colonel Tamas Kiss, working for the EU’s BOMCA (Border Management Programme in Central Asia) in Bishkek to implement “Integrated Border Management.” He stated that:

We want to see delimitation and demarcation take place, because without it the border cannot properly be controlled. However, we as international organizations cannot do much to speed this up, it depends on the countries themselves.72

He added that he would like the enclaves to disappear as, from the perspective of those trying to control the flows of goods and people over borders, “enclaves are always bad.”

This vision is that of the age of state nationalism, which ideally sees territories and nations and states as coterminous and as coinciding at the border. Incidentally, both Tamas Kiss and Salamat Alamanov had undergone training sessions organized by the Durham University Geography Department’s International Boundaries Research Unit—where I myself studied as an undergraduate. This classic model of delimitation, demarcation, and arbitration is shared by a global community of experts and politicians, and it structures
the geographical imagination of the modern world. In this vision, uncertain boundaries are themselves a problem to be solved—or an oddity to be reported.

In contrast, as Madeleine Reeves observes, those who live in these spaces do not see “contested territories” as a problem. Rather, they see the delimiting and demarcating of them, and the imposition of customs and passport control regimes and the like—what Reeves calls the “search for fixity”—as the problem. For the people whose voices I have appropriated and whose experiences I have interpreted in this chapter, daily life wantonly transgressed these borders. This was a daily reality structured by years and even generations of “cross-border” movement for work, rest, worship, socializing, study, veneration of the dead, and the fulfillment of family duties. It was also a way of life that transgressed the fixed identities not only of “Uzbekistani” and “Kyrgyzstani,” but of “Uzbek” or “Kyrgyz.” People moved between categories over generations or even lifetimes. Economic, ethnic, linguistic, and social geographies did not coincide with the political geographies of Soviet federalism or of independence—and this was not a problem. On the contrary, for Chek’s inhabitants its in-betweenness was a source of pride, and they took advantage of it to create economic opportunities, forging a unique sense of cross-cultural identity in what they call their “neutral zone.”

I asked Iskandarov about his position on the demolition of Chek. He said:

This division occurred with our agreement, or rather after the delimitation of that part of the border was agreed upon. Some of the people wanted to move to Kyrgyzstan, so we gave them assistance in new land to build new houses.

We see from these examples that a nationalistic Uzbekistan did not act unilaterally to impose an exclusivist geopolitical vision on a Kyrgyzstan driven by an enlightened multinationalism. The idea of a demarcated and controlled border delineating separate nation states was shared with Kyrgyzstani government officials, local administrators, foreign donors, and the like. Chek’s fate was sealed by a political geography of nationalism shared by the Kyrgyzstani and foreign elite as much as the Uzbekistani one.

CONCLUSION: VISIONS OF UZBEK NATIONALISM

In 1991 the village of Chek was a bustling, multiethnic transboundary community. Now, half of it has been destroyed, and it is impossible to legally or safely cross the border. In the years following independence its inhabitants often said to me: “Here there is no Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.” Now, the
inhabitants of the neutral zone who made that statement have been forced out, and their community no longer exists. It has been replaced by two distinct entities: Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. What does Chek’s fate tell us about nationalism in Uzbekistan and its interface with Kyrgyzstan?

First, it tells us that Uzbek nationalism is a geographical vision. It sounds obvious but needs reiterating: the “ideology of national independence” can only exist in places. Words like “homeland,” “state,” and “territory” infuse the discourse of Uzbek nationalism. Space is not the mere stage or container for nationalism: it is the condition of its possibility, the stuff of its actualization. The study of independent Uzbekistan must inherently be spatial.

Second, historically, Uzbek nationalism is a new vision. When I first visited Chek, it was a community whose social and economic life wantonly transgressed the boundary line over which it had the ultimate misfortune to lie. Yet the young children of the friends I first made, who now live on the Kyrgyzstani side of the former canal, have never seen anything of Uzbekistan other than armed soldiers patrolling barbed wire fences across a seemingly impassable chasm. This needs emphasizing: they have never once set foot on Uzbek territory, whereas their parents and grandparents passed back and forth daily. This is how the magic of territory and maps work: they present themselves as timeless realities. This is something entirely new for the Ferghana Valley.

To return to the questions posed at the start of this chapter: many of us have never experienced the shock of being confronted by a new map of our country because we have grown up with nothing else. Recording, as I have done here, the experiences of those people who do recall this cartographic vertigo is important because it reminds us that the magic wasn’t really magic at first.

Third, maps convey a violent vision. The nation-state ideology was spatialized through multiple forms of coercion. Most starkly, these included the demolition of bridges, the destruction of homes, and the use and threat of direct bodily violence by state agents. But it also included more subtle forms of force: obliging people to choose one citizenship, preventing them from crossing the boundary and seeing friends and family by demanding visas, stopping them driving across in their cars, and the like.

Finally, Chek’s experience tells us that Central Asian nationalism is a shared vision. It would be unfair and misleading to depict Uzbekistani state nationalism as a unilateral, backward, and irrational product of autocracy. Rather, Uzbekistani nationalism is an example of the dominant logic about how space is organized into territory. This ideology has replaced the previous socialistic ideology of the Soviet Union. As we have seen, this ideology is shared by politicians, boundary scholars, civil servants, teachers, foreign aid donors, and intergovernmental organizations in Central Asia—as well
as vast swaths of the world’s citizenry. To be sure, there are numerous different ways of running states under nationalism, which variously deform or enhance human well-being. But it is nonetheless the case that a direct line can be traced from the joyous recognition by Western powers of Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani independence in 1991, to the destruction of Chek in 2010. Humans have chosen to organize the world according to a particular logic: and the people of Chek have suffered the consequences.

NOTES

15. Özkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism*, chapter 5.


28. I have observed unpleasant exchanges at conferences where Western academics disparage the presentations of their Central Asian colleagues: marked not by
engaging with specific arguments, but by dismissive assumptions that the ideas of scholars who do not share specific modernist interpretations of nationalism are inherently inferior. This smacks of colonialism.


43. Yiftachel, “Territory as the Kernel of the Nation,” 212.


47. Liu, *Under Solomon’s Throne*. Mahalla is an Uzbek word designating a residential neighborhood, commonly with a single mosque and cemetery and often with a choyxona (café) and xammon (Turkish bathhouse). After independence, the mahalla became the smallest unit of state territorial governance in Uzbekistan. See Deniz Kandiyoti, “Post-Soviet Institutional Design and the Paradoxes of the ‘Uzbek Path,’” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 1 (2007): 31–48. In both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, mahalla committees take responsibility for the upkeep of the built environment, loaning community assets for use at weddings, and the like.


58. Roman law maxim, may be translated into English as “as you possess in law, thus may you possess.” See John McHugo and Clive Schofield, eds., *How to Prove Title to Territory: A Brief, Practical Introduction to the Law and Evidence* (Durham, UK: University of Durham, International Boundary Research Unit, 1998), 9. Reiterating this principle, on December 21, 1991, the Alma-Ata Protocol was signed whereby the new CIS states recognized “each other’s territorial integrity and the inviolability of the existing borders.”


62. According to the mayor of the village administration in Kyrgyzstan under which Chek falls, the VA as a whole had in 2005 8,575 ethnically Kyrgyz citizens and 4,917 ethnic Uzbek (personal interview).

63. McHugo and Schofield, *How to Prove Title to Territory*.


65. “Enesing kozy saisa, dard kimga aytasyng?”


67. Their ethnicity meant they were fast-tracked for Kyrgyzstani citizenship, and in the meantime international donors and the Kyrgyzstani state helped provide them with land in Chek and money to build new homes.

68. “Chek ayïlïnan Kïrgïz üy-bülölük köchüüdö.”


70. Author’s interview with Suzak regional administration, May 4, 2000.


72. Author’s interview with Salamat Alamanov.

Chapter Three

Grand Corruption in Uzbekistan’s Telecommunications Sector

Root Causes and Social Costs

Alisher Ilkhamov

Observers and academics have largely overlooked the issue of grand corruption\(^1\) in post-Soviet contexts, leaving the press to examine this issue. Scholars only began turning their attention to corruption as an important aspect of the post-communist transition around 2004–2005, as Vladimir Putin began his second term as president of Russia.\(^2\) These years marked the rise of a new group of oligarchs with close ties to Putin, public office, and especially the security services, such as Gennady Timchenko, Vladimir Yakunin, Yury Kovalchuk, and Sergey Chemezov. By the end of Putin’s first term—that is, by 2004—it had become clear that Putin was creating a new class of nobility as the social base of his authoritarian rule. In exchange for their loyalty, he informally allowed the new class of oligarchs to enrich themselves by diverting huge sums of public finance into their personal pockets. It became clear that the failure to achieve a democratic transition was primarily the result of this redistribution of wealth, predatory capitalism, and grand corruption. In response, a new generation of political opposition emerged, represented by Aleksey Navalny, and during Putin’s second term it began positioning itself on an anticorruption platform. The Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014 was a revolt against this kind of grand corruption that reigned in Ukraine under the governments of Yulia Timoshenko and then Viktor Yanukovich.

Analysts began to consider corruption and related issues only when transition theories focused on building democratic institutions and a free market economy proved unable to explain the root causes of the failed transition toward democracy across the post-Soviet region. That model of transition, limited to political and economic freedoms, has finally proved to be incomplete and inadequate, as it neglects such important factors as good governance and the rule of law.
Putin’s second term observers were beginning to understand that the difficulty of establishing democratic rule in most post-Soviet states is largely connected to the vested interests of a corrupt ruling elite. The newfound concern with corruption can be connected to the fact that, after admitting the Baltic states, the European Union raised the accession requirements for the next group of countries aspiring to join it. Now the EU demands that candidate countries first tackle systemic corruption before even being considered for an association agreement.

Moreover, grand corruption is a relatively new phenomenon for the countries in the region, even though official corruption was widely discussed there during the perestroika era and after. That discussion followed revelations, thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost, of misdeeds by the nomenklatura of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the late Soviet period, which indeed saw plenty examples of bribery and embezzlement at all levels of state and party hierarchy. The exploits of Yury Churbanov, the son-in-law of CPSU General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, made headlines in the press during perestroika. Churbanov was eventually arrested and convicted in 1987 for large-scale corruption.3

However, the amount of benefits that top officials would gain from nepotism, cronyism, and various other corrupt practices in the Soviet era is still negligible compared with what has transpired in the post-Soviet period—state capture by corrupt cliques, without any mechanisms of accountability. The corrupt officials in Soviet times lacked the current opportunities to accumulate and hide their ill-gotten proceeds through transnational corporate transactions and financial services, which can easily be done without revealing the ultimate owners.

The nature and, to some extent, sources of corruption have dramatically changed since the collapse of the USSR in late 1991. In the Soviet era, corruption was largely caused by the near omnipresence of state, the myriad administrative restrictions, the deficit economy that pushed the officials and citizens into shadow-market transactions,4 and the privileged status of state and party nomenklatura. However, the scale of that corruption was significantly smaller compared with what we see today. Corruption in Soviet times consisted mainly of petty and middle-scale embezzlement or bribery, almost exclusively in cash or in-kind goods and services.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, corrupt officials began exploiting advantages from legalized private corporate ownership and a rapidly growing private sector. Without a doubt, the market economy has helped to overcome the deficit of consumer goods and services endemic to the Soviet system and created many opportunities for economic growth and development. However, the development of new public institutions that would pro-
vide safeguards against new incentives for corruption lagged far behind the expansion of the private sector and economic liberalization. This mismatch between these two tracks of developments, on the one hand, and the much faster expansion of private ownership and market mechanisms along with entrenched authoritarianism and few accountability mechanisms, has led to opaque relationships between public-office holders and the private sector, giving birth to the current unprecedented scale of grand corruption. No longer involving suitcases full of cash, post-Soviet grand corruption is much more sophisticated, benefitting from seemingly legal bank transactions and the acquisition of shares in private companies. But these same features allow for the illegitimate and illicit appropriation of public and national resources on an unprecedented scale.

The lack of safeguards against corruption includes a dearth of institutional constraints on corrupt practices. Take, for example, the mechanism of transparent public procurement. To reduce the risk of corruption in this sphere, the state regulator should provide conditions for fair competition through an open and transparent tendering process. But when the strategic sectors of the economy are under the direct management of the central government—or occupied by state-controlled enterprises—there would be little incentive to apply the rules of transparent public procurement because it would be difficult to avoid conflicts of interest.

The same rules of transparent and accountable tendering process are normally applied in the distribution of such resources and required for profitable business such as frequencies and licenses in the telecommunications sector, even if the domestic private sector is underdeveloped in this sphere. For example, Uzbekistan’s telecom industry is dominated by foreign companies that need to acquire licenses allowing them to operate across certain radio frequencies. However, in Uzbekistan we do not see the state establishing and following a transparent tendering process to enable fair competition. The lack of equal playing conditions can be explained only by the absence of political will to tackle government corruption and to fulfill the country’s obligations under the UN Convention Against Corruption. The absence of political will, in turn, can be explained by the ruling elite’s vested interests in avoiding anything that would prevent it from engaging in opaque deals. It is not surprising that such a state of affairs eventually results in corruption scandals, as has occurred in the telecommunications sector of Uzbekistan, revealing shadowy deals between members of the ruling elite and some unscrupulous foreign investors. This kind of collusion between public office and private interests has taken place in the telecom industries of Uzbekistan and other post-Soviet authoritarian regimes, with almost the same set of international mobile operators involved. This chapter offers insights into such developments in Uzbekistan and my views about how they affect domestic society.
Chapter Three

COLLUSION IN ALLOCATING FREQUENCIES

Unlike other strategic sectors of Uzbekistan’s economy, the telecommunications sector has enjoyed relatively more economic freedoms. That is partly because doing business and generating revenues in this sector does not require investments from the state. On the contrary, opening the doors to private initiative has attracted foreign investments and brought modern technologies into the country. As a result, the market for mobile telephone and Internet services is dominated by private, mainly foreign, companies. Yet, since the government controls the distribution of frequencies and licenses for operating in specific spectra, top officials close to the presidential family have found opportunities to extract rents by forcing the foreign investors to cede shares of their businesses in Uzbekistan.

Despite the rapid development of telecommunications technology in the last ten to fifteen years, Uzbekistan continues to lag behind the world average on a number of indicators. It even ranks behind some Central Asian countries in terms of service quality and consumer costs. The gap is connected to the contradictory position of Uzbekistan’s government in relation to the sector. On the one hand, it desires to develop the telecommunications and information technology sector. On the other, it is determined to implement strict political control over information channels. Corruption and government interference in the business sector in general also prove major hindrances.

Until the middle of 2012, there were three mobile communications vendors in Uzbekistan, each under the ownership of international companies: Uzdunrobita, owned by Mobile Telecom Systems (MTS), a Russian company; Ucell, owned by the Swedish–Finnish company TeliaSonera; and Unitel, owned on paper by VimpelCom Incorporated of Bermuda but actually owned by Russia’s Alfa Group and Norway’s Telenor Group. Together, these three companies provided services to twenty-three million mobile communication subscribers, and from the mid-2000s they began to actively introduce services for mobile Internet. However, from the very beginning of their operations in Uzbekistan, these companies were involved in agreements and transactions with mysterious companies registered in Gibraltar, Takilant, and Swisdorn, to which they ceded significant assets and paid large sums of money to act as their intermediary for access to the Uzbek market. Takilant and Swisdorn did not hold any formal status in the telecommunications market of Uzbekistan, were not authorized by any government authority to carry out any activity on its behalf, nor was it mentioned in any official government documents. However, media reports widely stated that President Islam Karimov’s daughter, Gulnara Karimova, stood behind both offshore companies and is their beneficial owner.
At some point, the relationship between the presidential family and MTS deteriorated. In November 2011, the tax authorities and telecommunications regulators carried out a series of inspections at MTS that quickly escalated into a full-scale assault on the company and its assets. As a result of these targeted attacks, MTS ceased its operations in Uzbekistan in July 2012.

In 2012, authorities in Switzerland and Sweden launched criminal investigations into the activities of Takilant and Swisdorn and its associates. As a result, the Swiss Public Prosecutor’s Office froze assets valued at 800 million Swiss francs (US$ 910 million) held in accounts in Switzerland and elsewhere and filed criminal charges against several close associates of Gulnara Karimova. This led quickly to the collapse of Karimova’s once-expansive financial empire, criminal convictions for her closest associates, and ostracism and a criminal investigation for Karimova herself.

**WHO STANDS BEHIND THE “LOCAL PARTNER”?**

Available information suggests that Takilant, Swisdorn, Expoline (registered in Hong Kong), and possibly other shell companies were created by Uzbek nationals to act as intermediaries between foreign investors and the Uzbek state agencies that regulate the domestic telecommunications sector. Takilant and Swisdorn played a particularly important role.

Takilant was incorporated in Gibraltar, and internal documents list Gayane Avakyan, a known associate of Gulnara Karimova, as its director and sole shareholder beginning in 2005. Although the company was incorporated in 2003, Avakian became its director and formal owner on February 11, 2005. When she became Takilant’s sole owner and director, Avakian was only twenty-three years old, and there was no information available to the public about her biography and educational background, and no record of any positions held previously in public or private offices, except the information that she is a close associate of Gulnara Karimova.

According to the Swedish journalists investigating Teliasone’s business in Uzbekistan, a further Karimova associate, Bekhzod Akhmedov, was the authorized signatory and account manager for at least two accounts at the Swiss bank Lombard Odier, at least for a time, which received deposits from foreign investors in Uzbekistan’s telecommunications industry and possibly other sectors of the economy. But at the end of 2011 he reportedly fell out of favor with the Uzbek authorities, and in June 2012 he escaped from Uzbekistan, probably to Russia, before he could be arrested on charges of tax evasion and other economic crimes. His departure left the real owners of the accounts at Lombard Odier without an intermediary who could access the assets held there.
According to the Swedish law firm Mannheimer Swartling, which conducted an investigation into allegations of TeliaSonera’s involvement in corruption in Uzbekistan, in 2007 TeliaSonera entered into negotiations with Bekhzod Akhmedov, a Karimova associate—and, bizarrely, CEO of TeliaSonera’s future rival, MTS-Uzbekistan. As TeliaSonera officials admitted in an internal memo from 2007, Bekhzod Akhmedov acted as “Chief Executive for Gulnara Karimova’s investment group.” The negotiations between TeliaSonera and Bekhzod Akhmedov resulted in “introducing Takilant as TeliaSonera’s local partner” and a minor shareholder in Coscom (through TeliaSonera Uzbek Telecom Holding).

Another key offshore company, Swisdorn, was registered in Gibraltar on July 3, 2003. On September 10 of the same year its director and sole shareholder became Rustam Madumarov, rumored to be Gulnara Karimova’s civil partner and close associate.

The similarities among the three cases, all involving dubious relationships among the three international mobile operators (MTS, TeliaSonera and VimpelCom), on the one hand, and Uzbek-owned offshore companies, on the other, are striking. In each case, foreign investors entered into deals with “local partners” such as Takilant and Swisdorn—local partners with almost no official presence in Uzbekistan, no registration in the country, and no accreditation, at least as far as public documents reveal. These deals provide them with cash and equity in exchange for their help in acquiring entry to the local market, licenses, frequency spectrums, and phone number blocks. Both TeliaSonera and VimpelCom provided Takilant with shares in local operators that they owned and then repurchased these shares back at a much higher price, a buy-back that had been arranged in advance. As a result, between 2004 and 2010, two offshore companies that previously had no assets and no corporate or business profile managed to earn a net income of at least US$850 million by receiving payments or acquiring shares from the three foreign mobile operators. According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), the total amount received by Takilant and Swisdorn may be as much as US$983 million, as shown in table 3.1. This figure does not include assets received by another offshore company controlled by the same deal fixer for mobile operators, Expoline. The name of this shell company appeared in the forfeiture case filed by the U.S. Department of Justice in June 2015. Apart from payments made by the three mobile operators, the same members of the Uzbek ruling elite received significant amounts from two other foreign companies providing other telecom-related services, Merkony and Eastwell. The former paid US$86 million and Eastwell US$3.8 million to two Uzbek-official-controlled shell companies, one of which was the notorious Takilant, the other is Finex Limited, registered in Hong Kong.
According to OCCRP’s various reports, Uzbek officials have received more than US$1 billion from the various telecom companies. There seems to be no plausible and justifiable explanation as to why three global telecommunications companies could not deal directly with the relevant authorities—the Uzbek state telecommunications agency—and why roughly US$1 billion should have gone into the coffers of three obscure offshore companies and not into the state budget of Uzbekistan, especially if the investors seemed ready and willing to pay these sums. Clearly, something else played a role in making this decision. Whether or not this rises to the level of outright bribery is a question to be settled by the relevant authorities in Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United States, and other jurisdictions. However, in its fourth-quarter report for 2015, VimpelCom acknowledged the fact of corruption and agreed to pay a penalty of US$795 million to the U.S. and Dutch authorities\(^1\) this company is accountable to—it is listed on the New York Stock Exchange and is registered in the Netherlands. The company admitted that it paid more than US$114 million to an Uzbek government official between 2006 and 2012 in exchange for an opportunity to operate in the Uzbek telecommunications market.\(^2\) In July 2016, a Dutch court found Takilant guilty of accepting bribes from VimpelCom and Telia AB (formerly TeliaSonera) in exchange for wireless frequencies.\(^3\)

Earlier, on March 12, 2014, the Swiss Federal Prosecutor’s Office named Karimova a suspect in their criminal investigation into charges of money laundering.\(^4\) This investigation had been launched after Swiss police arrested on July 30, 2012, two other Karimova associates, Shokhrulk Sabirov and

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*Table 3.1. Net Income Swisdorn and Takilant Generated through Their Deals with MTS, TeliaSonera, and VimpelCom\(^1\) (US$)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreign Investors</th>
<th>Payments made to offshore companies controlled by members of Uzbekistan’s ruling elite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MTS</td>
<td>350,330,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VympelCom</td>
<td>176,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TeliaSonera</td>
<td>456,225,000(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>983,055,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merkony</td>
<td>85,718,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastwell</td>
<td>3,849,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>1,072,623,683</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2. US$75,000 of this amount was allocated in the form of equity; specifically 6% of shares in the TeliaSonera-controlled local operator Ucell.
Alisher Ergashev, when they tried to conduct a transaction involving an account at Lombard Odier. They were released on bail on October 16, 2012. Both of them were managers at the company Coca-Cola Ichimligi Uzbekiston, which was initially owned by Gulnara Karimova’s former husband, but later came under her own control, as her former financial adviser Farhod Inogambayev testified to a U.S. court. It is telling that Alisher Ergashev was also appointed manager of two companies registered in France, Invest service group and Invest Studio, where Gulnara Karimova is the main shareholder.

Meanwhile in 2012, thanks to material broadcast by journalists from the television company SVT in Sweden and the Swiss authorities’ request for mutual legal assistance, an investigation was launched in Sweden into TeliaSonera’s business in Uzbekistan. In May 2013, journalists from SVT released documents that confirmed Gulnara Karimova’s direct involvement in questionable transactions with TeliaSonera. The documents contain signatures believed, after analysis by handwriting experts, to be Karimova’s.

WHO WAS HELD ACCOUNTABLE?

In belated response to the growing scandal around the presidential daughter and the resulting damage to the country’s image, beginning in late 2013 the Uzbek authorities began dismantling Karimova’s business empire within Uzbekistan. She was barred from leaving the country, most likely in order to prevent her from giving evidence to the Swiss and Swedish prosecutors. Investigations carried out in Uzbekistan into her associates took place under heavy secrecy. In February 2014, Gulnara’s closest friends and associates Rustam Madumarov, Gaiane Avakian, and Ekaterina Kliueva were arrested by the National Security Service in Karimova’s apartment in the presence of both Gulnara herself and her daughter, Iman.

On February 17, 2014, Karimova’s associates were accused of using “fraudulent methods and illegal transactions recorded in Uzbekistan and abroad, and various fictitious structures, engaged in obtaining illegal profits and money laundering, tax evasion, concealment of foreign currency and its withdrawal outside the country,” but with no specific reference to their involvement in the affairs around Takilant and Swisdorn and receiving through these and other shell companies payments from the foreign mobile operators. In a vague statement, Tashkent claimed only that the government and individual companies had suffered significant damage.

On May 24, 2014, the Military Court of the Republic of Uzbekistan convicted Madumarov, Avakian, and eleven others on these charges and sentenced them to lengthy prison terms. Madumarov and Avakyan were
reportedly sentenced to ten and nine years in prison, respectively, but thanks to partial amnesty, their prison terms were reduced to six-and-a-half and six years, respectively.26 On September 8 and 22, 2014, the Office of the General Prosecutor of Uzbekistan issued a press release that clearly implied that Gulnara Karimova was also suspected of using administrative leverage for corrupt deals and taking part in criminal groups that included her associates.27

However, none of the Prosecutor’s Office’s press releases mentioned any cases involving the relationships between global mobile operators and the offshore companies associated with Karimova, such as Takilant, Swisdorn, Expoline, and Finex. Also unknown is whether any of her associates—or she herself—has been charged with corruption in the telecom market. Nor has the Prosecutor’s Office mentioned any investigation into those officials representing the regulatory authorities who played their role, whether under pressure from the presidential family or driven by their own self-interest, in the schemes allowing Takilant and Swisdorn to receive the lion’s share of the premium all three global mobile operators paid to enter and operate in the telecom market of Uzbekistan.

The regulatory authorities in question are the State Committee on Communications, Information, and Telecommunication Technology or Goskomsviaz (until October 2012 known as the Uzbek Agency of Communications and Information—UzASI) and the State Radio Frequency Committee (GKRCh), which is itself part of the Agency. It is bizarre how Takilant and Swisdorn could obtain 3G licenses and spectra of frequencies for operation and then resell them to the international mobile operators. Given the fact that these start-up companies had no business profile, no staff, and no corporate history to make them legitimate actors in the telecom business, UzASI not only failed to do due diligence, but had apparently entered into a corrupt scheme with them. Second, Uzbek law prohibits the resale or transfer of licenses to third parties. The government-approved Statute on Licensing Activities in the Field of Telecommunications clearly says: “The type of activity for which the license is allocated can only be carried out by the licensed entity. Transferring licenses or rights under it to other parties is prohibited.”28 Therefore, Takilant and Swisdorn improperly resold the licenses to other parties, illegal actions that were apparently overlooked by the regulatory authorities. If these authorities allowed this transfer of licenses to third parties to happen, then they had themselves committed the crimes of negligence and complicity in illegal action.

On September 20, 2012, the Uzbek news website Uzmetronom, which frequently features leaks from well-placed sources, published a report that the General Prosecutor’s Office had opened a criminal case against Abdulla Aripov, who had been fired in August 2012 from his position of deputy prime
minister and director general of UzASI. He was allegedly facing corruption charges for illegally granting licenses to MTS-Uzbekistan. 29 But there have been no follow-up reports on whether he was convicted and sentenced to prison. Some local sources suggested that it is unlikely that he was convicted, possibly because decisions on frequencies and licenses are made only after consultation with a number of other state agencies, including the Cabinet of Ministers, Ministry for Foreign Economic Relations, and the National Security Service. In September 2016, shortly after the death of President Karimov, Interim President Shavkat Mirziyoyev brought Abdulla Aripov back into the government and three months later, in December, made him prime minister, 30 without explaining to the public what role Aripov had played in the corruption scheme, whether he was guilty of any wrongdoing or not, and how the government is assessing his performance in that period.

Finally, given President Karimov’s reported predilections for micro-managing even the most marginal undertakings, it seems unlikely that such strategic decisions as the allocation of licenses to Takilant and Swisdorn and then to mobile operators could have been made without his personal approval. If Takilant and Swisdorn—which were doing nothing that the state regulatory bodies could not have done themselves without any third-party mediation—were indeed stepping in for the sole purpose of seizing a huge amount of hard currency, which the country desperately needed, it also seems highly unlikely that this could have taken place without the knowledge and consent and even participation of the president.

ROOT CAUSES

As with most strategic sectors of Uzbekistan’s economy, the telecom industry exhibits the same signs of state agencies distributing valuable resources, in this case frequencies and licenses that allow mobile operators to generate enormous income. Uzbekistan’s licensing process contains a number of gaps that make it vulnerable to interference from powerful individuals within and around the government. There are no standard protocols to shape the rules and conditions for license tenders, which creates an opportunity for the Cabinet of Ministers to set terms favorable to certain bidders. The Law of Republic of Uzbekistan “On Telecommunications” is very vague on procedures and conditions under which licenses can be allocated. Its chapter 9 says: “The issuance of licenses for certain activities in the telecommunications sector may be made on a competitive (tender) basis.” 31 In other words, the tenders themselves are not obligatory in allocating licenses. It is not surprising, then, that the process of allocating licenses and spectra for operations in the tele-
communications sector is neither competitive nor transparent for the public and mass media. The press itself lacks freedom and independence from the state. Even if such a transparent and competitive mechanism existed, there still would be problems related to enforcement and the lack of oversight by the judiciary and civil society. The latter two institutions themselves are not independent or free from the executive’s interference and control.

The established state of affairs, in fact, forces foreign companies seeking entry into the Uzbek market to gain access through the back door, by engaging with so-called local partners that actually broker the back-door deals. In some cases, brokers are just a link in a long chain of corrupt relationships and receive only a small portion of the bribes paid by foreign investors in exchange for preferential treatment. In other cases, these brokers are controlled by powerful individuals, such as members of the presidential family, and appropriate most of the bribe proceeds themselves.

The most important lesson from this study is that the new type of corruption, grand in scale and level, rests on a binary system that includes public officers and the private sector. In some cases, the private sector is just one part of the networks that seize a public office, in others the private companies act as agents in the chain of corrupt transactions initiated by top government officials. But neither side of this binary system can exist without the other. The corrupt public office holder needs a certain degree of economic freedom that will allow him to register a company in the name of one of his associates and to channel public monies into offshore accounts through this shell company. The corrupt managers of private companies also benefit from shadowy relationships with state officials because they avoid facing fair competition with other aspirant players.

**SOCIAL COST**

Since corruption is a criminal offense, and grand corruption even more so, by definition there must be both perpetrators and victims. Who are perpetrators of the corruption that has taken place in Uzbekistan’s telecommunications sector? First of all, those members of the Uzbek ruling elite who extorted bribes from foreign mobile operators in exchange for their access to the Uzbek emerging telecom market and its twenty-three million potential customers. But the ruling regime and the government as a whole should also be mentioned, as they lacked the political will to establish a transparent and accountable tendering process in the allocation of licenses and frequencies. The corrupt deal between the presidential family and foreign companies could have been revealed, if Uzbekistan had independent media, a division
of powers, and an independent judiciary. Thus, the government and the top leadership should share responsibility for this case of grand corruption. The absence of the aforementioned institutional constraints on corrupt practices and effective anticorruption mechanisms will surely facilitate other cases of grand corruption, as efforts to reform the governance system in Uzbekistan continue to languish.

But who are the victims of corruption in the country’s telecom industry? We can identify different categories of victims. First, telecom customers have suffered in terms of both cost and quality of telecom services. This is largely because the disagreements among the Uzbek ruling elites and MTS over the amount of bribes this new company was expected to pay led to its expulsion from the country.

While eroding Uzdunrobita’s ability to operate in Uzbekistan, the authorities were little concerned with the interests and rights of consumers and users of MTS’s mobile services. For example, MTS customers were not reimbursed for prepayments they had made for Uzdunrobita services, let alone the wider losses associated with the cancellation of Uzdunrobita services in Uzbekistan. Furthermore, these consumers lost their phone numbers, as MTS modems and specifications could not be transferred to other mobile operators. The consequences of MTS’s disconnection for consumers were far-reaching and included the monopolization of the sector by the remaining two operators, Unitel and Ucell, and correspondingly, reduced competition. This was accompanied by rising costs of services for consumers. Service tariffs increased, the speed of mobile Internet services decreased, and mobile penetration fell from 84.7 percent to 71 percent between 2011 and 2012.

As Table 3.2 shows, by the end of 2012, after the closure of MTS—and even after the period of stabilization—the total number of mobile communication users decreased by 3.4 million compared with the figure in 2011. This reduction was mainly due to reduced coverage, as MTS had provided more mobile phone network coverage in the country compared with its competitors. Table 3.3 confirms that the loss of the MTS network led to a significant market monopolization. VimpelCom’s brand Unitel (also known as Beeline), which previously held third place in the mobile communications market, became the largest mobile operator based on the number of subscribers, surpassing TeliaSonera’s brand Ucell. Both companies, Unitel and Ucell, held the dominant position in the market, increasing the number of their subscribers by almost 150 percent. However, 14 percent of the total number of MTS subscribers seem to have left the mobile market altogether.

After MTS left the country, expenses for telecom services increased for practically all mobile communications consumers. Earlier, competition had contributed to lower prices. In its annual report for 2011, MTS stated that
increased competition in the mobile market in Uzbekistan was putting downward pressure on the monthly average revenue per user (ARPU). Thus, in 2011 the company’s ARPU in Uzbekistan decreased to US$4 from US$4.70 in 2010.32

Due to the declining competition, the two remaining companies were able to raise their income. Table 3.4 shows how the total revenue and revenue

### Table 3.3. Operator Share in the Telecommunications Market of Uzbekistan by Number of Subscribers, 2009–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operator</th>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uzdunrobita (MTS)</td>
<td>MTS</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitel (Vimpelcom)</td>
<td>Beeline</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coscom (TeliaSonera)</td>
<td>Ucell</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on calculations from Table 3.1.
Table 3.4. Net Revenue and Annual Revenue per Subscriber for Leading Main Mobile Operators in Uzbekistan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mobile operators</th>
<th>Net Revenue, US$ (million)</th>
<th>Annual Revenue per Subscriber (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzdunrobita (MTC)</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ucell (TeliaSonera)²</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beeline (VimpelCom) ³</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total market:</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>1,144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

per subscriber changed for the two international companies operating in the mobile market between 2011 and 2013. VimpelCom’s total revenue in 2013 more than doubled compared with revenue in 2011, and revenue per user increased by 30 percent. Ucell figures show that total revenues almost doubled and revenue per user increased by 49 percent in the period. The market operators’ total revenues increased by US$166 million, despite the fact that the annual average number of subscribers during the same period decreased by 2.6 million. Revenue per subscriber increased by 33 percent.

The consequences for customers were even worse in terms of service quality, especially for the speed of mobile Internet. Prior to MTS’s departure from Uzbekistan, the company had actively introduced new products, such as USB modems, Internet access packages, and so on. This gave it a dominant position in the local market. With the cessation of its business in the country, the quality of mobile communications and access to mobile Internet deteriorated significantly with just the offerings of the remaining operators. These two operators seemingly lost any incentive to improve quality, as revenue growth was guaranteed with the migration of former Uzdunrobita customers to their networks. The deterioration in the quality of service can partly be explained by the increasing demand for the TeliaSonera and VimpelCom brands, due to a sharp rise in the number of their customers.

After Uzdunrobita was disconnected, most subscribers immediately tried to migrate to the other two mobile operators. This led to deterioration in the quality of mobile communication and Internet access for current subscribers. Unitel, owned by VimpelCom, experienced the most pressure from this, as the quality of communication and mobile Internet at this company was considered to be better than that of their remaining competitor, Ucell. The situation normalized only at the beginning of November 2012, five months after the disconnection of MTS services. However, the quality of mobile communication after these five months did not improve significantly.

According to some local insiders, immediately after the shutdown of the MTS network on July 17, 2012, the number of complaints regarding the deteriorating quality of service began to grow. However, the telecom companies met with delays in gaining government permission to install new base stations. VimpelCom’s Unitel publicly acknowledged that they were experiencing delays.33 There were even more serious consequences for the quality of 3G mobile Internet, which the three major mobile operators had been rapidly developing in Uzbekistan since 2008. The speed of mobile Internet decreased sharply after the liquidation of MTS. This drop in speed and quality is illustrated in table 3.5.

Based on the data in table 3.5, we can conclude that the average speed of mobile Internet began to decline after 2011. It only returned to 2011 levels
again at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014. This occurred while the rest
of the world was enjoying improvements in the quality of 3G. The change
in average speed over time in Uzbekistan since 2011 is shown in figure 3.1.

Finally, mobile communications customers were not the only victims of
corruption in this sector. There are sufficient grounds to suggest that the

Table 3.5. Speed of Mobile Broadband Internet in Uzbekistan,
2011–2014 (megabits per second–mbps)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Net Index Explorer.

Figure 3.1. Speed of Mobile Broadband Internet in Uzbekistan, 2011–2014 (megabits per second–mbps)

Source: Net Index Explorer.
population as a whole—and especially people dependent on social welfare benefits, such as the elderly, large families, single mothers, and the disabled—was also a victim, as corrupt practices in the telecommunications sector of Uzbekistan have severely harmed the country’s social and economic development and negatively affected the climate for foreign investments. After the telecommunications sector debacle created enormous reputational and financial damage for all three mobile operators, very few foreign investors would be willing to risk a deal with Uzbekistan, unless provided guarantees directly by the government.

Indeed, Uzbekistan is losing its attraction for foreign companies, despite being a resource-rich country with a population of nearly thirty-two million potential customers. Over the last three to four years, foreign direct investment in Uzbekistan has rapidly declined, and in 2014 it was only US$626 million, down from US$1,635 billion in 2011. In comparison, resource-poor Georgia, with a population of only four million, attracted US$1,647 billion in 2014.34 (See table 3.6)

Apart from that, the total amount of bribes paid by all three telecom companies to members of the Uzbek ruling elite was essentially siphoned from public finances, even though, strictly speaking, it was not a case of embezzlement. If these investors were ready to pay this amount to a private person in exchange for her help in acquiring normal conditions for doing business in Uzbekistan, these payments could have been made into the state budget in exchange for the same protection and conditions for doing business in the country, but in a more transparent and accountable way. How much was siphoned out of the country? OCCRP’s investigation provides a good sense of the scale of bribery in Uzbekistan’s mobile telecommunications sector—namely, over US$1 billion.35 As of late 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice is pursuing a comparable amount of assets by filing two cases to

Table 3.6. Foreign Direct Investment in Uzbekistan Compared with Georgia, 2009–2014 (millions of US$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Uzbekistan (pop. 32 million)</th>
<th>Georgia (pop. 4 million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,636</td>
<td>866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1,635</td>
<td>861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>1,647</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

force forfeiture of US$850 million suspected of being bribe proceeds paid by all three major investors in the Uzbek telecommunications sector.36 Furthermore, the Dutch court has ruled to confiscate US$135 million in the form of equity,37 thus making the total amount of Uzbek ill-gotten assets pursued by authorities in foreign jurisdictions equal to US$985 million.38 But what does this amount mean for Uzbekistan? As table 3.7 shows, US$985 million would be equivalent to 8 percent of the state budget in 2013, or 23 percent of public expenditures for education, or 53 percent of the budget allocated for health care. At any rate, this amount could have constituted a major investment into social programs or programs of public interest had it not been diverted by foreign investors’ dealing—by choice or coercion—with questionable, probably corrupt and certainly nontransparent offshore structures instead. At the very least, this would seem to constitute a major blow to the rights of the citizens of Uzbekistan to access vitally needed social services. That means the potential recipients and beneficiaries of these social programs can be considered victims of grand corruption in Uzbekistan, and the figures shown in table 3.7 provide only a low estimate of the damage the Uzbek population has suffered due to grand corruption. Taking into account the systematic nature of government corruption in Uzbekistan, the overall damage brought to the population must be significantly greater.

**CONCLUSION**

The corruption scandal described in this chapter had been percolating since the late 1990s and erupted in 2012. It continues to unfold in the form of lawsuits launched in a number of jurisdictions, including Switzerland, the
United States, the Netherlands, and Sweden. The lawsuits seek either to confiscate the assets generated from suspected bribe proceeds or to penalize international mobile operators for bribery and financial centers for facilitating money laundering.

Islam Karimov, under whose rule this scandal erupted and whose family has been involved in it, died on September 2, 2016, leaving this scandal unresolved and the systemic corruption endemic to his authoritarian regime as part of his legacy. Indeed, having had ample opportunity to implement reforms during his twenty-six years of rule, Karimov failed to create any meaningful institutional constraints on the corrupt practices rife at all levels of government.

Whether a new president, elected on December 4, 2016, will take steps toward building stronger institutions, greater transparency, and accountability—and away from the system of governance based on informal ties of personal loyalty and back-door deals—remains to be seen. But it is quite indicative that among the first steps that the new president Mirziyoyev took after the death of Karimov was to reinstate a government official who was part of the corruption scheme in the telecom industry considered above. Furthermore, Mirziyoyev has not yet made any convincing steps toward reforming the system prone to corrupt practices, which makes quite clear that we are most likely going to see business as usual, except possibly adopting new “progressive” laws that would have the same problems related to enforcement, as had many other “good” laws that were adopted during the Karimov era but never implemented. The fact that the government of Uzbekistan has signed and ratified a number of UN conventions on human rights and against corruption did not prevent the Uzbek ruling regime from engaging in the systematic practice of human rights abuses, grand corruption, and state capture by the presidential family and the clique around it. There has been no indication yet that such state capture is going to stop under the new president.

It would be a mistake to see corruption in this country as merely the fault of one person in power abusing public office and failing to deliver as a political leader. It is also a serious structural problem to solve, one that needs strong political will and determination to change the status quo—that is, the rules of the game entrenched under the Karimov regime. Unfortunately, over the last thirteen years as prime minister, Mirziyoyev himself gave no indication of any desire to change this situation. To the contrary, from the very beginning of his political career he has adopted the same authoritarian and heavy-handed style of governance of his boss, Islam Karimov.

But if authoritarian rule continues in Uzbekistan, then one can hardly expect significant changes regarding government corruption, because the latter is to a large extent derivative of the former and, at the same time, reinforces
this rule. Indeed, grand corruption and state capture are problems common to most post-Soviet authoritarian regimes that combine absolutist personal rule with weak institutions, as we see it in the example of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Russia, and some other states, where the combination of authoritarianism and weak institutions has created exactly that environment in which corrupt practices thrive at all levels of government. All these states illustrate one truth: in conditions when a supreme ruler enjoys absolute control over key state institutions, and no one dares to challenge the abuses of power inevitable under such circumstances, those associated with the ruler, starting with members of his family and kinship networks, use their ties to this ruler as leverage to acquire various benefits and privileges for doing and expanding their businesses, even if these privileges go against the law. Under such a state of affairs, we see rule by law instead of the rule of law.

The corruption scheme in the telecommunications industry of Uzbekistan described in this chapter offers just one example of privileges acquired due to nepotism and association with power and the absence of safeguards that would allow public-office holders to withstand this pressure from a clique associated with the ruling regime. The agency overseeing the telecom industry was forced to yield to such pressure and allocate lucrative licenses not to reputable companies, but to offshore firms created and controlled by the clique, and then allow these offshore firms to unlawfully resell licenses to international mobile operators. It is not surprising that the violation of law by the state telecommunication agency was left unchallenged by the existing judiciary and the local press, as neither of them is free from direct political control by the corrupt authoritarian regime.

It was not until the assets siphoned into offshore accounts were frozen, first by the Swiss and later by Sweden and the U.S. prosecutor’s offices on suspicions of bribery and money laundering, that the Uzbek Prosecutor General’s Office began to act, bringing charges against Gulnara’s associates and launching an investigation into her business empire. However, legal action by the Uzbek authorities has not gone beyond convicting a handful of associates, none of whom has ever occupied public office and, therefore, had decision-making powers, thus making them scapegoats for crimes in which many high-ranking public officials have been complicit but not prosecuted.

This climate of impunity for crimes of corruption remains intact in Uzbekistan, and despite the new president’s feeble commitment to institutional change, I am very skeptical about the prospects of tackling grand corruption in this country. Only the ongoing legal cases in Switzerland, the United States, the Netherlands, and Sweden create some hope that the ill-gotten assets in question, estimated at nearly a billion U.S. dollars, might prompt the Uzbek government to take at least some steps toward reforms. Without such
reforms, the socioeconomic and political development of this country will remain an unfulfilled dream.

NOTES

1. By “corruption” I mean the use of state power and respective leverages and access to resources for personal gain, while “grand” refers to corruption that involves the highest level of government and interests of the ruling elite, including heads of state, their closest associates and family members, and politically exposed persons of the highest level. I would separate corruption in the private sector into a special case.


11. Ibid.


17. “La fille du président ouzbek dans la ligne de mire de la justice Suisse.”


20. OCCRP has posted registration documents for both companies online: https://www.occrp.org/en/corruptistan/uzbekistan/gulnarakirimova/documents.html.


25. Ibid.


36. On June 29, 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice filed Case No. 1:15-cv-05063 with New York Southern District Court: United States of America v. Any and all assets held in account numbers 102162418400, 102162418260, and 102162419780 at Bank of New York Mellon SA/NV, Brussels, Belgium, on behalf of First Global Investments SPC Limiteds AAA Rate et al. On February 18, the department filed another case 1:16-cv-01257-UA: United States of America v. All Funds Held in Account Number CH140876000050335300 at Lombard Odier Darier Hentsch & Cie Bank, Switzerland, on Behalf of Takilant Limited, and Any Property Traceable Thereto et al.


38. Apart from the US$850 million sought by U.S. Department of Justice, the Dutch court has ruled in last July to confiscate 6% of shares in Ucell, which was payment-in-kind to Takilant by TeliaSonera. These shares are estimated by the court at US$135M: see “Takilant Found Guilty,” *Bloomberg*, July 20, 2016.

Chapter Four

Uzbek Political Thinking in the Third Decade of Independence

Morgan Y. Liu

This chapter asks What happens when daily life and cherished ideals clash in post-Soviet Uzbekistan? What outcomes will result from the persistent tension between the need to “get things done” and moral reasoning about how society ought to function? This dilemma is familiar to anyone living in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistanis conduct themselves according to interpersonal relations of obligation structured by enduring practices of gift-and-favor exchange. This operational logic pervades affairs in Uzbekistan’s economy, society, and politics. Uzbekistanis know that access to every valuable resource or opportunity in their republic is a matter of patronage, where law and bureaucracy usually function merely as channels of patron–client relations. Yet, the very same people can be quick to identify what they deem to be abuses of power by those in authority or inordinately excessive accretions of wealth and influence. The republic’s leadership at every level is widely seen as unjust, oppressive, arbitrary, and self-serving. In those moments, judgments appear to be informed by notions of fairness, impartiality, and the common good—that is, by non-patronal logics.

The tension described here arises from two types of expectations that Uzbekistanis have of their sociopolitical world. The first is a practical expectation about how “the system” actually works: that others will not act according to formal rules and laws, that cheating is possible and often necessary, that guarantees are best secured through personal bonds (sometimes backed by force), that government will not implement policy impartially, that the only reasonable way to procure resources is to “pressure [one’s] own patrons to milk that government for all they can while in office lest others suck the resources dry first.”1 The second is an ideal expectation expressing yearning for what is considered a more equitable and fair sociopolitical order. Many
acknowledge at some level that the world would be better if somehow a different arrangement could take hold, at least in limited spheres of life. Such utopian thinking may partly underlie the appeal that some Islamist groups have in Uzbekistan (and elsewhere), as well as the attraction many Andijonis felt toward the ill-fated circle of businesses that included Akram Yuldashev.2 One dominant feature of living in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, then, is that everyday practice continues to stand at wide variance from desired ideals. The gap shows no sign of closing, even with the 2016 death of independent Uzbekistan’s first president, Islam Karimov. What explains this situation and its consequences?

This chapter attempts to provoke a new discussion about Uzbek “political thinking” in the third decade of Uzbekistan’s independence. Political thinking refers to the entire span of concepts, sentiments, assumptions, and postures related to how authority, power, and politics in every human domain and level are understood and practiced.3 The inquiry focuses on more than formal politics, specifically the many other ways that power operates throughout society. This focus affords a view of Uzbekistan from the “ground level” perspective of the everyday. By keeping the inquiry broad to include both ideas and sensibilities, both explicitly articulated and tacitly held knowledge, the essay assembles a deep account of Uzbek understandings about how their society and government functions.

Analyzing the above dilemma in terms of this broad notion of political thinking brings certain advantages. Uzbekistanis treat the tension between practice and ideal in decidedly moral terms that are culturally constituted. That is, ideas and sentiments about politics and economics have culturally inflected moral framings that need to be understood in order to grasp a given type of political thinking. This line of analysis will lead to consideration about Uzbek notions of the leadership legitimacy and of the purpose of the state. What do they want from a good leader? What should a “good” state do for the citizenry? What kind of criteria do they use to make those judgments: is it a matter of state structures or the character of leadership? Accordingly, the chapter attempts to deduce how Uzbeks make sense of their post-Soviet predicament, rather than assuming that their desire is for a Western-style democracy. The analysis tries to avoid imposing a liberal teleology that envisions as the only desired trajectory an “open access order,”4 where resource access is governed less by personal favors and more by impartial rules, while acknowledging that aspects of such a political order are attractive to some in certain circumstances.

The expansive framework of political thinking allows us to relate the core dilemma to Uzbek notions and practices of mutual obligation. Debt and obligation, in all of their senses, form a basic mode of human relations across societies and history, structuring all kinds of complex arrangements in eco-
The following discussion will examine the core dilemma raised by daily dissonance of social logics of obligation. How is the tension between practical and ideal expectations articulated within communities and individual subjects, and does this tension create anything new? While Uzbeks pride themselves in qualities of patience (sabr or sabr-bardosh) and endurance (chidam), protracted contradictions generate novel subject positions and coping strategies.

Such research questions would be challenging to answer even when fieldwork is unproblematic. But especially since the 2005 events in Andijon, research of any kind in Uzbekistan has faced intense political, logistical, and ethical difficulties. Few outsiders have conducted extended social science fieldwork in the republic for the past decade, particularly concerning the many topics considered politically sensitive. Fieldwork impediments, which may not immediately change in post-Karimov Uzbekistan, should not stop scholars from making substantive contributions about Uzbekistan today. Historians and archaeologists, indeed, make a living through extrapolation and analogy of often limited materials, reconstructing “the past as a foreign country” (to paraphrase novelist L.P. Hartley). This study inverts this formula by pushing the limits of outsider academic knowledge about a foreign country. It contends that significant insights about political thinking within Uzbekistan can still be assembled by interpolating between an array of evidence available to a scholar working abroad, such as diaspora and émigré communities, Internet sources, and earlier fieldwork in Uzbekistan. I will leverage off of my own ethnographic fieldwork among Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan (1993–2011), my fieldwork in Uzbekistan (1996–2003), analyses by other scholars, and reportage. Synthesizing these sources, I provide frames for interpreting how ethnic Uzbek residents of Uzbekistan view politics and society, identify longer-term trends in those views, and venture tentative, though informed, characterizations of Uzbek political thinking today.

A FRAGMENTED FIELD OF POLITICAL POSTURES

The core dilemma being considered here, the persistent clash between daily life and cherished ideals in Uzbekistan, reveals several features of Uzbek political thinking today. First, opinions and attitudes about state power are nonuniform and highly fragmented. Uzbekistan’s population assumed a variety of stances regarding post-Soviet government under the harsh political realities of President Karimov. This field of differing citizen-subject positions reflects persistent tensions in how Uzbeks relate to political power.

First, there is a strong desire for “stability,” defined as the persistence and predictability of the political state of affairs, which promotes deference
to current authority figures and acquiescence to the status quo. Propaganda has certainly advanced the image of the state as indispensable to the peace, prosperity, and greatness of the Uzbek nation, in whatever ways this claim is actually believed. Especially in the immediate post-Karimov moment, anxieties about attenuated power struggles throughout the hierarchy make political predictability attractive indeed. But at the same time, Uzbekistanis experience the frustrations, humiliations, intimidations, and impediments exercised by state function (or dysfunction) on their everyday lives. These difficult encounters with the state range from the persistent lack of economic opportunities for most, perceptions of corruption among the political elite, and constant security sweeps in street underpasses, to the occasional crisis, most notably the 2005 Andijon events.

An urge for stability and security after years of uncertainty during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods is coupled with a prevalent mistrust of exploitative political elites. As a result, ordinary Uzbek citizens have developed strategies that not only enable them to secure their often meagre livelihoods but that also allow for negotiation with the regime over its rules and regulations.9 Few expect that Uzbekistan after Karimov will be significantly different on these counts.10

As a comparison, the reactions of Uzbeks living in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, to the Andijon events exhibited a similar tension. That resulted in a “kaleidoscopic” field of subject positions in the months following, whereby starkly contradictory views of Karimov existed side-by-side among family members and even within conflicted individuals.11 Even though Osh represents an increasingly divergent sociopolitical context from all of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan likely harbors a diversity of postures toward political authority analogous to those found in Osh after 2005. In both contexts, postures of cynicism, resignation, and despair are layered with variously articulated yearnings for good, moral, and just authority. As in Osh, these tensions in Uzbekistani society can exist not only between people but also within individuals who can be internally conflicted in their stances regarding how power operates throughout state and society.

The poignant paradox at the core of these countervailing tensions is that the state appears both necessary and predatory to collective life. With this paradox persisting, the experience of continued hardship, injustice, and fear within Uzbekistan produces a fragmented field of political postures and citizen-subject positions.

**UZBEK LOGICS OF OBLIGATION**

A second characterization we can make about political thinking concerns how relations of mutual obligation operate among Uzbeks and how those are
structured. Uzbeks conduct their social, political, and economic life according to distinct logics of obligation, which underlie much of what happens in Uzbek society. But what happens when actual social relations consistently fall short of ideals about how they ought to operate? That is, the same dilemma about the clash between political reality and cherished ideals carries over to everyday relations of mutual obligation. Considering the tensions of Uzbek social life may give us leverage to understand the tensions of Uzbek political life.

It is well known that patronage characterizes Uzbek society, economy, and politics. But patronage does not form an exclusive or totalizing social-political logic. Uzbeks also reckon authority and obligation in other ways, and that is where the tensions arise. An additional site to consider is the mahalla—the residential neighborhood—which offers a social logic that differs from patronage. The neighborhood is important because many Uzbeks are socialized in them and spend much, if not most, of their non-work time there (and for younger daughters and daughters-in-law, all of their day as a rule). The mahalla can also have essentialist associations with traditional Uzbek culture and lifestyle, even though that association turns out to be problematic. They are the result of political contrasts, such as against a colonial “Soviet city” or of Uzbekistan’s post-Soviet use of the mahalla as an instrument of state policy. What is most revealing about the mahalla here, however, is the distinctly dense fabric of social relations within it, characterized by informal monitoring, constant gossip, social discipline, reciprocal involvement, and mutual aid. To live in a mahalla is to conduct oneself according to a specific set of social expectations that includes certain obligations toward neighbors. The well-known practice of hashar refers to assistance or labor regularly rendered for a neighbor or the mahalla as a whole, without monetary compensation, typically involving building houses, planting trees, or maintaining water canals.

But why do residents live in the continual position of being available to render assistance in many forms to their neighbors? Part of the motivation includes the prospect of receiving needed resources and favors in the future. One gives now, one receives later in the mahalla moral economy. But more is at work than just calculated interests. A “cultural sanction” also operates that presses a strong, persistent sense of obligation toward one’s community. The open-ended expectation to contribute to the collective according to one’s abilities produces “spheres of communal participation” in Johan Rasanyagam’s term, which includes practices such as hashar. One could say that a signal feature of living in a mahalla, for better and for worse, is the ever-present expectation to participate in this sphere.
The logic of hashar works a bit differently from obligations within a patron–client network. Patronal relations of trust and debt usually require more deliberate purpose, calculation, initiation, and maintenance compared with relations among those who happen to live in your neighborhood. Patronal relations are intentional, cultivated personal relations. Communal relations involve a degree of that dynamic, but crucially also involve allegiance to the collective. That is, even though most mahalla residents know each other personally (or can locate each other personally, such as, “OK, you’re a son/daughter of so-and-so”), and normally maintain good neighborly relations, there will always also exist obligations to the mahalla that go beyond duties to individual families within it. Communal participation is driven by considerations of honor, shame, and communitas with respect to the mahalla as a whole.

Henry Hale draws a parallel contrast between what he calls patronalism and allegiance to imagined communities such as nation, ethnicity, or religious group. Taking an expansive vantage point almost as ambitious as David Graeber’s recent work on debt or bureaucracy, Hale argues that patronalism constitutes a logic that applies in various degrees to political, economic, and social relations everywhere and throughout history, taking particularly elaborate forms in the post-Soviet sphere. He writes:

Patronalism refers to a social equilibrium in which individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorizations that include many people one has not actually met in person. Patronalism, then, involves collective action based far more on extended networks of actual acquaintance than what Benedict Anderson cleverly calls “imagined communities,” such as nations, ethnic groups.

The mahalla case presents a refinement to this schematization of personal versus impersonal exchanges. The Uzbek mahalla is a face-to-face community that nonetheless involves crucial group dynamics, whereby obligations are owed to other individuals, families, and to the entire collective. So, despite being “personal” places, mahallas have modes of obligation that are distinct from patronal modes.

That distinction becomes clearer if it is mapped out spatially. The mahalla tends to diffuse obligation across its space—that is, residents live with potential demands for service that could come from literally any point within the neighborhood. Taking the experiential viewpoint of individual actors bodily located in the mahalla, it is as if obligation pervades, or is “diffused” in, the space surrounding them. By contrast, patronal networks tend to distill or concentrate obligation along definite interpersonal linkages that can crosscut
spaces and social realms. This is because those intentionally cultivated relations are fewer and involve people who are not necessarily close by. If we were to pay attention to where people are physically located and draw out linkages of obligation on a map using data visualization methods, the contrast in shape or topology between mahalla and patron modes of connection would be apparent: diffused versus distilled lines. The spatial characteristics of these types of obligation make graphically explicit the differences in how the two operate socially.

Hashar and patronage are not mutually exclusive terms, but rather two tendencies in a continuum of ways of reckoning obligation within Uzbek society. Motivations should be seen as always drawing from both modalities to different degrees. Moreover, these two logics do not exhaust the space of possibility, although I will only mention a third one briefly. Another mode of obligation concerns notions of public interest and common good, where the scope of “public” or “common” are not necessarily co-extensive with either a face-to-face community, like the mahalla, or an imagined community, like the nation. While Uzbeks seldom use abstract terms such as umumiy manfaat (general interest/benefit) or umumiy foyda (common good/gain) in everyday speech when addressing abuses of power or inequities of patronage, their concrete, situational judgments do reveal implicit understandings of such notions. These normative ways of evaluating sociopolitical reality may resonate partly from Soviet discourses of progressive society and self-sacrifice, and partly from Islamic notions of justice as divine ordering for human society. Concern for the poor, the powerless, and the disconnected is also echoed in state discourses surrounding the mahalla as an ideology-loaded bureaucratic instrument of rule in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. This discourse expresses a sensibility attentive to aiding widows, orphans, and pensioners, even if reality falls short. The point here is that ideas of fairness, impartiality, and the commonweal circulate among Uzbeks, who operate according to nonpatronal logics.

So far, this chapter has claimed that Uzbekistan is characterized by a variegated landscape of political postures and a spectrum of ways to reckon obligation. Given that landscape, what can be argued more concretely about Uzbek political thinking, such as concerning legitimacy?

HOW DO UZBEKS UNDERSTAND LEGITIMACY?

A critical part of political thinking concerns the criteria by which leadership, informal or official, is reckoned to properly hold positions of authority. What is important for many Uzbeks is not so much how a leader assumes power,
but what he does once in power. Legitimacy, when it comes to public office, is less a matter of fair elections or democratic procedure and more about the character of the leader as expressed in his actions. Uzbekistanis recognize that elections in their republic have preordained results, and that appointments to all offices proceed according to the logic of gift-and-favor exchange. Seen through Western criteria, few individuals serving in official positions in government, education, industry, or elsewhere would be judged as legitimate. But for many Uzbeks, the main issue is how the hokim (mayor or governor), rector, or director actually functions in office. What kind of people do they turn out to be in practice? Rhetoric aside, do they actually operate with some sense of the common good or only according to the interests of their own families and patronage networks? Legitimacy flows more from personhood and performance than from procedures and polls.

This kind of political thinking emerges from the contours of Uzbek social life. It is well known that Uzbek social relations are highly hierarchical around considerations of gender, age, education, piety, wealth, title, place of origin, and family reputation. These hierarchies, coexisting with more egalitarian relations among tight-knit cohorts of peers, structure much of everyday work and leisure. The formal leadership of mahallas, which reports to the city government, is officially elected, though those positions often go to those already long recognized as carrying social authority, perhaps across generations because of being from a well-regarded family. There are also those who carry authority informally in the neighborhood because of age, accomplishment, or religious knowledge. Part of my fieldwork in Osh and Jalalabad, Kyrgyzstan, involved talking to variously positioned Uzbeks regarding who is respected in the community and why. The dominant concern was not inequality as such, because social distinction and differences in power are assumed in this social landscape. Nor was the issue one of fairness about how respected individuals achieved their mantle of authority. Rather, the question was whether they were generous in investing resources to benefit the neighborhood. I heard admiring accounts of local businessmen who funded the reconstruction of mahalla mosques, who financially helped those in need, and who opened workplaces to give employment.

These sentiments of admiration were magnified when a self-appointed leader is seen as bestowing public benefit on a citywide scale. A notable example is the grand patron of the Uzbek community in Jalalabad until 2010, Kadyrjan Batyrov (Qodirjon Botirov). Batyrov had founded an Uzbek cultural center, Uzbek language press, and a university; he was organizing and funding the construction of a large Friday mosque and drama theater. Before all these highly visible projects were brought to a sudden end by the intereth-
nic violence that struck southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, Batyrov was admired by local Uzbeks for giving them a proud place in the economy of Jalalabad, and for his generous “open hand” (achik qol) that sought to benefit the entire city. Batyrov claimed that his institutions benefitted people of every ethnicity. The university, indeed, was called the Friendship of People’s University (Universitet Druzhby Narodov imeni Alima Batyrova, in Russian, and, in Uzbek, Olim Botirov nomli Halklar Do’stligi Universiteti). There is no doubt that a landmark Uzbek-dominated institution had to make its pitch in this way to be politically viable in Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless, Batyrov sought to inhabit the culturally resonant role of generous patron who worked for the common good. His Jalalabad institutions were about constructing legitimacy by demonstrating performance and personhood.

This logic of evaluating good leadership applied also on a republic-level scale, far beyond the face-to-face community. I have argued that a certain political imaginary informed how Uzbeks in Osh tended to view authority. Government leaders were admired when they displayed certain qualities of moral constitution marked by impartiality, selflessness, wisdom, courage, determination, and even ruthlessness in pursuit of the commonweal. I called this moral character-centered conception of a leader a khan figure. I have shown that Osh Uzbeks, as citizens of Kyrgyzstan, overwhelmingly viewed Uzbekistani President Karimov as a khan, a benevolent despot whose harsh ways worked for the long-term good of all people in the first two decades of post-Soviet independence.

This is not to claim that most Uzbekistanis idealized and admired President Karimov. Osh Uzbeks themselves do not all view Karimov or other leaders in this way, particularly after the 2005 Andijon events, as I have also shown elsewhere. What can be claimed is that this conception of legitimate authority forms a significant current on the landscape of diverse and shifting political conceptions among Uzbeks in both southern Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Where that current runs relatively strong, even when people reject Karimov as fulfilling the role of virtuous leader, that model remains a compelling and desired ideal as the only means for the country’s positive transformation. In other words, even if there are no real “khans” to be found anywhere on the current political landscape, only a khan, somewhere and someday, could save us. A great state leader is in this sense an ideal, virtuous Uzbek man.

What do Uzbeks across the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan border share that would produce such political thinking? There are several conditions to mention, and they are more specific than general appeals to Soviet authoritarian nostalgia or an Uzbek patriarchal “mentality.” First, there are expectations, conditioned by Soviet rule, about the state’s active, steward-like role in
Chapter Four

society and economy. The post-Soviet economic crisis and political instability are seen through this lens as the state’s withdrawal from its proper sustaining role, resulting in the initial “chaos” of quickly liberalizing Central Asian states such as Kyrgyzstan. Second, there is the understanding, conditioned by everyday life in mahalla neighborhoods, that authority is constituted by hierarchical relations representing an exchange of moral obligations. The face-to-face community of the mahalla is also seen as the site where proper persons are formed (tarbiya) within its tight moral economy and rapid information circulations, to produce the same virtuous qualities that mark a good political leader. Those qualities of character are often interpreted as being not only authentically Uzbek, but also Islamic, particularly for the Soviet-raised generation whose view of Islam tends to be more cultural and ethical. Third, there are echoes of Inner Asian paradigms of political power, whereby state authority is seen as inherently personal rather than institutional in source, and thus centered around moral exemplars rather than abstract rules or laws. These reinforce a notion circulating from medieval Islamic thought that the character of the ruler is somehow reflected in the character of his domain, whereby the land, for example, produces fertile harvests because of the king’s virtue. These conditions—Soviet expectations of the state, everyday communal experience, and still circulating old paradigms of authority—each apply in Uzbekistan today. I suggest that they condition the production of this particular character-centered conception of a legitimate ruler as a key tendency in the field of political thinking in Uzbekistan today.

While this view of legitimacy dominates Uzbek political thinking, other modes of thought are present as well. Discourses about legitimacy based on democratic practice do matter in certain ways. There are Uzbeks who care deeply about democracy, who invest and sometimes sacrifice their very lives in dissent and activism. Most visible are the muxolifa, the political opposition to Karimov’s government that lives and operates mostly in the Internet-mediated diaspora. As energetic and creative as their efforts may be, my sense is that their forms of political thinking are shared by a relatively small segment of the residents of Uzbekistan, those who are politically active and globally connected. Democracy also matters for the Uzbekistani state itself, which, like so many of its global cousins, sounds the right notes and goes through some motions to project an image of a modern democracy-in-progress. While democratic signifiers do play consequential roles on the landscape of Uzbek political thinking, that stream does not run deep in the society. The democratic focus on structures and procedures that enable routinized transparency, accountability, dispute resolution, and negotiation fails to capture how Uzbeks tend to envision politics working.
Amid Uzbekistanis' postures of acquiescence, consent, approval, fear, antipathy, and apathy with respect to President Karimov’s policies and ideology, there runs a much stronger and deeper concern about the moral quality of political authority and less about open societies, free media, participatory culture, opposition parties, checks and balances, or fair elections. A mainstream Uzbek perspective on power is concerned with the justice of leaders as an aspect of personal moral constitution. In this view, good leaders make good systems, not the other way around. The character of politics, then, is ultimately about the character of personhood.

If that is so, then a crucial purpose of the state would be understood as setting the basic conditions for the formation of proper persons in the nation. The populace, in this conception, needs to be cultivated into moral, productive citizens under the stewardship of a paternalistic authority. Similar alternative political imaginaries have been recently elaborated elsewhere. Saba Mahmood makes a well-known case for treating Egyptian women in the country’s late-twentieth-century Islamist revival as subjects seeking their own moral cultivation and to eschew Western feminist judgments that view them as duped victims of patriarchy and false consciousness. Brian Silverstein makes an analogous argument for Turkish Sufism today, whose practitioners use rigorous daily disciplines to train and inculcate “a certain kind of moral self marked by virtuous habitual dispositions, feelings, and actions.” Such political thinking is far from confined to the Islamic world. Political theorists from communitarians like Michael Sandel to pluralists like William Connolly argue for positive views of freedom that acknowledge the constitutive role of communities in forming our preferences and goals. Grasping these perspectives requires relinquishing European Enlightenment notions of polities being constituted by rational and freely choosing sovereign individuals whose preferences are presocially constituted. The preconstituted, independently choosing self appears to be a fantasy of liberal individualism and neoliberal consumerism. Western prejudices aside, though, if Uzbeks tend to view states as properly paternalistic in nature, this does not mean they relish living under oppressive or predatory control. It only means that they expect the modern state to exert a heavy, guiding presence in their everyday lives, but they wish that presence to be beneficial and salutary.

This brings the discussion back to the figure of the great, virtuous leader. Given that the late President Karimov claimed to be this kind of ruler, emanating the glow of Tamerlane, but fell tragically short in the view of most, the yearning for such an absent exemplar must be acute, especially with the post-Karimov era now begun. One might even venture that the desire for a just ruler runs more deeply and compellingly than the post-Soviet state’s
strident discourses of Uzbekistan’s world-historical exceptionalism. As appealing as those nationalist narratives might be to some of the populace, or might have been earlier, could not the notion of political virtue put to practice—fairness, judiciousness, vision, the commonweal—be even more attractive in the present circumstances, as perhaps a truer expression of Uzbek greatness?

CONCLUSIONS

Uzbeks make sense of their political and social worlds with a range of logics, characterized by a persistent tension produced by life in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. They expect everyday affairs to be conducted according to a logic of patronage (personal exchange of favors between unequals), while the people yearn for a better social, economic, and political order derived from a logic of common good (benefits fairly given to the many, including to strangers belonging to some notion of “public”). The question left unanswered for now, given constraints on meaningful fieldwork in Uzbekistan, is what will result from the continued contradictions between experience and ideal? What new subject positions—structurally articulated patterns of thought, sentiment, and perspective—and novel possibilities for political agency are being produced by the persistence of such tension in an Uzbekistan after Karimov?

Upon further reflection, though, we could ask, do people actually see patronage and fairness as being in conflict, even if they complain about it? Do they really find anything wrong with pursuing advantage for oneself and one’s own network? Is that not simply being faithful to one’s obligations, essential for remaining a responsible member of the community? Research elsewhere has shown that actors tend to complain about “corruption” when they are excluded from access, but are happy to take advantage of resources obtained from their own networks. So do Uzbekistanis want to abolish patronage, or just to be included in a better patronage network? To consider a more radical critique, are claims about the common good in fact about a very large patronage network, encompassing perhaps “the nation,” topped by the president as supreme patron? In other words, is the logic of patronage inescapable in Uzbek political thinking? Or could Uzbeks adopt a viable alternative mode of mutual obligation, consonant with Uzbek ways of being human and promoting the common good? An Uzbekistan beyond Islam Karimov may eventually find that sweet synthesis of a societal order that is authentically Uzbek and truly just.
NOTES


2. The appeal of the latter is problematic and perhaps ironic, because the employment and social welfare provided by those businesses were enabled by patronage from Andijon’s then-governor, Kabiljan Obidov, which may be why they were considered a threat to President Karimov, who then instigated the 2005 massacre as a response. Lawrence P. Markowitz, *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 100–123.

3. A more analytically accurate term for this idea is “political imaginary,” which I define and discuss in Liu, *Under Solomon’s Throne*, 13–15. However, I use “political thinking” in this chapter for its greater accessibility.


7. One notable exception that “proves the rule” is Peshkova’s study of Islamic practice in the Fergana Valley, based on fieldwork in the late 2000s that ran into intense difficulty with officials, as the book’s introduction recounts. See Svetlana A. Peshkova, *Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014).


27. Liu, *Under Solomon’s Throne*.

28. Liu, “‘Massacre through a Kaleidoscope.’”

29. This paragraph outlines one of the main lines of argument in my book (*Under Solomon’s Throne*), which develops a more complex notion of “political imaginary”
that spans ideologies, unreflective bodily practices, and all human understandings “between” concept and habit. The underlying idea is that a subject’s understandings of authority, social relations, and politics are implicated with the full range of human experience.


40. Uzbekistan’s nationalist discourses are captured and analyzed, among other places, well in Adams, The Spectacular State.

41. My claim here is bold, that the desire for a just order is ultimately preferable than for mere stability, and possibly for some, even with the costs and uncertainties of structural change. This reading differs at least in emphasis from other, more prevalent analyses that favor stability: “The Uzbek population is caught between a rock and a hard place: the status quo with its repressive and exploitative policies hardly seems more appealing than the likely dire consequences of short- (and possibly) long-term radical systemic change. From the point of view of ordinary Uzbeks who have suffered terrible hardship throughout the transformation period, however, it appears to me that many favor the former option, as it would offer them the stability and security to continue their livelihood strategies and their fragile accommodation to the ruling regime.” See Hansen, “Livelihood Strategies,” 2.

Part II

AGRICULTURE AND LABOR MIGRATION

Changing the Social Fabric
Chapter Five

Government, Cotton Farms, and Labor Migration from Uzbekistan

Russell Zanca

When Uzbekistan became an independent country nearly twenty-five years ago, its leaders remained committed to being one of the world’s leading cotton-producing states and concurrently committed to becoming self-sufficient in wheat production. In 1990, for example, about 5 percent of Uzbekistan’s irrigated lands were sown to wheat and about 44 percent sown to cotton; by 2011 it was 35 percent for each crop. In reaffirming its status as an agricultural country, Tashkent also proclaimed its willingness to diversify its crops and, hence, its potential for agrarian growth and development. Thus, more and more irrigated farmland has been planted with grains and fruits and vegetables instead of cotton.1

While the Soviet system of state (sovkhoz) and collective (kolkhoz) farms no longer exists, it would be hard to argue that Uzbekistan has transformed its agriculture by embracing non–state-interference and free-market policies for most rural inhabitants. Rather, the command-and-control approach to agriculture dispersed power and access to regional tiers of connected sovkhoz and kolkhoz leaders while continuing to be mostly unconcerned about what I will call the “peasant masses,” for lack of a better phrase. Despite the slight rebound for the agricultural sector overall that began in the late 1990s and into the first years of the 2000s, it was not nearly enough to satisfy Uzbekistan’s surfeit of poor, rural people. Thus began the flight of millions of job-seekers to Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, South Korea, and farther abroad. While we cannot say that it is the decline of Uzbekistan’s agriculture per se that directly caused the exodus we know as labor migration, it is accurate to assert that the neglect of the agricultural poor directly caused it. Over the course of twenty years, the Uzbek peasants have paid a high price for their country’s inability to develop a different sort of agriculture with training and expertise; accessibility to land, inputs, and water; and crop diversification. Government policy
largely remains a matter of resource surplus extraction; controlling resources is privileged over the value chains from products themselves.

Accurate facts and figures are not so easy to come by in terms of the sheer size of the population of Uzbekistan itself—the government has given the number as both twenty-eight million and thirty million. We also do not have reliable figures for the number of Uzbeks who live and work abroad at any one time, let alone accurate percentages of people from rural and urban areas. Furthermore, we do not know how many of those in urban areas may be recent migrants from the countryside. Nevertheless, Russia’s Federal Migration Service lists fewer than two million citizens of Uzbekistan as living within Russia, although here we do not know how many people are officially registered with rights to live in Russia and how many are residing illegally. Overall, estimates of working-age Uzbeks residing outside of Uzbekistan today range anywhere from the conservative 10.5 percent to the liberal 14–15 percent of the population. Thanks to several valuable ethnographic and demographic studies, we also know that in some districts of Uzbekistan’s primary agricultural areas, including Khorezm and the Fergana Valley, at least 30–40 percent of the working-age male population has left to search for work abroad.

While we understand that the remittances sent to Uzbekistan based on wages collected in Russia alone for 2012 totaled nearly US$6 billion (or less than 16 percent of GDP), we know that at least 25 percent of Uzbekistan’s GDP is attributable to global remittances overall. Therefore to speak of labor migration outside of Uzbekistan as a lifeline to the rural poor and the poor generally is an understatement. However, whether or not it seems contradictory, agriculture remains the number one source for income and livelihoods throughout Uzbekistan among those whom we would identify as representing the dehqonchilik—the common and poor agricultural working people of the country. Even as Uzbekistan has experienced a reinforced “feminization” of agriculture, endured a demechanization of agriculture, and seen the rise and deepening of income inequalities in the cotton-growing regions, there is little reason to think that agricultural productivity will be anything but the backbone of the rural economy for years to come.

Confirming the centrality of agriculture to the economy and common way of life, agricultural production is at least 30 percent of Uzbekistan’s GDP, and cotton fiber comprises 35–40 percent of that figure. Moreover, factored into this are secondary- and tertiary-products industries adding more to the overall GDP from agriculture.

The rest of this chapter will skim over the obvious point that the Uzbek government’s failing agricultural policies have been a leading cause of the surge in its labor migration in terms of its demographic and economic size and scope. Instead, I will focus more on the possibilities for developing an
innovative and transformative agriculture that, more than likely, would lead to greater socioeconomic freedoms and prosperity for the rural poor.

Assessing what the government has done well with regard to the system of massive cotton farms since independence includes considering at least a few measures that have been marginally beneficial—such as emphasizing and mandating wheat production, allowing greater rice production by fits and starts, practically doubling the amount of private plots (sotiks) attached to two million households, and leased lands to so-called farmers (fermer), despite well-documented and widely discussed favoritism and elitism vis-à-vis leases. While these are steps to build on, the measures and policies taken remain grossly inadequate. With its status as one of the world’s most corrupt governments (ranking 166th out of 174 in the 2014 CPI) coupled with a lower-tier ranking of medium development, according to the UN Human Development Index (114th of 186 countries), there is vast room for improvement.

Intense cotton cultivation may have allowed Uzbekistan a modest level of development for more than one hundred years, but cotton cultivation and processing needs further reduction to enable greater agrarian recovery and growth. Cotton, frankly, has not been very profitable in recent years. Inputs are high, but yields are not. The international market is volatile. Price is dependent on a single and unpredictable nonmarket factor—China’s national cotton stockpiling policy. Because cotton actually does not require the labor intensity of other high-value crops, revenues are not shared as extensively in rural areas as would occur with other agricultural products. From the early 1990s until the mid-2000s, the cotton sector lost purchasing power; only 20–30 percent of cotton fetched competitive prices. Furthermore, no other crop requires such public expenditures as cotton does. Required are much maintenance and effort—funds and time—to organize, monitor harvest, and then store, process, furnish pre-export finance, market and transport—altogether not such a successful contribution to national and rural economies.

Additionally, if we accept that most cotton work, especially harvesting, was the domain of women, then we need to know how many rural women migrated from Uzbekistan for work from the mid-2000s through the present. If these rural numbers either are substantial or growing, it may tell us something about the change in dynamics of labor-force participation in cotton work throughout the country.

The main question must become: “How is cotton work, harvesting, and earning seen as worthwhile and beneficial by rural inhabitants generally?” My argument is that it is so poorly remunerated and creates so few opportunities for annual improvement that millions of rural Uzbeks have sought earning and working opportunities elsewhere, especially over the course of the last decade.
Studies based on UN Food and Agriculture Organization data suggest that current cotton crop yields in Uzbekistan are roughly half of their biological potential. Moreover, low cotton yields are in large part attributed to poor farm incentives, insufficient irrigation water availability, unreliable input supplies, and the deteriorating quality of land—providing new farm incentives is paramount.\(^7\)

For the poorest workers, agricultural income is the most important source, though they are at high risk of irrigation interruptions, owing to factors such as wasteful delivery caused by damaged infrastructure and upstream water hoarding that lead to water shortages. The interruptions limit productivity. The most profitable agricultural products are also the most labor-intensive. These are the kinds of crops that could provide value to benefit more people. Horticultural products—fruits and vegetables—have seen a dramatic increase in prices. Farming in the Aral Sea Basin would actually be more profitable if farmers could switch to other crops; for Uzbekistan, this would be stone-fruits, tomatoes, and melons—only 10 percent of potentially irrigable land in Uzbekistan is under cultivation for the three most valuable crops.

For millennia the Syr and Amu Darya river systems have functioned as natural promoters of agriculture, but they have long been completely overused and unregulated. Radical irrigation restructuring has been advised for nearly a quarter century, and it well may be the key to Uzbekistan’s prosperity. Currently, agriculture absorbs 90 percent of the country’s water needs, and this sector’s dominance will be challenged in the near future. The problems with irrigation continue to be seepage, infiltration, and evaporation losses.

Today irrigation management is so top–down and nontransparent that its problems, while not intractable, cannot be solved easily. For example, the lack of agricultural extension services is causing a decline in agronomic expertise. Water Users Associations (also known as Water Consumers Associations) need training and participatory roles. Accessible education and training should be a government commitment as well as priority. While many experts rightly speak about the land problems (accessibility or usufruct) and demographic complexities, it is worth recognizing that water is the overwhelming constraint on future agricultural development. Water infrastructure and management must be developed. Uzbekistan is push-me/pull-me on agricultural and property reform. Simply, the state’s powerholders talk about the need for private development and land sales, but they constantly hamper the ability of ordinary and industrious people to make free-market purchases. Those in power and those tightly connected to those in power maintain strong control over free-market reforms and land sales. Thus, there is next to no free choice for most people in farming areas to make independent decisions about what to grow on land that they own, though the state continues to claim that it favors free-market reforms.
Among the ways to improve irrigation, viable alternatives include harvesting via collection, trapping, and storage, although variables such as climate change and precipitation abundance and deficit must be factored in, too. Improving crop profiles works in tandem with irrigation innovation. Zero tillage and minor tillage improve yields—in other words, they increase water productivity. Cotton planted as double-cropping after winter wheat yields higher amounts with no tillage, better than monocropping. Wheat–cotton rotation has also seen improved productivity gains.

For decades, the national discussion has centered on the depletion of water resources owing to cotton’s needs and the government’s priorities. It is also true that rice and tomato growing require more water than cotton per cubic hectare; wheat’s water requirements, comparatively speaking, are about only 30 percent of cotton’s per cubic hectare.

With nearly four million hectares under irrigation, Uzbekistan is the Central Asian country with the most pronounced water shortages; this situation is why regional cooperation among upstream and downstream Central Asian countries is key and cannot occur quickly enough. Overall, irrigation reduction should characterize the Aral Sea Basin—lower yield stability for crops. Because water use must be made more efficient, farm prices must increase as water productivity increases; Uzbekistan needs the more obviously profitable cropping combinations.

There is much less consensus on the disadvantages of Uzbekistan’s autarky as its own bread basket. The debate, so to speak, on mandated wheat production hinges on both a general cost–benefit analysis and a kind of food security and psychologically stabilizing factor analysis. The scholar Max Spoor says there are only marginal benefits from the wheat-producing strategies used since the 1990s. Growing wheat feeds more people, but it leads to little economic growth, as it is primarily used for domestic consumption. Wheat yields have been mixed as well—and income is low as a result. However, a recent World Bank report favors high grain production in the interests of food security and lower food prices domestically. Trends suggest that for Uzbekistan, successful reform must aim to increase foreign exchange earnings from cotton and maintain wheat self-sufficiency. Economic dependency on agriculture will not end for the foreseeable future because of the need for food security.

Finally, several things should be kept in mind with reference to making an impact on poverty alleviation and agricultural dynamism. First, according to data from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, women tend to benefit little in comparison to men with regard to globalizing processes. With reduced agricultural subsidies and a controlled increase of the private sector, opportunities favor men. Specifically, they benefit men with industrial skills in mechanization and those with technical educations, as well as those who
have connections to access machinery and jobs beyond villages. Accompany-
ing the decrease of government expenditures and efficiency is the tendency is to disfavor small-scale farmers, unskilled and informal workers—and women comprise a large part of these categories. Hence, in terms of drivers of change, economic and food consumption patterns, agricultural and natural resources management, land and water management and climate, the human resources condition in Uzbekistan has meant the feminization of agriculture along with the disappearance of men. In sub-Saharan Africa, this situation has led indirectly to malnutrition.

The government should not set prices for many items and products. Such intervention limits entrepreneurs, who earn more if they can arrange trade on barter terms or mutual agreements. Currently these forms of trade are discouraged because the transaction costs are too high. In such cases, there is little incentive for producers to improve—what would be the point?

To look for signs of a stronger economy in the future, there is a pretty straightforward indicator throughout society and locales: are people consuming better foods, especially nutritious and calorie-rich foods? A profusion of bakeries (I have never had trouble finding *nonvoikhona* in Uzbekistan) often indicates lower income.

THE ENUMERATED RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Improve terms of trade—increase official prices.
2. Improve incentives: farmers sell surplus to the state at an agreed price or get to market cotton individually in excess of the contracting system. Reduce state procurement contracts. More land reform.
3. Privatize farm sector activity for farm outputs and inputs. Privatize cotton gins and processors; establish farm input supply associations.
4. The system of official prices must have a floor price system (85 percent of forecast international prices). This will give farmers a choice to deal with excess on top of contracts fulfilled. Give farmers more choice in selling, securing insurance, and getting seeds and other inputs.

Extensive comparative research from China, Vietnam, Mexico, and Turkey shows that improvements for the overall wealth and benefits in agriculture for rural Uzbeks is possible, and many aspects of various countries’ models could be implemented without a cookie-cutter approach and without under-differentiating (treating different national contexts similarly because of similar crop profiles or environmental conditions).

There is a very good chance for dynamic growth in agriculture in Central Asia. It is all about reform and restructuring with innovative use of technol-
ogy. Cotton growing should be curtailed pending conservation innovations in conjunction with the development of higher-quality cotton. Higher-value commodities, such as rice, fruits, and berries, should be substituted instead. Using less water (by using water efficiently) that accords more strictly with seasonal demands in the Central Asian region could result in gains for all.

The key to generating agricultural vibrancy in Uzbekistan, especially for cotton growing, is innovation—in terms of soil health, water management, healthful international relations, especially with states bordering the Aral basin, and increasing freedoms and opportunities for energetic farmers and entrepreneurs. Those with powerful political positions in the state must be willing to allow farms to generate capital without the continued and compulsive desire to seize nearly all of it. The state’s lawmakers must consider the options and risks for the poor—the remaining pudratchi or dehqon (types of peasants and hired laborers), with regard to social services, a modicum of social welfare, minimum wages, health insurance, and so on, lest the rural poor continue to vote with their feet—as it were—by leaving Uzbekistan to work abroad.

Unlike the socialist system that limped along holding onto Uzbek agriculture until well into the 1990s, what has emerged since approximately the dawn of the new millennium is a slight dispersal of elite power. Key divides remain: between centralized elite planners in the capital and the provincial capitals, and then there are the rural agricultural elites at the district levels. Added to this is the rise of the fermer who is a more competitive and demanding producer than any seen in Uzbekistan since communism came and went. To some degree, these fermer innovate and decide independently, but they are not completely free from the demands for cotton and wheat, and their intentions may be reversed given the well-anchored state and its whims. The new gulf or chasm that emerged in terms of a class divide, or simply in terms of the rise of another layer or stratum in society that is on markedly unequal terms with what we may gloss as the three classes of Uzbek agricultural elites, involves the dehqon or common peasants. Their landlord or boss is now the farmer, and they make contracts with the farmer to harvest and deliver so much product. The farmer must supply and pay them. Depending on many factors, this can work out well, but it can also go very badly as people could continue being undersupplied and underpaid.

Meanwhile, the state clearly has little to no concern for cotton-working peasants. It is a sink-or-swim approach. This introduces perhaps a new kind of quandary for us: do we want state intervention for the peasants’ benefit? If yes, then we are asking the same corrupt and indifferent state to now change tack or redirect itself to help the least important, least-likely-to-complain segment of the population. Do we seek fairness, or simply noninterference accompanied by establishing conditions that help and enable people to prosper.
by staying out of their way and not compelling them to grow cotton instead of rice, not preventing them from accessing land, water, inputs, and markets? In the end, of course, we face the question: are the state and state power formations under Karimov capable of transforming into something less regulatory, to be innovative, to improve ecological and environmental conditions to improve agricultural productivity?

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A little over a year after this essay was written, President Islam Karimov died. Speculation began immediately over who Karimov’s replacement would be and whether or not the Uzbek government would abandon the late leader’s nationalist and authoritarian ideology and governance. While scholars and analysts are correct to consider the personality and characteristics of the next leader, the real question hinges on the evolving nature of the regime itself. While it has been just about two months since the initial transfer of power, and no one really can be sure of how Uzbekistan’s politics will affect farming and natural resources management, there does seem to be a growing sense that the new leader and Karimovite, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, may be more open to cultivating better relations with neighbors, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and liberalization of the economy overall.

The only positive signs we have at this point come from such sources as the BBC Uzbek Service and the Jamestown Foundation’s Eurasia Daily Monitor. Basically, we know that the Mirziyoyev government is willing to negotiate extensively about border crossings (easing restrictions on forms of travel and trade) as well as discussing energy issues, especially the flow and distribution of water from Uzbekistan’s respective mountainous neighbors.

How these initial talks will proceed with at times less-than-friendly neighborly relations among states of southern Central Asia remains guesswork, but, still, they are a first step. True signs, let alone commitments, to liberalization will indeed be rooted in freer borders and less regulation of cargo, goods, and stock that would normally and naturally flow back and forth among the people living in bordering areas. This is what we will have to look for carefully if and when the Mirziyoyev government ascends power and stabilizes over the course of the next year. Given the developments of the past twenty-five years, there are many reasons to be skeptical, but there are grounds at least to consider the possibility of incremental and beneficial changes that will result in the slow but steady improvement in the way of life for millions of Central Asians. Karimov’s death has every bit as much potential for a downturn in the overall fortunes of Uzbekistan’s citizens as it has potential to go in the opposite direction.
NOTES

1. If the highest amount of territory sown to cotton was recorded in 1984 with roughly 2,000,000 hectares sown to cotton, then by the late 1990s about 15 percent of that cotton-growing territory was used for other crops—300,000 hectares.

2. The gender split among migrants is roughly 83 percent male to 17 percent female. Presumably, the number of female labor migrants increases from year to year. See Federal Migration Service of Russia, June 7, 2015, http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/details/54891/.

3. The human rights groups Najot estimates that anywhere from three–five million Uzbeks work abroad at any one time, based on a population of twenty-eight million. Furthermore, the economist Bahodir Safiyev observed the following based on President Islam Karimov’s tantrum about too many Uzbeks leaving the vatan (home country/homeland) unacceptably to work in Russia as street cleaners and janitors when there were plenty of good jobs to be had at home. Safiyev, an analyst in Tashkent, said the president seemed to be contradicting himself:

“First he talks about unprecedented economic growth, rising exports and imports, and an improved investment climate. Then he complains about the existence of migrant workers and massive unemployment,” Safiyev said. “How can these problems exist if the economic figures are so high?”

Economist Bahram Abdulloyev said the reality was that much of the economy was being fed by the money the migrants sent home to their families, so it was unlikely the government would take action to stop the exodus even if it could.


4. Regarding land leasing, we also should recognize the inefficiency and disorganization that accompanied the break-up of kolkhozes, many of which were badly indebted and poorly maintained. See Max Spoor, “Uzbekistan’s Agrarian Transition,” in Policy Reforms and Agriculture Development in Central Asia, eds. Chandra Suresh Babu and Sandjar Djalalov (Boston: Springer, 2006), 183.


10. When most calories come from grains—carbohydrates—you tend to see a country that is not prospering and a population deficient in nutritional intake. Russell Zanca, “The Repeasantization of an Uzbek Kolkhoz: An Ethnographic Account of Postsocialism” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, 1999).
This chapter examines labor migration from Uzbekistan to Russia, specifically the issue of returning home. The dominant narrative says that these people will never actually go back home, but is that perception accurate? Is there a widespread practice of return? In reality, the returning-home myth and the act of returning home are two different modes of migration, not two clear-cut and opposing statuses. Therefore, migration strategies are best analyzed using the testimony of real people, who live standard lives in Uzbek society.

An analysis of Uzbek migrants’ life-stories collected in 2014 and 2015 provides an opportunity for research on the permanent deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes, including the link between imaginary and real plans of building a house. One migration scenario dominates these biographies, which is linked to collective family responsibilities and to family life cycles.

This scenario implies that migration activities intensify when there is a need to change social status. Periodically, the activities slow down: men return home for extended stays or perhaps even permanently, family members rotate with each other. In other words, migration becomes a permanent feature built into regular family cycles. This scenario is based on the concept of compulsory social responsibilities toward family, which require a temporary or permanent presence at “home.” Hence, returning home is not a sentimental feeling or sense of duty or loyalty to the homeland, but also a strict social requirement imposed by family and society.

However, this single scenario is compounded by internal contradictions, which generate multiple practices and conflicts of interests. The latter can be seen in migrant strategies as possible options, including staying, leaving, and returning, and the choice is often based not on strategic planning ahead of time, but a reaction to evolving circumstances. The chapter argues that
besides the balance of interests, debates and decisions regarding migration engender conflicts and contradictions due to the different roles and interests within a family. The balances emerging within the migration scenario framework remain unstable and have multidirectional trends, and they open the path to potentially change the entire migration strategy.

RETURNING HOME TO UZBEKISTAN²

Traditionally, researchers of migration from Central Asia to Russia focus on two key issues: what forces people to leave their homes, and how do they adjust in a new place? However, there is another aspect that is often ignored: returning to the country of origin could be defined as both a new migration and a new stage of the previous migration.

There are different interpretations of Central Asia migrants’ return from Russia. Some maintain that once launched, the migration never ends: people either leave and adjust to the new environment or keep moving nonstop. The notion of “returning home,” cited by the migrants themselves, has a mythical nature and in reality differs from the most common practice. People return to it as a rhetorical tool of an emotional or instrumental nature. However, some people still admit that the migrants’ return is not just a myth, since there is a massive reverse migration—sometimes voluntary, sometimes forced—when people end up in the countries of their origin and stay there for a while or for good. One can easily quote specific examples of return/nonreturn, entry/exit data, and survey results regarding staying/returning intentions to confirm a particular view. However, every one of these arguments has a flaw: not only is there an issue with representativity and data reliability, but a firm link cannot be established between opinions and current widespread practices, nor with the potential evolution of these practices in the future. We will never know whether a decision to return or not will be final; many years later, people may suddenly decide to go home, or, following many years at home after returning, they leave again. It seems that we have a rather permanent wave moving back and forth between Russia and Central Asia, while the very myth of return should be confirmed with examples and practices. In other words, the myth of return and return itself are just different modes of migration, not two unambiguously opposite statuses.

To analyze links between these modes, I will examine the migration practices and narratives from the viewpoint of family scenarios deemed “standard” in the country of origin. This study is based on a series of recurring interviews recorded in 2014 and 2015 with migrants from Uzbekistan in Russia and their relatives in Uzbekistan. In addition, I have used abolished
Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS) statistical data to illustrate the migration scale and the gender and age structure of migrants from Uzbekistan to Russia in 2013–2016.

**MIGRATION FROM UZBEKISTAN TO RUSSIA**

Uzbekistan is a new field for migration studies, not because of a lack of mobility in this region, but due to the forms it took, the dramatic changes in these forms, their legal status, and how migration has been discussed since the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Central Asians have always participated in labor migration. In the Soviet era there were resettlement operations within the region, and in the late Soviet period there were plans for the permanent or temporary resettlement of Uzbekistan’s labor force to other Soviet republics. These attempts took the shape of fly-in fly-out employment, service in military labor units, and group migration to a new settlement. Upon the collapse of the USSR, spontaneous labor migration began to grow. It acquired an international dimension in the 1990s and became quite large-scale in the 2000s.3

According to the FMS, by the summer of 2014, before the Russian economic crisis resulted in the steep decline of the ruble, the number of Uzbekistan’s citizens present in Russia had reached 2.5 million (another 0.2–0.3 million had migrated to other countries).4 Taking into consideration the nonstop rotation of migrants, the general number of migrants to Russia in 2012–2014 could have reached over 3 million people—that is, at least one person in roughly half of Uzbekistan’s households left to work in Russia during these three years. Mostly, those who migrated were rural dwellers, as well as small-town inhabitants, who lived in similar conditions.

Once they reached Russia, migrants from Uzbekistan tended to face a number of challenges. First, they had to acquire legal-resident status and a work permit. The application process for these documents is cumbersome, counterintuitive, and requires a great deal of effort. The Russian naturalization procedure is also very challenging. As a result, a significant number of migrants have a “semi-legal” status: they have some permits but not others, or they have acquired permits through dubious means.5 In Russia, migrants from Uzbekistan are met with hostility from the local population, attitudes that are reinforced by politicians and the media. As a result, migrants rely heavily on informal negotiations and networks, limiting their social contacts to relatives and fellow countrymen. This environment encourages these people to return home to their countries of citizenship, where their families remain.
Chapter Six

The current migration pattern is fairly routine; migrants arrive from Uzbekistan, usually without their families, and occasionally go home. This kind of migration is well studied by anthropologists in various regions of the world, and it is deemed as “transnational.” It defines the migrants’ way of life as “here and there” between different nations. Their main motivations for migration are work and income, which are unavailable in their country of origin. Earnings are regularly wired from Russia to Uzbekistan. According to the Central Bank of Russia, US$6.7 billion was sent in 2013 (likely the peak year) via banks and payment systems, which is equivalent to almost 10 percent of Uzbekistan’s gross domestic product. As various polls and interviews with migrants indicate, the migrants sent most of their money to support their families: for everyday needs, children’s education, sometimes for medical treatment; sometimes, though rather seldom, as investment capital to launch their own business in their country of origin. The main expenses funded through such remittances are socially significant ritual events (weddings, circumcisions, funerals), cars, and constructing, purchasing, or repairing a house.

Four events happened in Russia in late 2014 and in 2015 which had a significant impact on migration: (1) the economic crisis, which contracted both the economy and the labor market; (2) the depreciation of the ruble versus the U.S. dollar; (3) the introduction of new, complex legal rules for foreign nationals; and (4) increased punishments for flouting these rules, including more frequent entry bans and deportations. As a result, by spring 2016, the number of migrants from Uzbekistan present in Russia decreased by almost 25 percent over the same period in 2014, while personal remittances from Russia to Uzbekistan dropped by almost 70 percent (measured in US$) between 2013, the last year before the crisis, and 2015. These events not only caused a massive return of migrants, but also reinforced the idea and rhetoric of returning home, and many migrants changed their plans for the future.

However, we observe an ambivalent picture of the crisis. On one hand, migratory aspirations are unstable, they vacillate, and there are quick mood swings from mobility to a sedentary way of life. On the other hand, migration remains a principal strategy: people tend not to give it up completely, but instead adjust to new circumstances. In other words, we are still dealing with the same single scenario, which many people still select. However, now this scenario may be implemented in a variety of different ways.

MIGRATION SCENARIOS

A regular migration model is part of both individual and family survival scenarios and strategies in Central Asia. This kind of scenario has already been
described in a number of studies devoted to this region. They are focused on biographical cycles and rituals that require large financial expenses and, therefore, migration revenues.\(^9\)

For example, Alisher Ilkhamov wrote about the “extended or traditional family” in Uzbekistan as a typical model of family organization. Such a family consists of several conjugal couples (sometimes several households), organized along patrilineal kinship with a joint budget and defined roles for every member, usually under patriarchal norms, according to which elderly and men have priority and represent their minors and women in public life. The head of the family has a very specific set of standard duties: to marry children off, to build a house for every married son, to provide an education for his children, and to celebrate all the rituals, related to the passage from one life cycle to another. The family budget and every family member’s efforts are distributed according to this list, one task at a time.\(^10\) First of all, Ilkhamov pays attention to expenses for numerous rituals that take the bulk of family finances, confirming how socially important these rituals are, how they define the social status of the family and its members, and generate and reinforce social networks. Migration, Ilkhamov stressed, turned into an important source of new revenue for the family budget, primarily for “strategic priorities of the family budget”; that is, for the implementation of rituals that are important practices for the reproduction of social institutions, rather than daily survival. Such investments in turn reinforce the social networks, which eventually will be employed in migration.

Therefore, migration strategies can be defined as a part of family strategies, accepted in society. Prior to marriage, a child lives with his/her parents. A girl, upon marriage, moves to her husband’s home (if there are no sons in a family, the son-in-law sometimes moves to his father-in-law’s home, though this would be dishonorable for the young man). When his son gets married, a father is supposed to provide him and his daughter-in-law their “own housing.” It could be a room in the house vacated for this purpose (if there is an extra room), or a one- or two-room annex to the main house, or a newly built house sharing a courtyard with the parents’ house, or a separate plot of land acquired to build (or rebuild) a house there. Often this housing is temporary, since there is a rule that sons get married according to their age, the oldest marrying first. The youngest brother’s family moves either to the newly built rooms or to the rooms where the older brother’s family used to live, while the latter moves to a newly built or purchased house. After the youngest brother’s marriage, the oldest one “separates” from the paternal home (sometimes he doesn’t do this right away, but several years later), while the youngest stays there. If there are several sons, which is common in Uzbekistan, they take each other’s place, replacing each other several times. According to the rule,
the youngest son stays with his parents for good and inherits the paternal home, although with a caveat: he cannot make decisions about it (e.g., to sell it) without consent from his older brothers.

In the urban environment, where many people live in multifamily apartment buildings, it would be quite a challenge to build an annex or remodel housing. Therefore, the same scenario would be played over the purchase/acquisition of new apartments (including ones in other cities). If a family can afford it, they prefer to move to a set of urban houses with a shared courtyard. Of course, this general situation, which I define as a “family scenario,” is not always strictly implemented and has a great number of variations; however, it remains the ideal model. Everybody tends to follow it. It has several important components. First, men enter into marriages in order of seniority, and every marriage is the business of the entire extended family: everybody works to pay for the wedding and a house for the relative. As a result, every family/household member, not just the one getting married, accumulates his/her social capital, activates networks, and shows his/her loyalty to the community.

Second, every family member plays a very specific role, defined by age, gender, marital status, and personal skills. Other family characteristics play a role, too, including: parents (alive or deceased), number of brothers and sisters, their place in line, family-specific norms and emotional relations, and the economic capacities of every member. Distribution and even diversification of roles are designed in such a manner that everybody’s status would be accounted for and maintained to the maximum extent so that the best possible balance of general family interests would be found. Third, the social status and domestic position of family members keep evolving and going through certain stages. It is a cyclical process: as the rituals and transitions are repeated, every member of the family/household plays a new role.

I would like to stress that there was always a wide range of options for maximizing revenues and minimizing risks within the framework of the described family scenario, and these versions always matched the surrounding circumstances. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was practically impossible to acquire a new plot of land, the main family strategy in rural Uzbekistan was to increase production of the plot owned by the family/household and to secure a government job or social benefits. After Uzbekistan became independent in the early 1990s, the amount of state salaries and benefits was drastically reduced, and the family strategy switched to focus on expanding private revenue sources, including those coming from private plots of land, which became easier to acquire under capitalism.11 In the 2000s, the domestic labor market could no longer satisfy family needs, and many families turned to labor migration to Russia and other countries to diversify revenue
sources. Although migration required new daily practices, it fits perfectly into the same scenario. A migrant who moves to a foreign country does not simply earn money for himself or his family, but also fulfills a very specific social duty toward his family and community, showing his skills, loyalty to the accepted rules, and willingness to follow a preset scenario, including the expenses and consumption scenario.

Though this scenario is quite flexible, it is not free from conflict, since in every given case there are negotiations and decisions regarding who goes and who stays, when a migrant should return, how to use the migrant’s remittances, and how to mitigate potential migration risks. Delia Rahmonova-Schwarz, who writes about different versions of links between family and migration scenarios using data from all the countries of Central Asia, has identified several types of migrants. For example, the oldest son usually takes on the responsibilities of a “family savior” and “father’s deputy,” while the youngest (or only) son must divide his efforts between his parents and his own family, while daughters are not guided by economic motives and instead try to avoid family conflicts.12 Madeleine Reeves, who studied the Sokh district of Uzbekistan, also wrote about the “expectation of proper performance of family duties” (particularly, the duties of the son- and daughter-in-law) within the context of migration of a local population. She stressed the resulting tensions: moral expectations might not match material ones, different functions may not be compatible between a son and a husband, a daughter-in-law and a wife, for whatever reason, causing arguments and conflicts and a transformation of the very concept of family.13

Hence, this scenario includes the conflict of different positions, a conflict between the strategies of “leave” or “stay”; the conflict between moral duties and the logic of rational calculations of revenues and losses. All these contradictions sometimes get aggravated, and sometimes they normalize. The set of risks and opportunities, duties, and freedom of action may vary significantly, they could be either more or less balanced or asymmetric. Next I will provide several basic scenarios, when the migrant’s role is played by different people: father, son, and mother. These scenarios are based on research I have done.14

Option 1a: Son Migrates

Former FMS statistics, which include the age and gender of the Uzbekistan citizens who were in Russia in 2014, shows that almost 47 percent of them are young people between eighteen and twenty-nine years old (12 percent are women), which converts to 1.2 million people. Their share grew from 30 percent up to almost 50 percent for the period of 2013–2014, then in early 2016, it dropped down slightly to 45 percent. This category includes young
people of premarriage age or who emigrated immediately after entering into marriage, while they are still living with their parents, according to Uzbek tradition. This category comprises the largest group of migrants, who I notionally define as “sons.”

Anthropologists sometimes describe the voyage of young men to work abroad as a rite of initiation, as proof of their adulthood and masculinity. However, the migrants and their relatives gave other reasons for this voyage. One of them is that “everybody (friends, neighbors, etc.) does it” or “to see the world.” In this case, the main stress is put on a show of courage by a young man, his social fitness, and self-sufficiency/maturity. The second motivation for a son is to earn money for the family, to assist his parents and brothers. Often his migration is the result of a collective economic decision, when a father is still physically fit to work, and the mother, brothers and sisters are able to earn money in the country of origin, while the young man has neither professional skills nor a stable income at home. The migration of an unmarried or just-married son would not disrupt the regular economic activities of the household or the observation of public commitments to society (for example, participating in rituals), nor the reputation of the family, since all of these duties would be fulfilled by other family members, principally by the father.

Whatever the reasoning, the person designated to migrate is not strictly predetermined by a set social role and can be quite flexible, depending on the circumstances. Two cases demonstrate this logic.

At the time of his interview, “Bobur” had just turned twenty-one–twenty-two, and he was working as a loader/packer in St. Petersburg. His family lives in a Ferghana Valley village and has six members: father, mother, and four sons. Bobur is the eldest son. His father and brothers work in the private construction business; they rent a plot of land and grow potatoes to sell; they raise cattle; and they serve as private drivers using their family car. The family has many sources of income, and Bobur’s remittances provide additional support. Answering the question of whether his father would like to become a labor migrant, Bobur was emphatic: “There no need, my contribution is sufficient. There is plenty of work over there.” Bobur left for Russia in 2013. Prior to the fall of the ruble in late 2014, he was able to wire home US$500–US$700 per month though he was not making much money: about 30,000 rubles per month, but he was very frugal. The family used these remittances to buy new cattle to resell a year later. When asked what his remittances are used for, Bobur said that the first priority was the renovation of the parental home, which was almost complete. Next comes the purchase of a new car and the construction of a new house for himself. Bobur specified that his father managed the budget: “He is the boss, he knows what to do.” When asked about his plans, Bobur prevaricated: “I might get married soon, I might go home, I might come back after the wedding.” He tried to hide his own self-
ish interests behind the rhetoric of his duty to assist his parents and younger brothers. The youngest brother is eighteen years old, and Bahodyr does not want him to come to Russia for work: “We don’t need the money, it should be better for him to study in a university.” Though Bobur graduated college with honors, he stresses that it would be too hard on his parents to pay for his continued education; therefore, as the oldest son, he is supposed to help his younger brothers. Meanwhile Bobur’s father (he is forty-three–forty-four years old) says the opposite: “The short-term plans of the family are to get Bobur married and to build a separate house for him. We save money for this purpose. Then we would do the same thing for our other sons (in our situation, everybody should live separately).” The head of the family also mentioned that he had planned to go to Russia himself, but Bobur went there “instead of him.” Bobur believes that he will eventually return to Uzbekistan, and one of his brothers will replace him.

“Bahodyr” is also from a Fergana Valley village, and he is twenty-three–twenty-four years old. He came to Russia in 2011, where he works on a construction site in St. Petersburg. He was making 25,000–30,000 rubles (about US$1,000) in 2014, wiring home US$500–US$700 each month, and used to travel home every year. In 2015, after the depreciation of the ruble, he found a job for 50,000 rubles (US$700) per month and intends to stay in Russia. His family has eight people: father (fifty-one–fifty-two years old), mother, three sons (Bahodyris the youngest), as well as the oldest son’s wife and daughter. All of them live together, sharing the same courtyard. The father, who graduated college, has a large plot of land where he grows cotton and other produce. The eldest son is also a college graduate; he works with his father. The middle son studies at university. Though the father claims that the family material needs are taken care of, Bahodyr, encouraged by a friend, asked the father to let him go. The family plans to buy a car for the father, to build a house and buy a car for the oldest son, and to marry the two other sons. Bahodyr believes that in two years, he will be able to buy his own car so that he can work in Uzbekistan as a private driver. He doesn’t need a separate house since he is planning to stay with the parents. All these goals are seen as a common task: “My brother builds a house and I/we should help him.” “My brother will also help me. When I’m going to buy a car, he will help. If I decide to build a house, he also will help.”

Option 2: Father Migrates
As I mentioned earlier, Bobur’s father did not rule out the possibility of his own migration to Russia; however, he eventually decided to send his oldest son there instead. This shows that the son-migrant option was more convenient in this case. However, there are many cases in which the father-migrant option prevails.
According to FMS, the ratio of 18- to 29-year-old male Uzbek citizens working in Russia to 30- to 39-, 40- to 49-, and 50- to 59-year-olds would be roughly 2:1, 3:1, and 10:1, respectively. Older men rarely migrate, since they already have an established profession, job, and social network in Uzbekistan. Besides, they do not need to prove their masculinity and maturity. There are also risks for older men: if he migrates and leaves his wife alone with the kids at home, it might lead to a conflict or tensions between his wife and her mother-in-law, his own relations with his wife might deteriorate, or he might lose control over his growing children. In order to avoid these problems, he would need to ask his relatives to take care of his family, to help keep the household in order, and to represent family interests in public life. However, if the senior relatives are gone or they are too busy with their own lives, such a request might create problems and imply additional responsibilities in response. In other words, the father’s migration, despite the financial benefits, becomes a heavy social burden. Still, many families resort to this option when there are no other sources for the family budget. Two examples show that paternal migration fits into the regular migration pattern.

“Shuhrat” is a rural teacher. At the time of the interview, he was forty-one years old. He has a wife, two sons, and two daughters. The oldest son is seventeen years old and would soon graduate high school. Before the collapse of the USSR, Shuhrat served in the Soviet Army, and his unit was deployed in Russia. After his military service, he went back to Uzbekistan and never left the country again. He got married, built his house with the help of his brothers, and created a separate household. While his kids were young, expenses were relatively low. Both he and his wife worked (he was a carpenter in a private business, she worked at a factory), they had a plot of land and cattle, and the family’s needs were met. However, as the children grew up, the need for an additional income emerged. “The children are growing, expenses are rising, we are running out of money. And we still need to pay for their education and marriages, and fix the house.” According to Shuhrat’s calculations, the period for major expenses will last about ten years.

Shuhrat admits that he cannot save a large amount of money in a short period of time with his traditional income. He believes it would be wrong to ask his father and two brothers for help: the parents are elderly, while his brothers live in separate households with their own children and expenses. Since his oldest son is too young, Shuhrat decided to migrate for work himself. His first time was in 2014. He worked construction in the Moscow region, making roughly US$1,000 per month, and wiring home up to US$800 per month. Shuhrat said that he migrated with the consent of his parents, and sends them a part of his remittances. This reminds us of the migrant son option, indicating not only the preservation of family ties with the parents, but
also at the crucial role of the father as the head of the family, while Shuhrat is absent. Shuhrat sees his work as seasonal (he intended to go home for the winter months) and rather optional: “I will earn what I can and will not break my back.” During this conversation, Shuhrat’s wife hinted about her quarrels with her husband and let him know that he should stay in Russia as long as possible to make money for his family.

“Umid” is another example. At the time of the interview he was forty-seven years old. He lives in a village, but his parents were considered local intelligentsia, and he graduated from college. In the 1990s, he was a Russian-language school teacher (though he tried to start his own business) and got married; now he has three sons and a daughter. His father died rather young, and Umid, as the youngest son, stayed with his mother. The older brother and his family live separately, while the sisters got married. Umid claims that he makes enough money to support his family, though his wife Shahnoza (who is also a school teacher) said that in the mid-2000s, the family’s situation became challenging. The plot of land didn’t bring them any revenue, they had no cattle, and their salaries were low. Meanwhile, friends and neighbors gave them other ideas: “If you look around, you can see that somebody buys a car, somebody else builds a house, somebody helps his sister, somebody tries to improve their parents’ living conditions.”

In 2007 their oldest son turned fourteen years old. With college tuition and wedding expenses looming on the horizon, Umid left for Moscow. He first worked construction and later as a plumber, sending home US$500 per month and visiting home every year. The revenues were used to remodel the house and buy a car. Umid had borrowed money to remodel the house and buy a car and paid it back with his remittances. He left his family in Uzbekistan, expecting that his mother (who died in 2012) and relatives would help. He used to call them regularly to monitor the state of affairs at home. Later, the father was joined by his grown son, who worked as a street-cleaner in Moscow. After a year of work, the son was sent back home to help his mother and continue his studies in college. Umid said that he didn’t want his son to stay in Moscow, though he would not rule out the option of his eventual return to Russia in order to find a good job.

Option 1b: Brother Takes over Father’s Responsibilities

Let’s step back from Option 2 (fathers) and go back to the sons. It is important to note that the separation of the oldest son from the household does not automatically imply his full financial and social independence. While he now manages his own budget and daily lifestyle and acts as an independent figure in the local community, he does not sever ties with the parental family: the
oldest son is supposed to be involved in every event of the “parental family” and its funding, and, when necessary, the father may reserve for himself the right to represent his son’s interests in public life. Marriage and the construction of a separate home are not the only stages of a son’s separation from his father’s home. Other rites of passage include the circumcision celebration for his own first son, which take place five to seven years after the boy is born.

In some cases, sons take upon themselves the responsibilities of their fathers, fulfilling duties toward the “parental family.” These duties are perceived from the father’s point of view, who for some reason is absent. This mingling of roles might be related to some kind of unfavorable circumstance and lead to complications and conflicts of interests with their own and other relatives’ interests.

“Jurabek” had these duties thrust upon him unexpectedly. Initially, he planned to migrate as the oldest unmarried son. The family consisted of Jurabek’s father; mother; Jurabek; an older sister, who is married and lives separately; and a twenty-one-year old younger brother. Jurabek is twenty-three–twenty-four years old and is based in a small town. He graduated college, but could not find a job matching his professional skills and ended up helping his father run his bicycle shop. In 2013, Jurabek went on a short trip “to see Moscow” and briefly worked in a café. In 2014, he went back to Moscow for permanent employment as a cook. At first, the parents were opposed to his departure, but they later gave their consent. He was making up to 40,000 rubles (about US$1,100) per month out of which he wired US$700 to his parents. His twenty-one-year-old younger brother was also a migrant laborer, working as a cashier in a shop in Moscow, since his parents are still physically fit and can take care of themselves.

Jurabek stressed that he did not want to depend on anybody and wants to provide for himself, make his own career, and live by “modern” standards. However, when talking about his fellow migrants, he said: “They only have one thing on their mind: to earn money, to get married, to buy a car. That’s it! They want to stay there [in Uzbekistan]. I know many guys who earned money, got married, and stayed there. . . . Maybe in a year or two they will come back [to Russia]. But for the near future they will stay there.”

In 2015, Jurabek’s father, who was just fifty-seven, suddenly died. This event prompted both brothers to return to Uzbekistan for the funeral and mourning rituals. Jurabek became the oldest man in the family, essentially taking his father’s place. In a new interview conducted in 2015, he was not sure about going to Russia, mentioning the economic crisis, the declining revenue (“It’s no fun anymore”), and the expensive trip, as well as the challenges of moving up professionally in a foreign country. He stated his plans as follows: “If I find a decent job here [in Uzbekistan] and can make a good career, I will not leave. First of all, I need to settle down here.”
of independent choice conceals his efforts to follow the guidelines of the standard scenario. Since Jurabek is not married, he cannot become the full-fledged head of a family. Therefore, his primary goal is to get married and have children. After that he would be free to develop his own plans. At this stage, the guardian role was assumed by a maternal uncle, the only adult man among Jurabek’s closest relatives. It is his responsibility to find an appropriate bride for Jurabek and help with funds for the wedding.

The case of “Ravshan,” a distant relative of Jurabek, is more complicated. Formally, his family has eight people: his father, his mother, himself, his wife, their little son, his two younger brothers and a sister. He is twenty-six–twenty-seven years old. Last year, his father worked as a locksmith, his mother was a housewife, and Ravshan worked at a gas station. In 2005, his father left for Russia to work, and Ravshan joined him in 2007. He worked with his father in Magnitogorsk and Moscow. He was a driver making good money, often wiring home US$1,000 per month. This money was used for his sister’s wedding and to construct a new house adjacent to the parental one. Ravshan married in 2011 and lived in Uzbekistan for a year, working again at a gas station. At that time, the issue of the middle brother’s marriage was raised, implying that Ravshan should “move out”; that is, buy a separate plot of land and build his own house (“these are our traditions”). He went back to Magnitogorsk, and then moved to Moscow, making roughly 40,000 rubles (about US$1,100) per month and wiring home US$400. The fall of the ruble in late 2014 forced him to look for a new job more actively, and now he makes more money, claiming that he wires home US$1,500 each month.

His case is particularly complicated, since Ravshan’s father met a local woman in Russia and de facto abandoned his family (most likely because of a conflict with the wife’s relatives). They are not formally divorced, but the father doesn’t stay in touch with Ravshan’s mother and has no desire to go back, since he no longer regards his house in Uzbekistan as his “home.” Ravshan’s family pretends that the father remains the head of the household and is absent because he is working in Russia fulfilling his paternal duties. However, Ravshan took the father role upon himself, as the oldest man in the family, and followed the basic scenario. He sent his middle brother to work in Moscow and manages his revenues. Ravshan’s plans for the future include the circumcision event for his son, which would require great expenses, efforts to help his brothers to manage their lives, and building his own house. Ravshan says that he is going to arrange for his brothers’ marriages (“I am the oldest one, I am supposed to”). Meanwhile, he still hopes that his father will return and become involved in household matters. He is vague when talking about his future: “We’ll see what will happen, I don’t know,” though stressing that the family is going to need a lot of money, and he wouldn’t be able
to earn so much in Uzbekistan ("I would work forever, it is difficult, it is hard to the oldest one at such a young age.") Ravshan would like to get Russian citizenship to facilitate his search for work.

**Option 3: Mother Migrates**

A less common scenario is a mother’s labor migration to Russia. There may be different reasons behind female migration. Some researchers believe that it is a forced migration, that women only leave when family survival is at stake. Others note that female migration is not only a way to help the family at home economically, but it can also be a result of her desire to be independent in her own home, to raise her social status, and to look “modern.”

Female migration from Uzbekistan is rather minimal. According to FMS data, in 2014, out of 2.5 million Uzbek nationals in Russia, about 0.4 million were women—16–17 percent. (In early 2016 they were up to about 19 percent.) Among them, women between the ages of eighteen–twenty-nine and thirty–thirty-nine were the largest demographic groups—and almost equal in size—those between the age of forty–forty-nine were in the ratio of almost 1:2 in comparison to the youngest group, while those between the age of fifty–fifty-nine were 1:4/5. These numbers show that female migration does not fit completely to the described family and migration scenario.

At first glance, female migration could be very beneficial: usually their contribution to the household budget is not significant, and women have no responsibility to represent their family in public life. However, the small share of women migrants can be explained through the high reputational risks it brings for her relatives. According to local perceptions, this attitude is “wrong” and unladylike, and it has an impact on the status of both the woman and her relatives, significantly decreasing the chances of her children on the matrimonial market. Besides, female migration, particularly from the rural areas, where women do not have the professional skills required in the Russian labor market, do not speak good Russian, and have limited access to male-dominated social networks that could help her find a job and adjust to life in a foreign country, does not bring significant financial revenues.

Still, female migration exists, and there are several categories of it. Well-educated urban women can find a job with a salary comparable to that of men, and in this case, financial success can make up for a loss of reputation. Divorced women are more willing to migrate, since in Russia they have a better chance to provide for themselves (and even find a new husband) than at home, where due to the lack of a breadwinner, they end up in a challenging situation, especially since their reputation is already “tainted” by divorce. Finally, the migration of a woman together with her husband or with some
other close relative is considered unacceptable—in addition to being harder to find a job, there are more expenses for food and housing, and the issue of children is becoming more problematic.

The cases of sisters “Nigora,” “Dilbar,” and “Aziza” provide different reasons for female migration. They grew up in a regional capital city in a Russian-speaking environment, their parents were educated, and they graduated from college. Their parents are long gone, and each sister has her own family and children. All three of them left for Russia after the age of forty; they work as nannies and make decent money.

I can’t say much about Dilbar, since I did not get a chance to interview her, but the two other sisters said that she was the trailblazer and initiated their move to Moscow. Her reason for migration, according to the sisters, was not financial, but was the result of a “difficult” divorce,” “depression,” wanderlust, and a desire for a change of scenery.

Nigora was the second to leave. She is fifty-four–fifty-five, graduated from a medical school, got married in the 1980s, has three children, and used to work as a physician in a hospital. She left for Russia in 2003, when the hospital closed and she lost her job. By that time her sons were twenty and twenty-one, her daughter was fourteen, and they stayed at home with her husband, also a physician, and her mother-in-law. As a reason for migration, Nigora mentioned the fact that her children were growing up, and the family needed money for college tuition. The other reason was their plan to buy an apartment in Tashkent for their oldest son. In 2007–2008, Nigora returned to Uzbekistan, but later opted to go back to Moscow. Her husband joined her this time and became a foreman at a construction site. The money they earned was used to pay for the weddings of all three children and the circumcision festivity for their oldest grandsons. None of the children migrated. Nigora explains it as their “patriotic feelings”; besides, she was opposed to their migration, believing that her sons should take care of their families. The husband worked in Russia for four years and returned home, while Nigora stayed and continued to work in Moscow. She is proud of her earnings, although she stresses that this is family money, not hers. She manages all the expenses along with her husband, but as the “head,” it seems like her word is the decisive one. Even though her children earn their own money, she continues to work in Moscow, occasionally visiting Uzbekistan. She says that she must help the youngest son, who is still not financially independent. Nigora intends to return home for good and live with her grandchildren and husband. However, she delays this decision because “there is an element of excitement. There is always a temptation to start a new job and get an extra source of revenue. There is always something else, which requires additional funding: a new car, housing renovation. Though, I still miss home.”
Chapter Six

Option 4: Mother and Father

Nigora’s case shows that although the mother’s migration was a central collective and individual strategy, both the father and mother worked in Russia together for a while. In fact, family migration was not only quite acceptable, in some circumstances it might even be preferable.

Aziza was the last of the three sisters to come to Moscow, arriving in 2006–2007. She is now forty-nine–fifty. In her own words, she was “liberally educated” and in the late 1980s married on her own accord. Aziza moved into a huge house that belonged to her father-in-law and lived with her husband’s relatives. She didn’t work outside the home and gave birth to a son and two daughters. In approximately the year 2000, Aziza moved to Tashkent along with her husband and children, where they rented an apartment. Her husband started a business with his brothers, and Aziza again stayed at home. However, the business failed, they lost money they had invested, and they had to go back to the regional capital from which they came. According to Aziza, her husband was indecisive and could not run the business or make arrangements to return home. Therefore, when her sister suggested that Aziza to move to Moscow, she decided to give it a chance.

The first migration attempt was unsuccessful. Aziza “cried all the time,” and she went back to Uzbekistan “for good.” Yet half a year later she was back in Russia, where she has worked as a nanny ever since. Her husband and children eventually joined her, and worked there for a while. They even rented a apartment. In 2008, they were able to afford a major overhaul of the “paternal house” in Uzbekistan, pay for the oldest daughter’s wedding, and pay for their children’s college tuition. Aziza had borrowed money and paid it back with her own income. After a while, the children returned to Uzbekistan. Aziza’s relationship with her husband in Russia grew strained: they are still formally married but live separately. The husband does not work, and Aziza pays for all the children’s needs (“I count on myself only”). Like her sisters, she wants to go back and live in her own home, and she also hopes to reestablish her relations with her husband one day. However, so far she doesn’t see a real opportunity to return, since her son doesn’t earn much in Uzbekistan and cannot provide for his upcoming expenses, which include his own marriage as well as his sister’s wedding.

“Nargiz” is another female migrant. At the time of the interview she was fifty-four–fifty-five years old. She lives in a regional capital city, is a college graduate, and worked as a children’s daycare director for a long time. She and her husband built two houses with one shared courtyard—a symbol of high status and prosperity. She described it as “gracious living.” However, problems began in the late 2000s. The husband got sick and needed expensive treatment. “Ulugbek,” their college-educated only son could not find
a job with a good salary. The daughter-in-law, who arrived in 2001, was mostly taking care of her small children and needed money herself. These factors forced Nargiz to move to Moscow for work, while her son went to work in Turkey. The husband died in 2013. The son returned home, but later, at his friends’ advice, went to Russia, where he now works as a taxi-driver. Although he assured his family that he would send money home, Nargiz stated that not only could he not afford to do so, he always needed financial support in order to settle down in Russia. As a result, Nargiz went to work in Kemerovo, Russia, leaving her daughter-in-law at home alone to take care of Nargiz’s grandchildren. Nargiz said that she needed money to pay back the debts she had borrowed. In 2014, she returned home to take care of her grandchildren, while her daughter-in-law went to join her husband in St. Petersburg, where she worked as a cashier in a store, earning 40,000 rubles (about US$1,100).

Nargiz says that the situation grew quite dramatic:

When my daughter-in-law joined my son, we decided that she would wire me her income, while Ulugbek’s salary would be used to pay for their food, housing, etc. She sent her first paycheck, and literally several days later, she called me to say that Ulugbek had failed again. I replied that since they can’t make it, I would either send the children to St. Petersburg or to the daughter-in-law’s parents, and that I would leave for Moscow, since I am capable of providing for myself and would not ask for money.

After debating the different options, the family decided that Nargiz should move to St. Petersburg along with the grandchildren so that the family would be together. Ulugbek said that “it would be better to work hard for two years in one place and go back home.” A year later, this plan had failed. Nargiz found a job in Uzbekistan, while the daughter-in-law left St. Petersburg to take care of the children.

There is no statistical data available on married couples working together in migration. According to a 2010 poll conducted among Uzbekistani women, this was the most common practice, comprising almost 70 percent of all female migrants. When we extrapolate the 2010 data (no matter how notional it is) to the FMS data in the year 2014, there would be 240,000 married migrant couples, men and women between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine. This means that about 13 percent of all men of this age came with their spouses (in early 2016, there were 180,000 spousal couples, or 14 percent). Hence, while it is a prevailing option for female migration, overall females do not comprise a large portion of the labor migration population.

All the examples of female and family migration in one way or another imply domestic hard feelings and conflicts, as well as a greater uncertainty
regarding future plans. The short-term joint residence of women in Russia more or less fits into the scenario that I consider to be the main one. It happens when a family needs to maximize its income in a very short time. Long-term use of this option is typically a reaction to a key source of tension within families—the inability of men to fulfill their duty for some reason. A solution for such a conflict is actually an extension of migration, and, as a result, the creation of a new scenario.

CONCLUSION

I believe that we can identify a prevailing scenario in Uzbek migration to Russia that is defined by collective family responsibilities and is linked to the cycles of the family biography. It is because of this link that migration quickly grew popular and involved not only poor, needy people, but also a more prosperous segment of the population that already makes sufficient money to cover daily needs in Uzbekistan.

This scenario implies an intensification of migrant activities when families need to change social status, carry out significant rituals, or build a house, which is an element and symbol of a family’s social status. Periodically, activities decline, migrants return home (briefly or permanently), or one family member takes the place of another. Migration is built in into family cycles and acquires a permanent nature. Its ultimate goal, which is formulated at every specific stage, either becomes a reality or is replaced with a new goal.

This scenario is built into family cycles and responsibilities, and it is based on the idea of fulfilling specific social responsibilities toward the family. Therefore, “returning home” is not simply a distant emotional feeling and sense of loyalty to the country of origin, but also a strict social requirement imposed on a man by family and society. This obligation is reinforced by moral and material coercion, while it predetermines the way people explain their decisions and plans. At the same time, this scenario implies by default that personal plans should never be acted upon, that a new goal will replace the achieved one, and that society has permanently transitioned from a sedentary way of life to a highly mobile one.

While talking about a specific scenario, we should also recognize any inner inconsistencies, which shapes the many practices and conflicts of interest.

Diversity is not reduced to age, gender, education, and place of residence. It has other important dimensions. For example, there are the different practices for investing earned money, scheduling migrants, duration, and defining the moment of when migration should be terminated or resumed. All this diversity is represented in migrant strategies as possible situations of choice,
including the decisions to stay, leave, or return, which are often dictated not by strategy or by predetermined plan but by circumstances, such as size of income, level of prices at the market, incapacitation or death of a family member, and each member’s personal interests. All of these issues are continuously debated as people look for the best choices, decisions that would preserve the family balance and the general scenario, which would imply the incorporation of migration into the general family strategy. The decisions about who should migrate, who should stay, who should return, and who should be replaced are made jointly.

In this scenario we see not only striving toward a balance of interests, but also contradictions and conflicts—sometimes hidden, sometimes open. These conflicts are about defining roles and characters, about who should be the “father,” who should be the “son,” and who should fulfill the duty of the “youngest brother.” These roles are not always self-evident and predetermined; they can be challenged or combined. These conflicts are about which option to choose: why in one case it is the “father” or “mother” who leaves, and not the “son”; why there is an issue of the “father and mother” leaving together, how the “father” and “son” should explain the fact that it is the “mother” who migrated. Every role or archetype has his/her own interests, which should be measured against other family roles, while discussing all of the benefits and risks. Everybody works on overcoming emerging contradictions, but they are not always successful. There are examples when a family’s instability is aggravated, when the distribution of remittances is shifted, when remittances become a type of permanent assistance, instead of being a way to reinforce the family, and the trips between countries become less regular.21

I believe that the current migration scenario in Uzbekistan is prevailing now. I think that there is no need to explain it with the “traditionalism” of the society and immutability of some of its cultural norms. It is quite the opposite: we see a permanent transformation in the lives of people, the very migration pattern of 2000–2010 was a quite a radical change of practices and relations in comparison to what used to be, for instance, in the 1960s–1990s. Back then, the government tried to limit migration to perpetuate the cotton monopoly, using coercion as well as generous social benefits and the development of social infrastructure, such as health care and education. Only in the 1980s did the government begin to debate plans to relocate the “excess population.” In the 2000s, the mechanisms that had previously thwarted mobility ceased to operate, and regular migration became an important source of revenues; however, it was still insufficient and too unstable to fully provide for a household. In every decade, local community interaction with the Soviet or neoliberal order led to the reinvention of “traditions,” the redistribution of family roles, new definitions of what is allowed and what is taboo, and
the shifting of social hierarchies. The emerging balances always were and still remain unstable and contradictory, fraught with competing trends. How long the current balance of family scenarios and migration strategies will last depends on multiple circumstances, and new changes might happen quickly and on a large scale.

NOTES

1. An extended version of this chapter was previously published as Sergey Abashin, “Vozvrashchenie domoy: semeynye i migratsionnye strategii v Uzbekistane,” Ab Imperio, no. 3 (2015): 125–65.

2. This chapter is based on research conducted by the European University at St. Petersburg as a part of the “Transnational and Translocal Aspects of Migration in Contemporary Russia,” funded by the Russian Science Foundation (Grant No. 14–18–02149).

3. There are few general studies of migration in the post-Soviet Uzbekistan, since they are not encouraged in the country of migrants’ origin. See, for instance, E. Abdullaeva, ed., Trudovaya migratsiya v Respublike Uzbekistan: sotsial’nye, pravovyye i gendernye aspekty (Tashkent, 2008); Lyudmila Maksakova, “Uzbekistan v sisteme mezhdunarodnykh migratsiy,” in Postsovetskie transformatsii: otrazhenie v migratsiyakh, eds. A. Zayonchkovskaya and G. Vitkovskaya (Moscow: Tsentr migrationsnykh issledovaniy, 2009), 323–49.

4. Statistics were regularly uploaded and updated at the abolished Russian FMS website: the data regarding foreign nationals on the Russian soil disaggregated by sex and age (according their nationality) are available at http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/, last accessed March 20, 2016. Unfortunately, the materials are not available for open access at the moment.


14. In my research among Uzbekistan’s citizens, I have never found the option of a daughter-migrant, although it probably does exist.


16. The true names and places of residence will not be disclosed in this chapter.


Chapter Seven

Establishing an “Uzbek Mahalla” via Smartphones and Social Media

Everyday Transnational Lives of Uzbek Labor Migrants in Russia

Rustamjon Urinboev

Uzbekistan became an independent state in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike the leaders of other newly independent states of the former USSR, Uzbek authorities made it clear from the beginning that the “big bang” or “shock therapy” approach to transition was not suitable for them.¹ Instead, Uzbekistan adopted a “gradualist” approach, following Uzbek authorities’ decree that Uzbekistan would find “its own path” to political and economic independence.² Uzbekistan remained dependent on imported consumer goods, currency controls, and the exploitation of rural labor. The authorities were aware that a rapid transformation of the economy would affect the lives of millions, probably leading to social unrest. Hence, the Uzbek model of transition clearly reflected the concerns for political stability and the peculiarities of the post-planned economy. Preserving economic stability and social and political order became the overarching rationale for rejecting all manner of economic and political reforms recommended by international institutions and for developing a strict border regime.³

As a result of these gradualist policies, Uzbekistan’s cumulative decline in GDP between 1989 and 1996 was the lowest of all the former Soviet republics. Although the gradualist approach to transition helped prevent a sharp loss of output and consequential rise in unemployment and social unrest during the early years of transition, by 2000 it became evident that the economy had become stagnant.⁴ This was largely due to active government intervention that created significant administrative barriers and a high tax burden, thereby causing high transaction costs for national business and fueling the informal economy.⁵ As Kandiyoti maintains, the partial market reforms that the government implemented in pursuit of stability paradoxically resulted in inefficient resource allocation and widespread corruption that required
increased recourse to coercion. These developments eventually led to a significant retrenchment of the welfare state in Uzbekistan, since the tax revenue was very low compared with the scope of social welfare programs promised by the government.

At the same time, the government took a series of severe measures to liquidate, or formalize, informal economic activities (bazaars and petty cross-border trade), which provided alternative means of survival for hundreds of thousands of people, thereby leaving little room for informal income-earning strategies. Although the Uzbek economy is said to have experienced above-trend rates of growth (about 7–8 percent) since 2004, these indicators hardly reflect everyday life in Uzbekistan where many people, especially in rural areas, are compelled to search for job opportunities abroad. Thus, economic motives and the broken social contract between the government and population eventually led many to turn to labor migration as the main livelihood strategy.

Russia is the main destination for Uzbek labor migrants due to the country’s visa-free regime, relatively better wages, and high demand for foreign labor. According to April 2016 statistics of the Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS), there were around 1,756,000 Uzbek citizens present in the territory of Russian Federation. Due to the predominantly economic character of the migration, the majority of Uzbek migrants are young, low-skilled workers from rural areas or small towns. Most of them are from the densely populated Fergana Valley, where the unemployment rate is high. As Ilkhamov describes, the average Uzbek migrant in Russia is a young married male with a secondary school education, whose main purpose is to earn money for wedding expenses and/or building a house. Uzbek migrants mainly work in construction sector (23 percent), retail trade (18 percent), services (19 percent), as well as in agriculture, industry, and transport. Due to high accommodation costs and precarious working conditions, migrants rarely bring their family members to Russia. A migrant’s family (wife, children) and other relatives (parents, siblings) remain at home, and he usually sends his earnings to provide for their daily needs and other expenses (building a new house or car, life-cycle rituals, medical treatment, education). Hence, for the majority of Uzbek migrants, resettlement or integration into Russian society is not a primary goal. They arrive in Russia as temporary labor migrants, leaving home for Russia in the spring to do temporary seasonal work, and then return home in autumn. Even those migrants who spend most of their time in Russia and rarely visit home regard their situation as “temporary” and maintain close ties with their family and mahalla (local community), assuming that they will eventually return to their homeland.

Accordingly, these post-Soviet migratory trends can be viewed as an indication of social changes currently taking place in Uzbekistan, since mil-
lions of Uzbeks (mainly men) for the first time are moving (i.e., becoming “nomad”) to Russia, leaving behind their families and community. Historically, Uzbeks have always been the most sedentary nation in Central Asia, preferring to seek their livelihood in their home country. Even during the Soviet era, ethnic Uzbeks displayed the lowest mobility rate among the Soviet republics. In the 1980s, experts attributed Uzbeks’ reluctance to migrate voluntarily to a presumed innate and incorrigible cultural attachment to their families and mahalla. Hence, due to their settled lifestyle, Uzbeks were able to preserve their traditional structures and social hierarchies despite Soviet modernization efforts, while nomadic nations of the region such as the Kazakh and Kyrgyz were more receptive to Soviet modernization policies.

However, we can no longer divide the Central Asian ways of life into settled and nomadic categories. Today, in both urban and rural areas of Uzbekistan, migration has become a something of a norm: a widely accepted livelihood strategy used by households to secure their basic needs and generate resources for life-cycle events, construction, and entrepreneurship projects. Thus, the lifestyle of Uzbeks is becoming increasingly transnational since more and more households are sending musofir (migrants) to Russia. Castles and Miller note that “migration is a collective action, arising out of social change and affecting the whole society in both sending and receiving areas.”

There is a growing academic debate on “migrant transnationalism” that revolves around the argument that migrants who live their lives across the border of two (or more) nation-states become part of the fabric of everyday life and social relations in their home state, while simultaneously becoming part of the socioeconomic processes in their receiving state. Sociological studies of migration have demonstrated that migrants carry their own “legal culture” (i.e., customary practices and unofficial laws based on indigenous or religious laws) to the host country, leading to the formation of a plural legal environment in the host country. At the same time, migrants’ societies of origin are themselves being transformed by migration: neighborhood-based forms of identity are becoming transnational along with national and regional identities. Migrants bring home not only money, gifts, and consumer products but also knowledge, ideas, values, and norms—what could be called “social remittances.” In addition, existing gender relations are being fundamentally challenged and changed through female labor migration, and migrant remittances, in addition to their economic impact, fulfill an important social role by keeping absent migrants “present” in their sending communities, serving as a means to alter or retain social status and producing new “elite” class and network connections. Using the insights from international migration literature, it seems reasonable to assume that the large-scale migration of Uzbeks to Russia might produce social changes in both migrant-sending and receiving societies.
Much of the prevailing research related to Uzbek migrants in Russia (also covering Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants) focuses on issues such as the push-and-pull factors of labor migration, the economic impact of migration and remittances in sending societies, migrant strategies for dealing with the law and informality in the host country, sexual risks, difficult living and working conditions, xenophobia and discrimination, the political impact of labor migration in sending societies, and the effects of migration and remittances on the ritual economy, gender-based power relations, traditions, social norms, status, and hierarchies in sending communities. Despite the diversity of scholarly literature, one idea common to these studies is that they tend to explore “Central Asian labor migration to Russia” as two separate processes. They focus on developments that occur either in places of departure or places of arrival, but not both. Put another way, the study of migration is confined to processes and variables that occur within the boundaries of a single nation state, ignoring the increased transnational links between migrant sending and receiving countries. Hence, with a few exceptions, not much has been said about the everyday transnational connections between places of departure and arrival and how these transnational processes trigger social changes in sending and receiving countries. Without applying a transnational perspective, we cannot satisfactorily understand the impact of migration on social change. This is particularly important when considering the growing use of smartphones and social media among Uzbek migrants, which may facilitate the daily exchange of information and reduce the importance of distance between sending and receiving countries, thereby making migrants part of everyday life and socioeconomic processes “here” (in Russia) and “there” (in Uzbekistan).

This chapter explores the everyday transnational lives of Uzbek migrants in Moscow and their left-behind families and communities in rural Fergana. Unlike Western countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, Germany, United States, Canada) where it is possible for migrants to establish relatively functional transnational and diasporic communities, there is little in the way of an “Uzbek migrant community” in Russia as it is considered a form of temporary migration. Despite these features, rapid improvements in communication technologies (e.g., smartphones and social media) have enabled Uzbek migrants to stay in touch with their origin societies as well as to create some form of permanent, telephone-based “Uzbek mahalla” in Moscow, which usually gathers together migrants from the same mahalla or village in Uzbekistan. Hence, Uzbek migrants’ transnational place-making practices take place via smartphones and social media. The existence of such telephone-based mahallas helps migrants cope with the challenges of being alien and avoiding or maneuvering around structural constraints such as
complicated residence registration and work permit rules, social exclusion, racism, and the lack of a social safety net. This further suggests that mahalla institutions are also undergoing changes due to migratory processes as they are becoming increasingly involved in shaping the livelihoods of their residents both locally and transnationally.

These processes will be investigated using an ethnographic study of the everyday life and experiences of Uzbek migrants who work in the construction sector in Moscow and their family members and community who stay behind in Shabboda village in rural Fergana. By ethnographically attending to the experiences of Uzbek migrant workers and their families, I demonstrate the “everydayness” of material, emotional, social, and symbolic networks and exchanges that connect Shabboda village and its mahallas to Moscow. More specifically, I will show how the bonds of mahalladoshlik (shared mahalla origin) and mahalla-level social relations (e.g., reciprocity, trust, obligation, age hierarchies, gossip, and social sanctions) are reproduced and maintained across distance, through smartphones and social media, and have identifiable impact on the outcomes of many practices that Uzbek migrants (and other actors) engage with in Moscow. This chapter is based on ethnographic material gathered between January 2014 and July 2016 in Moscow, Russia, and Fergana, Uzbekistan.

THE CENTRAL ASIAN MIGRANT LABOR MARKET IN RUSSIA

After the United States and Germany, Russia is the world’s third-largest recipient of labor migrants, with eleven million foreign-born people present in its territory. The majority of labor migrants (approximately five million) originate from three Central Asian republics—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—and generally come to Russia under the visa-free regime. This is due to Russia’s declining population and increasing demand for cheap foreign labor, on the one hand, and poverty and unemployment in Central Asia, on the other. As the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have no extractive sectors, Tajik and Kyrgyz migrants arrived in Russia earlier than the inhabitants of resource-rich Uzbekistan, where labor migration started in the mid-2000s. Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg have the largest concentration of labor migrants.

Although Uzbek migrants have visa-free access to Russia, they are required to obtain a residence registration and proper documentation for employment within seven days of arrival. The work permit is expensive and difficult to obtain, especially since legislative changes in 2015. Migrants will spend at least 22,000 rubles for a work permit, as well as a 4,000 ruble (€54) monthly fee.
addition, they must purchase health insurance, provide proof of medical tests, and pass a test on Russian language, history, and law. However, many of them can barely comply with these requirements due to their poor knowledge of Russian language and laws and extremely low salaries. As Reeves asserts, even those migrants who possess all the required paperwork cannot be sure that they will not experience legal problems when stopped or caught by Russian police officers and migration officials. Under these circumstances, the status of being “legal” or “illegal” becomes contingent on contextual factors, such as how, when, and where the interaction between migrants and Russian state officials takes place. Hence, it is almost impossible for a migrant to be fully formal. Due to exorbitant work permit fees and the arbitrariness of the law, many migrants end up working in the shadow economy where they can survive with limited language skills and no particular formal qualifications. This information seems to be partly confirmed by the Russian Federal Service’s 2015 statistics showing that nearly three million foreign nationals in Russia have already violated the legal terms of their stay, and 40 percent of these foreigners are citizens of Uzbekistan.

One indication of the size of the shadow economy is the efforts that Russian authorities spend to limit the phenomenon through draconian laws and border-control infrastructure—for example, widening the grounds for issuing re-entry bans to migrants who have violated laws during their previous stay. This regime is applied even for minor infractions. In September 2014, the FMS announced that nearly one million foreigners were banned from re-entry to Russia in 2014. However, there is no evidence that these measures have produced the desired effects. In fact, Uzbek migrants work in an environment that is notorious for corruption and disregard for the rule of law, which allows them to invent various strategies and tactics in order to maneuver around restrictions. Given the large gap between legal theory and practice in Russia and the idiosyncratic nature of the Russian legal system, migration laws are just part and parcel of the absence of the rule of law. Hence, the more restrictive the migration laws are, the higher the value of bribes that migrants give to police officers, migration officials, and border guards in order to continue working in Russia. Moreover, the risk of not re-entering Russia prompts many Uzbek migrants to limit their returns home and concentrate on one long stay, during which they try to earn as much as possible, knowing that this might be the only opportunity they have for a long time. A small decrease in the number of Uzbek migrants is more the result of recession in Russia in autumn 2014 and the drop in workplaces and income than proof of the efficiency of the prohibitive measures.

This restrictive legal environment can be seen as an outcome of the clash between the economic need for cheap labor and xenophobia in Russian
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society. The rise of antimigrant attitudes is partly connected with the lack of formal migrant integration in Russia. Instead of introducing migrant integration measures, the Russian authorities balance these conflicting social and economic demands by tightening migration control policies that further push migrants into the shadow economy. These measures intensify xenophobic and pejorative attitudes toward migrants. A survey conducted by the Levada Center in 2012 showed that the majority of Russians (56 percent) agreed with the statement, “Russia for ethnic Russians,” and no less than 70 percent of respondents answered that government should restrict the influx of migrants and that undocumented migrants should be expelled from Russia. Accordingly, racism has become an integral part of everyday life for Uzbek and other Central Asian migrants. Reporters and human rights activists have extensively documented the difficult living and working conditions of Uzbek labor migrants in Russia. The prevailing research also describes Central Asian labor migrants as victims subject to human rights abuses, such as exploitation, discrimination, unsafe working conditions, wage theft, and physical violence. On top of this, Uzbek migrants have to deal with corrupt police officers who regularly extort money from them. Today anyone walking on the streets of large Russian cities (e.g., Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Yekaterinburg) will quickly notice police officers checking the documents of Uzbek and other Central Asian migrants. This is especially visible on the Moscow metro where the police officers usually stand at the top of escalators to catch migrants.

There are very few civil society organizations in Russia that Uzbek migrants can approach for protection. Although Uzbek diaspora groups in Russia are assumed to be the first port of call for migrants seeking assistance, their role and usefulness in Uzbek migrants’ lives is quite limited. Media reports indicate that certain members of Uzbek diaspora groups have actually facilitated the exploitation of migrant workers, at times acting as middlemen between abusive employers and potential migrants. A rare example of a more effective migrant rights organization is a Civic Assistance Committee in Moscow that assists migrants in obtaining unpaid wages and appealing deportation orders. But their resources and reach are limited only to a very small portion of the migrant population. Uzbek migrants often complain about the reluctance of the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Moscow to hear and address their grievances. Unlike the governments of neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that have attempted to set up legal mechanisms to protect their citizens in Russia, Uzbekistan’s official policy completely ignores the scale of migratory processes and their economic role. Uzbek migrants are usually described as money chasers or victims in their home country’s mass media and pop music. For example, the well-known Uzbek singer Yulduz
Usmonova recorded the song “Ketdi” (My husband left to Moscow), while Ulug’bek Baxshi sings “Xato qildik” (We made a mistake). Hence, Uzbek migrants cannot rely on host country institutions, diasporic organizations, nor their home country’s government. Nevertheless, from the perspective of migrants, the possibility of working in Russia provides a vital economic lifeline for their families back home, which leads them to accept everyday injustices, exploitation, and racism.

As shown above, the everyday life of Uzbek as well as Tajik and Kyrgyz migrants in Russia is characterized by a constant sense of insecurity, with the threat of exploitation, deportation, police corruption, racism, physical violence, and even death. This total lack of security compelled Central Asian migrants to create informal networks and structures for coping with the risks and uncertainties of their precarious livelihoods. As Abashin notes, the majority of labor migrants belong to diverse networks revolving around kinship, region of origin, or ethnic affiliation that reproduce many “domestic” practices, adapted to the conditions of migration and temporary residence. The existence of such informal infrastructure allows migrants to establish some form of integration in an otherwise restrictive sociolegal environment—for example, by devising specific survival strategies, creating intragroup solidarity, distributing information about jobs, and building up an informal social safety net for stretching the livelihood risks and dealing with emergency situations (e.g., medical treatment, repatriation of a deceased to home country). These networks, possessing their own infrastructure of trust, security, and mutual aid, constitute an important social safety net for migrants. Some commentators refer to such migrant networks as Uzbekskiy Peterburg, Kyrgyztown, and Moskvaobod. However, due to prevalent xenophobic attitudes, these networks are hidden from the public eye and based on a low-profile social order. Thus, the distinctive feature of migration in Russia is the presence of a hidden world of migrants that is based on its own economy, legal order, and welfare infrastructure.

A growing body of literature indicates that migrants do not necessarily depart from a place of origin and permanently settle at a receiving country. Rather, they remain situated in one “translocal social field” that emerges through daily cross-border exchanges among migrants, former migrants, and migrants’ left-behind families and communities. Hence, if a migrant belongs to translocal social field (i.e., “translocal community”), he/she has “translocal social capital” and can thus ask the members of this community for advice, a favor, or help. However, translocal social capital can also significantly restrict migrants’ freedom. This is due to the existence of collective expectations and social sanctions affecting individual behavior. Any deviation from general shared values, normative reciprocity, and trust may result in
an individual’s exclusion from the community. Seemingly, the maintenance of the translocal community takes place through the extension of affective regimes of guilt, shame, gossip, neighborliness, and obligation. One of the most pertinent works in this respect is Velayutham and Wise’s study of a “translocal village” in which they show how the village-defined moral economy (e.g., traditional modes of trust, obligation, shame, and neighborliness) extends across borders. Thus, “translocal social capital” and place-based identities play important roles in organizing the livelihoods of both migrants and their left-behind community.

Like other Central Asians in Russia, Uzbek migrants also have their own community. However, due to the restrictive sociolegal environment, Uzbek migrants do not organize in public places and try to make themselves as invisible as possible, keeping a low profile and avoiding interactions with state institutions. Instead, they use smartphones and social media as means of community building and socialization. Migrant communities usually include migrants that hail from the same mahalla, village, or town. This mahalla-based networking makes up for the absence of a formal protection system. The fact that their families are from the same place and regularly interact at social events acts as a guarantee that social pressure can be applied onto a family if their member in Moscow is not acting fairly. This means Uzbek migrants’ interpersonal relationships in Moscow are influenced by the social processes and pressures that come from their left-behind communities. This situation recalls Etzold’s study of the street food vendors in Dhaka in which he argues that the “translocal social capital” (networks based on common places of origin and kinship ties) can become important in times of crisis. As will be shown in the empirical section, it is actually the existence of everyday transnational interactions between migrants and their left-behind mahallas that create strong moral bonds and serve as a main social safety net and risk-sharing institution for Uzbek migrants who have little access to the formal system due to multiple structural factors. This implies that the study of migration and social change cannot be confined to the political and geographical boundaries of a particular nation-state and that we also need to focus on the intersection between the practices, exchanges, and experiences of those who have migrated and those who have stayed in place.

NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This chapter is based on multisited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Moscow, Russia, and Fergana, Uzbekistan. The fieldwork took place from January 2014 to July 2016 for a total of eleven months. The fieldsites were
chosen because Moscow is the city with the largest number of Uzbek migrants, whereas Fergana is one of the main migrant-sending regions in Uzbekistan because of its population density and high unemployment rate. Due to my own village background and Uzbek ethnicity, I was well-connected to the Uzbek migrant worker community in Moscow. This enabled me to participate in migrants’ daily lives and thereby become a typical migrant worker.

First, observations and interviews with migrants were conducted at construction sites, bazaars, on the streets, farms, apartments (rezinovye kvartiry), dachas, parking garages, dormitories, car washes, auto service centers, and Uzbek cafes and chaykhanas in Moscow city and Podmoskovye (Moscow province), where Uzbek migrants live, work, and socialize. These observations and interviews gave me firsthand information on: (a) how migrants create and maintain social networks, (b) the strategies and tactics that migrants utilize to cope with the risks and challenges of working in Russia, (c) the role of common mahalla origin (mahalladoshlik) in migrants’ everyday life, (d) the “street laws” (ko’cha qonulnari) and masculinity (erkakchilik) rules, (e) the role of social media and smartphones in migrants’ (and their left-behind communities) everyday life, and (f) migrants’ informal social safety nets.

Second, while keeping abreast of developments in the Uzbek migrants’ lives in Moscow, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Fergana region, in the village I call “Shabboda,” which produces a large portion of the migrant population. My aim was to explore the processes of everyday material, emotional, social, and symbolic exchanges between Shabboda village and Moscow and how these transnational interactions impact the outcomes of practices that Uzbek migrants (and other actors) engage with in Moscow. During the field research, I regularly visited migrants’ left-behind families and carried out observations and informal interviews with village residents at “migration-talk hotspots” such as the guzar (mahalla meeting space), choyxona (teahouse), gaps (regular get-togethers), and life-cycle events (e.g., weddings, funerals) where the bulk of mahalla information exchange regarding remittances and migration takes place. Informal interviews with mahalla residents were, in this respect, as useful as the Moscow fieldwork to better understand the evolution of dynamics between actors.

During the field research, I strived for spontaneity and sudden discoveries and therefore went to fieldsites “blank”—that is, without any predesigned fieldwork strategy or theoretical understanding. Moreover, I treated migrants as experts on the migration situation in Russia, thereby refraining from bringing in my own perspective. The informants were asked for their consent to participate in the study. Due to the sensitivity of the data, I have changed the names and locations of all informants and omitted any information that could be dangerous to the concerned actors.
EVERYDAY TRANSNATIONAL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SHABBODA AND MOSCOW

Shabboda is a village in the Fergana region, consisting of twenty-eight mahallas, and it has a population of more than eighteen thousand people. The income-generating activities of the village residents are made up of multiple sources, ranging from cucumber and grape production, raising livestock for sale as beef, and informal trade, to construction work, daily manual labor (*mardikorchilik*), fruit-picking, and brokerage. However, remittances sent from Russia constitute the main source of income for many households. Hence, migration is a widespread livelihood strategy, a norm for young and able-bodied men in Shabboda village. Inhabitants are mostly elderly people, women, and children during the “migration season.”

Most village residents have sons or close relatives working in Russia. Shabboda, in the words of my informants, is a “Moscow village,” as the majority of villagers work in Moscow due to the existence of village networks there. Several villagers work as a middleman in Moscow’s construction sector, serving as a gatekeeper to villagers seeking access to the labor market. Most villagers have smartphones with Internet access, which enables them to exchange daily news with their covillagers in Moscow. Absent migrants are “present” in the village through social media (Telegram Messenger, Viber, Odnoklassniki, Facebook) and regular phone calls. Odnoklassniki is the most popular social media site among migrants. As other studies have shown, cheap telephone calls, in addition to facilitating daily information exchange between migrants and their left-behind families, also have considerable impact on community life, gender relations, religious and other social practices, and local economic development in both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving contexts. Similarly, everyday mahalla life and social relations in Shabboda village are being transformed due to migratory processes. Whatever I went and whomever I talked with, the central topic of conversation was migration and remittances. Young men who prefer to stay in the village were usually seen as lazy and abnormal by villagers, while those who migrated to Russia and regularly send money home acquired higher social status. The share of women migrating to Russia was also increasing in the village. While observing everyday life, I felt that there was always someone leaving for Moscow, someone waiting there to receive them, and someone returning to the village to attend a wedding or funeral ceremony. Thus, Shabboda has become a truly “translocal village” as everyday material, family, and social exchanges directly connected it to Moscow.

Labor migration from Shabboda village to Moscow should be situated in the context of Uzbekistan’s centuries-old mahalla tradition, which is based on
ties of kinship, reciprocity, and good neighborliness. Derived from the Arabic *mahali*, meaning “local,” the term mahalla is used in Uzbekistan to mean a neighborhood or local community, which is mostly characterized by common traditions, language, customs, moral values, and reciprocal exchange of money, material goods, and services.\(^{81}\) Most Uzbeks identify themselves through their mahalla. For example, if a native is asked where he or she lives, the answer will be, “I live in mahalla X.”\(^{82}\) There are about 12,000 mahallas in Uzbekistan, and each mahalla might contain 150 to 1,500 households.\(^{83}\) Mahallas are led by an *oqsoqol* (leader) elected by residents. As the state in contemporary Uzbekistan is no longer able to secure the basic needs of its population, mahallas have become a key welfare structure that provide alternative access to public goods, services, and social protection. Seiple describes mahallas as the place where group members look out for each other, collectively parenting their children, connecting friends and family to jobs, distributing funds to those in need, and submitting to the judgment of elders.\(^{84}\) Typically, mahalla-level mutual aid practices include monetary and labor exchanges, rotating savings and credit initiatives, noncompensated labor during life-cycle rituals, housing construction, and contributions to charity. A *hashar* (noncompensated community project) is the most common mahalla practice, where local residents cooperate with one another through the reciprocal exchange of labor, money, material goods, and services. *Guzar* (mahalla meeting space), *masjid* (mosque), *choyxona* (teahouse), *gaps* (regular get-togethers), and life-cycle events are places where such mutual aid activities are discussed and initiated. The cooperative behavior among mahalla residents is ensured by social norms that create order and increase group solidarity.\(^{85}\) The failure to comply with mahalla-level social norms might lead to informal sanctions, such as gossip, ridicule, humiliation, or even exclusion. Therefore, every resident tries to conform to social norms established within the mahalla.

These mahalla-based norms, identities, reciprocal relations, and social sanctions will continue to shape Shabboda residents’ livelihoods even when they are not physically present in the village. When talking with people in the village, it becomes evident that the decision to migrate to Moscow not only stems from economic considerations, but it is also connected with kinship relations between migrants, former migrants, and nonmigrants (i.e., people’s translocal social capital). Villagers believe that going to Moscow will mean joining mahalla and village acquaintances there. They imagine their future migrant life as integrating into their mahalla and village networks that already extend into Moscow. As Shabboda migrants come from the same village, often the same mahalla, and thus their families know one another, there is a high probability that they will continue to help one another when they move to Russia. The fact that families are from the same place and regularly
interact at social events acts as a further guarantee that social pressure can be applied onto a family if their member in Moscow is not acting fairly or not helping his mahalla member. This is also a way to make up for formal protection mechanisms by relying on mahalla connections. So, money is not everything in Shabboda and “alternative currencies” such as respect, prestige, and reputation also count in everyday mahalla life and social relations. Villagers probably attend the same social events and have a relationship of mutual dependence. It is possible that some of the villagers have helped one another in the past. Subsequently, these interactions lead to the emergence of networks of reciprocity, expectations, affections, and obligations among residents. These mahalla-level networks of reciprocity are crucial to the survival of migrants and serve as an alternative social safety net. Hence, the give-and-take rituals constitute an integral part of everyday transnational interactions between Shabboda and Moscow.

Accordingly, the state is absent not only in Shabboda, where villagers use mahalla-driven solidarity to create alternative public goods and services, but also in Moscow, where solidarity and support from mahalla networks make up for the total lack of security from state institutions. Many migrants I encountered were totally unaware of the existence of Uzbek diaspora organizations that could provide some form of redress for their grievances. Also, they received little or no support from the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Moscow when they experienced human rights abuses. As most Shabboda migrants worked in the shadow economy, they were reluctant to approach Russian state institutions because doing so would only invite punishment by the state. Under these circumstances, the only feasible source of help is their village and mahalla networks. Hence, Shabboda migrants usually stick together, in case someone gets sick, needs to send something home, or desperately needs money. Even the terminology they use clearly reflects their precarious livelihood in Russia. Shabboda migrants rarely used the terms such as “migrant” to refer to their status in Russia. Instead they use the term musofir, which provides more context-sensitive definition of what it means to be a migrant worker in Russia. Unlike the more neutral “migrant worker,” musofir refers to a person who works in a foreign country and experiences risks, hardships, and challenges on a daily basis. This is especially evident in the words of one of my informants who stated that “we are not living in Moscow, but we are struggling to survive here” (“Biz bu yerda yashamayapmiz, vizhivat qilishga harakat qilyapmiz”).

Smartphones and social media serve as the social glue connecting migrants and their distant mahalla on a daily basis. A growing body of literature on migrant transnationalism and new communication technologies suggests that mobile phones do not “fracture” localities but actually extend and reproduce
them in migrant-receiving societies. Similar patterns can also be observed among Shabboda migrants. Although most Shabboda migrants do not share common accommodations and/or work in different places in Moscow, they are engaged in intertwined relationships that are mediated by smartphones and social media. They regularly use social media apps like Viber, Telegram, and Odnoklassniki to stay in touch with one another in Moscow as well as with their left-behind families and mahalla. Owing to these everyday technologies of transnationalism, news of events that take place in Moscow quickly travel to migrants’ sending village and become the subject of daily discussion. Hence, smartphones allow migrants to remain within the daily life of Shabboda village. Left-behind families and mahalla also take part in migrants’ everyday life in Moscow by sharing mahalla news and giving advice on important matters. Accordingly, smartphones and social media serve as the everyday technologies of transnationalism, reproducing and maintaining mahalla-level identities, social norms, and relations (e.g., reciprocity, affections, trust, obligations, gossips, hierarchies) across distance.

TYPES OF TRANSNATIONAL EXPERIENCES

This section presents two case studies that focus on everyday transnational exchanges between Uzbek migrants in Moscow and their left-behind families and mahalla in Fergana, Uzbekistan. These case studies resulted from my research stays both in Moscow and in the Fergana region. Both cases demonstrate the existence of (telephone-based) transnational mahalla that emerged as an alternative to state migration regulations and have identifiable impacts on the livelihoods of Uzbek migrants and their left-behind community. My goal is to provide a “thick description” of the transnational mahalla that shapes the livelihoods and behavior of its residents “here” (Uzbekistan) and “there” (Russia).

Transnational Mahalla

“Misha” leads a construction brigade (brigada) comprised of his co-villagers and mahalla acquaintances. He employs some of his fellow villagers from Shabboda, and they are all in a mutually dependent relationship. Misha needs trusted workers, and his workers need him to protect and help them, given that they do not speak Russian and have no resources to get official work permits. Even more important, their families are intertwined transnationally. When all goes well in Moscow, Misha’s family back home is well respected and praised for providing economic opportunities to the mahalla. However,
when things go bad and Misha cannot pay wages, his family’s position weakens and they come under attack. If the brigada fails to find a solution with Misha, they can turn to Shabboda to put pressure on Misha in Moscow. Mahalla pressure put Misha’s family in an awkward position. Declining status and dwindling respect eventually lead Misha to find a new arrangement that, although less financially lucrative, saves his and his family’s reputation.

Misha is an early migrant from Shabboda village who brought around two hundred of his co-villagers and acquaintances to Moscow. He arrived in 2002 when labor migration was still a new phenomenon in the village. He currently works as a posrednik (middleman) in the construction sector, connecting migrant workers and Russian employers. This is the highest rung on the career ladder that many migrant workers strive to reach. Misha is fluent in Russian and Uzbek and well trusted by Russian middlemen who approach him with many zakaz (jobs). Misha’s main role is to find well-skilled migrant construction workers, take full responsibility for the quality of the construction work, and address migrants’ daily concerns (e.g., accommodation, food) and legal problems (e.g., police problems). It is not so easy to find skilled, reliable migrant construction workers who will perform their tasks in accordance with state standards and not steal construction materials. Kinship is more important than reputation in this case, but workers’ reputation is also a key factor when Misha selects workers for his brigade. When Misha approaches someone who is not from his village, or at least his district, they rarely agree to work under him. Coming from the same village creates not only a social bond but also social responsibility in the workers’ mind. Both the family of the middleman and the workers share a territory and interact daily to the point that noncompliance with the agreed obligations from either side would trigger a chain reaction with the workers’ families putting direct pressure on the middleman’s family in the village, a thing that might not happen if the two men’s families lived far from one another.

Thanks to this mechanism, Misha’s erkakcha gap (literally “man’s word”) is enough for his workers, and he allows migrants to work without any documents. The work of a middleman in the Russian construction sector is largely informal. An amount is agreed upon and paid gradually as the construction project progresses. There is no written agreement between Misha and his co-villagers, and they rely on ko’cha qonunlari (laws of the street) and erkak-chilik (“manliness”) rules to get things done. Misha receives payment from Russian middlemen and then distributes the money to his workers, taking a dolya (share) of between 10–15 percent of each workers’ salary. As other studies have demonstrated, the embeddedness of work and social relationships generate mutual dependence and a long-term reciprocity relationship that all parties are happy to continue. This relationship exists on two levels,
the local and the transnational, reinforcing the relations not only between actors but also their families in their home village. At the time of fieldwork, Misha’s brigada consisted of twelve migrant workers, and their main job was installing new windows in mid-rise and high-rise buildings. On average, the brigada worked ten–twelve hours per day, without taking any days off. They endured harsh conditions, working on the seventeenth floor despite the freezing cold weather (the outdoor temperature was –25°C). They only took a day off in exceptional circumstances, such as when supplies were delayed or in case of an emergency. Misha usually purchased food, and the brigada cooked meals for themselves. This means every day one migrant, on a rotating basis, could be assigned to prepare lunch and dinner for everyone. In this kind of relationship, there is no clear boundary between work and non-work activities in the brigada’s daily life.

Furthermore, there is no clear boundary between workers and supervisors. Misha takes care of his dependents under the assumption that happy workers are better workers. He may do small favors for some of his workers, such as buying cigarettes or sending money home on someone’s behalf, even if Misha has to advance the sum from his own pocket. Eventually, this combined position of older brother and line manager allowed him to have more leverage. His workers knew that they can count on him, but he also knew that, should he need extra help, they would be available to provide it. Likewise, the brigada members were at the center of a complex matrix of relationships. In Moscow they operated under Misha, respected his authority, and called him elder brother, regardless of their age difference. While they have little choice but to trust that he will deliver their salaries, take care of them if they face difficulties, and help them with documents, this trust is based on the understanding that, given their family connections, it would be too costly for him to cheat on them. Any monetary advantage would bring only short-term benefits and would be countered by retaliation at the village level.

Almost all brigada members had smartphones and regularly used Odnoklassniki and Telegram Messenger to check the latest news, view photos of Russian girls, and send instant messages to their families and mahalla networks. New technologies allowed them to remain in touch with their families in a quasi–real-time exchange of information between the village and the workers in Moscow. The brigada’s Moscow adventures were the most popular subject of “village talk.” Misha’s capacity to provide for his countrymen not only put him in a higher position in Moscow; it also enhanced the prestige and reputation he and his family enjoyed in Shabboda village. Given that Misha provided many village residents with jobs in Moscow, his family members enjoyed high social status and prestige in the village. When invited to weddings, Misha’s father was always offered a premium table and served
more quickly than others. Misha was especially praised by the parents of his brigada for employing and taking care of their sons.

Despite his high social status, Misha’s prestige is surprisingly tenuous. As long as he is perceived as bringing more benefits than troubles, he will be supported by his brigada and mahalla. However, when this comes into question, or the benefits are not tangible, any kind of allegations might be used to attack him. In April 2014 tensions within the brigada emerged. The brigada had completed half of a window-installation job in Moscow but had not been paid since January. Two workers left, and others were considering it. The issue was both local, they need money to eat and survive in Moscow, and transnational, since all their families were expecting remittances money.

Misha took a clear stand, insisting that he, too, was a victim of circumstances, blaming Russian middlemen and the construction firm’s representative. As the brigada was in daily contact with their families and mahalla, the problems in Moscow quickly travelled to Shabboda village. Relatives of Misha’s workers started putting pressure on Misha’s family, by spreading gossip at guzar, choyxona, and weddings where people gather and talk. This raised rumors in the village about Misha’s exploitative behavior and emboldened many fellow villagers to confront him through his family. Misha, in the villagers’ view, was supposed to secure the brigada’s salary irrespective of the circumstances. After all, the brigada trusted him and worked hard during the cold winter. This was based on an understanding that a person must never assume the posrednik role if he cannot keep his word. Tempers flared, and some villagers went as far as to accuse Misha of human trafficking. He was held responsible for the brigada’s undocumented status in Russia and the possibility that, if caught, they would be banned from re-entering Russia for five years.

Religion was also invoked. Misha was portrayed as a bad Muslim who earns money through harom (sinful) means. The brigada’s families regularly visited Misha’s house and told neighbors about the situation. Moreover, the oqsoqol (mahalla leader) and imom (leader of the mosque) interfered and warned Misha’s parents that the details of the dispute would be made public during Friday prayers if Misha refused to pay his fellow villagers’ salaries. Misha’s family was under siege, facing daily barbs on the village streets. Misha’s father’s situation was particularly bad since he could no longer attend guzar, choyxona, and other social events. Eventually, mahalla pressure forced Misha to make a decision and prioritize the well-being of his family over his personal situation. He borrowed money to pay the brigada’s salaries. Thus, the extension of mahalla-level affective regimes of guilt, shame, and gossip across borders proved to be an enforcement mechanism that determined the outcome of a dispute.
This case study shows that transnational social capital not only provides privileged access to resources but also limits individual freedoms. As Vertovec notes, social capital is based on collective expectations affecting an individual’s behavior, including general shared values, normative reciprocity, and enforceable trust that can be monitored and safeguarded within a social network.91 Shabboda migrants, despite being physically located in Russia, continue to be influenced by collective expectations and norms of their mahalla and village. On the other hand, villagers are “socially located” in Russia due to their increased engagement in migrants’ everyday life and socioeconomic relations. Due to the inability of the Russian and Uzbek authorities to adequately regulate the migrant-labor market, the mahalla emerged as a transnational governance mechanism resolving the dispute that occurred in the territory of Russia. Thus, everyday lives of Uzbeks are becoming increasingly transnational in light of migratory processes, while the role of the mahalla is becoming increasingly important in the lives of both those who migrate and those who stay behind. The case study also highlights the need to move away from methodological nationalism92 and broaden our analytical lens to include transnationalism perspective when analyzing social change processes in migrant-sending and -receiving contexts.

Telephone-Based Mahalla in Moscow

The next case study is organized around three empirically interwoven moments including: (1) obligations stemming from shared mahalla origin—mahalladoshlik obligations, (2) solidarity and reciprocity among migrants, and (3) repatriation of a body from Russia to Uzbekistan. All three examples illustrate the role of transnational exchanges and mahalla networks in organizing the precarious livelihoods of Uzbek migrants in Russia.

Mahalladoshlik Obligations

Wednesday afternoon, July 30, 2014, “Zaur” and I were in the car heading toward a construction site in Balashikha, a small city in Podmoskovye (Moscow province) where the majority of Shabboda migrants work. Unlike his covillagers who work in the construction sector, Zaur works as a clerk at the grocery store in Moscow city, a status that made him known as Russkiy (Russian) among his covillagers, given the fact that he receives a higher salary and not obliged to do chornaiia rabota (black work). As Zaur is considered to be more successful and better connected than other migrants, people from Shabboda village often contact him with requests.

As we neared the construction site, Zaur received a phone call from Uzbekistan. He usually picks up calls if they come from Uzbekistan and immedi-
Establishing an “Uzbek Mahalla” via Smartphones and Social Media

It was Zaur’s neighbor, “Ozoda,” who had an urgent request. From their phone conversation I learned that Ozoda’s husband, “Ulugbek,” who works on a greenhouse farm in Vologda city, recently had appendectomy surgery and was on a train to Moscow. Ozoda was very worried about her husband as he was physically unable to work and had no money to purchase a train ticket back to Uzbekistan. It was obvious that Ozoda asked Zaur to help her husband return to Uzbekistan. After finishing the conversation, Zaur said that we needed to return to Moscow city and meet Ulugbek at Kazanskaya railway station when he arrived from Vologda. On our way to the station, I asked Zaur to tell more about the details of the phone conversation, and he provided the following account:

Ulugbek and I come from the same mahalla. He is in a critical situation now, as he has neither good health nor money to return to Uzbekistan. There is no train from Vologda to Tashkent for the next ten days, so he must go to Moscow first and then take another train to Tashkent. Actually, Ulugbek could have taken direct train from Vologda to Tashkent if he stayed there ten more days.

He knows that he would be taken care of by his mahalla networks if he comes to Moscow. Therefore, he is now coming to Moscow. Ulugbek is very clever. He didn’t contact me directly. Instead he contacted me through his wife since he knew that I wouldn’t refuse if someone contacts me directly from Fergana.

Of course, I have no any other choice but to cover Ulugbek’s expenses from my own pocket. First, I am now driving from Balashikha to Kazanskaya railway station and burning gasoline. If you take taxi, you will spend at least 3,000 rubles for this trip.

Second, Ulugbek wants to return home as soon as possible, but train tickets to Uzbekistan are usually sold out. One needs to buy a ticket at least three days before traveling. This means I have to bribe the train provodnik [conductor] and arrange a place [without a valid ticket] for him. In addition, there are many thieves and racketeers in Kazanskaya railway station that extort money from migrants. I have connections there and I can make sure that Ulugbek safely boards the train and reaches home without any problems.

Third, Ulugbek does not have any money to pay for train expenses. This means I have to bribe the provodnik from my own pocket, and I know that Ulugbek will not return this money to me. This would be treated as my “mahalliadoshlik obligation.”

But I hope he would appreciate my help and tell our mahalla about my odamgarchilik [good deeds]. This is enough for me. You see how much trouble and expenses I have and the time I lose just to keep my face in the mahalla. If
I refuse to help Ulugbek and other mahalla acquaintances, mahalla people will spread gossip about me saying that I have no odamgarchilik. Of course, I am in Moscow now and could just ignore the gossip, but I have to consider my family members’ situation, as they are the ones who bear the consequences of my decision.

We arrived at Kazansky station at 4 pm. Ulugbek’s train arrived one hour later. Events unfolded exactly how Zaur had described. After meeting Ulugbek at the station, we all headed toward a small fast-food cafe where migrants can get fake work permits and residence registrations. There we met one Uzbek women who was well-connected with train provodniks. Zaur paid her 7,500 rubles, and she then guided us toward the station and quickly arranged a special seat for Ulugbek on a Moscow–Tashkent train. After a short conversation with the conductor, she assured us that Ulugbek was now in safe hands and would be in Uzbekistan in five days. Zaur gave an additional 1,000 rubles to Ulugbek and told him that he can use it for his food expenses during the long trip. We shook hands with Ulugbek and watched as the train departed for Uzbekistan.

**Solidarity and Reciprocity among Migrants**

In April 14, 2014, I spent a day together with “Baha,” a migrant construction worker from Shabboda village. Baha does not have a stable job, but he usually receives various short-term offers from private clients, for example, to install windows or fix apartment doors. After we had dinner, we took a taxi to the parking garage in Moscow’s Babushkinskaya district, where “Horin,” another migrant from Shabboda, works. Baha did not tell me why we were going to visit him, but I assumed that he was going to introduce me to him. Horin and his boss “Kolya” welcomed us at the garage entrance, and we all shook hands. After a brief chat, Baha told me that we would need to join Horin and Kolya and go to Medvedkovo district where Kolya’s apartment is located. I did not know why we were going there, but I quickly learned that Horin had asked Baha to repair his boss’s broken door. I concluded that Baha had received a job offer and that he was going to earn some money now. It took Baha nearly two hours to repair the door. Based on my knowledge of pay rates in the construction sector, I was confident that he would get at least 1,500 rubles payment for his work. Surprisingly, Baha did not receive any payment for his work, except the fact that Horin promised that he would invite us for dinner next week. Although I had a good understanding of the migrant labor market in Moscow, this situation was puzzling for me. In my view, Horin had clearly abused Baha’s kindness by just expressing his gratitude and not translating it into some cash. When I asked about it, Baha explained:
Establishing an “Uzbek Mahalla” via Smartphones and Social Media

Our musofirchilik [migrant] life in Moscow can be compared to how we live in our mahalla in Shabboda village in Fergana. You know, in our mahalla people help one another during weddings, funerals, house construction, irrigation infrastructure building, road asphalting, et cetera. This is a hashar—collective effort of the mahalla to solve day-to-day problems. Without hashar it is very hard to get the things done. As we are all musofir in Russia, it is very important that we continue this tradition and support one another. We are nobody in Russia, the lowest class of workers, without any rights. Russians treat us lower than dogs; simply we are all churka [dumb] to them. Therefore, we need to stick to one another and live like one mahalla.

As you see, I helped Horin and did not ask any payment. Horin enhanced his status (plyus bo’ldi), as he fulfilled his boss Kolya’s request without any cost. I know that Horin appreciates my help and he would also do some favor for me if I ask him for help. I helped him today, and he will help me tomorrow. If you ask money for everything, you would be alone tomorrow when you get into trouble. You don’t die from hunger if you have good relationship with your mahalla and village networks. We are all musofir here, so you must be kind and generous to your mahalla networks, otherwise you cannot survive in Russia.

Repatriating a Body from Russia to Uzbekistan

Uzbek migrants, like other Central Asian migrants, experience difficult living and working conditions in Russia, including discrimination, hazardous working conditions, and physical violence. Hence, the threat of death looms over migrants’ daily life in Russia.93 As one of the Shabboda migrants said, “Death can be the fate of any musofir in Russia as we are working in a bespredel [limitlessness, lawless] country where anything can happen.” Aware of their own precarious livelihoods, migrants voluntarily contribute to repatriation expenses if someone from their mahalla or village dies from work-related accidents, disease, or from neo-Nazi skinhead attacks.

When someone is killed, this news spreads swiftly because migrants immediately contact their mahalla networks via smartphones and social media. There is no standard contribution amount, and migrants determine how much to contribute based on their financial situation and income level. As the threat of death is constantly present in the lives of migrants, news of a death affects everyone deeply, and many migrants step forward to help with repatriation expenses. The following statement by “Nodir,” a migrant from Shabboda, indicates that migrants see their contribution to the body repatriation process as a form of insurance in case of their own death:

I always make contribution to body repatriation because I know my covillagers would do the same favor for me were I to suddenly die from a work accident or disease. Body repatriation is a hashar—a collective mahalla project where
everyone is expected to contribute. If you are greedy and don’t contribute, there is a high likelihood that your body will not be taken care of in case you die. Nobody wants his body to remain in Russia, we all want to be buried in our homeland.

Due to these risks, Uzbek migrants tend to capitalize on their mahalla traditions (norms of reciprocity and solidarity, good neighborliness) as a means to cope with the challenges of musofirchilik in Russia. However, this practice is spread only within village and mahalla networks; it is rare to see someone from Uzbekistan’s Kashkadarya region contributing to the repatriation of a deceased Fergana migrant, for example. This indicates that bonds of mahal-liychilik (localism) and mahalla-bound identities are stronger than national or ethnic belonging among Uzbek migrants.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter explored the everyday transnational lives of Uzbek migrants in Moscow and their left-behind families and communities in rural Fergana. I argued that rapid improvements in communication technologies (e.g., smartphones and social media) have enabled Uzbek migrants to stay in touch with their origin societies as well as to create telephone-based, transnational mahallas in Moscow, which attract migrants from the same village in Uzbekistan. It was empirically shown that the mahalla-based identities, solidarity, reciprocity and social sanctions are reproduced and maintained across the distance and have a significant impact on the livelihood strategies of Uzbek migrants and their left-behind families.

One important finding of my study is that mahalla institutions are undergoing significant changes due to migratory processes. They are becoming involved in shaping the livelihoods of their residents both locally and transnationally. This means not only Uzbek people but also their mahallas are becoming nomadic. My findings in this sense do not provide support for previous research that claims that the mahallas’ capacity to enforce social norms is weakening because migrant remittances reduce the need for mutual aid activities and creating economic inequality among mahalla people. As my findings indicate, migration further strengthens the mahallas’ role in the everyday life of Uzbeks, as a mahalla-based moral economy (e.g., traditional modes of trust, obligation, shame, and neighborliness) and mahalla-bound identities have been extended across borders and have considerable impact on the livelihoods of Uzbek migrants in Russia. It is actually the existence of everyday transnational interactions and pressures between migrants and their left-behind mahalla that create strong moral bonds and serve as a main
social safety net and risk-sharing institution for Uzbek migrants whose rights and needs are not addressed by the Russian or Uzbek governments. Thus, the intrinsic message of this chapter is that the study of migration and social change cannot be confined to the political and geographical boundaries of a particular nation-state and that we also need to focus on the intersection among the practices, exchanges, and experiences of those who have migrated and those who have stayed in place.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Throughout the chapter, Russian and Uzbek words are spelled according the standard literary form. They are used based on the following two criteria: (1) whether a Russian/Uzbek word or phenomenon is central to the study; (2) if an English translation does not fully capture the meaning of the Russian/Uzbek word or phenomenon. Russian and Uzbek words are presented in italics. The principal exceptions are mahalla, musofir, musofirchilik, hashar, brigada, posrednik, mahalliychilik, since these words are frequently used or have a central place in the chapter.

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NOTES

4. Ruziev, Ghosh, and Dow, “The Uzbek Puzzle Revisited.”


13. Laruelle, “Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia.”


19. Ilkhamov “Labour Migration and the Ritual Economy of the Uzbek Extended Family.”

20. Abashin “Migration from Central Asia to Russia in the New Model of World Order.”


38. According to RFE Uzbek Service, 7 million citizens of Uzbekistan are registered on Odnoklassniki—the most popular social networking site in the post-Soviet space. At least 1.5 million Uzbeks visit Odnoklassniki on a daily basis. Some 92 percent of these visitors use mobile version of the site, which means visitors mainly use smartphones to access the site. “Bir iarim million uzbekistonlik khar kuni,” RFE Uzbek Service, 2013, accessed October 1, 2016, http://www.ozodlikorg/a/25120527.html.

39. See, for example, Patricia Ehrkamp, “Placing Identities: Transnational Practices and Local Attachments of Turkish Immigrants in Germany”; Velayutham and Wise, “Moral Economies of a Translocal Village.”


43. Abashin, “Migration from Central Asia to Russia in the New Model of World Order.”

44. Abashin, “Central Asian Migration.”


46. Round and Kuznetsova, “Necropolitics and the Migrant as a Political Subject of Disgust.”


51. Bobylov, “Glava FMS.”


55. Abashin, “Migration Policies in Russia.”


60. Sahadeo argues that negative attitudes toward Central Asian workers existed even during the Soviet times in spite of *druzhba narodov* (people’s friendship) discourse. Central Asians who worked on construction sites (*limitchiki*) in Moscow and Leningrad were perceived as *chernye* (black) and faced discrimination. See J. Sahadeo, “Druzhba Narodov or second-class citizenship? Soviet Asian migrants in a post-colonial world,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (2007): 559–79.


64. Round and Kuznetsova, “Necropolitics and the Migrant as a Political Subject of Disgust.”


67. Laruelle, “Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia.”

68. Uzbekistan’s official policy with regard to Uzbek labor migrants in Russia is changing under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The government has finally acknowledged the scale and economic importance of these migratory processes.

70. Abashin, “Migration from Central Asia to Russia in the New Model of World Order.”


75. Etzold, “Migration, Informal Labour, and (Trans) Local Productions of Urban Space.”

76. Velayutham and Wise, “Moral Economies of a Translocal Village.”

77. Etzold, “Migration, Informal Labour, and (Trans) Local Productions of Urban Space.”

78. Chikadze and Brednikova, Migrants from Uzbekistan in Russia.


87. Raul Pertierra et al., Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2002); Nicole Constable, Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and “Mail Order” Marriages (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); McKay, “Translocal Circulation.”

88. All names used in case studies are pseudonyms.


91. S. Vertovec, “Migration and Other Modes of Transnationalism.”


93. Round and Kuznetsova, “Necropolitics and the Migrant as a Political Subject of Disgust.”

94. Kikuta, “Remittances, Rituals, and Reconsidering Women’s Norms in Mahallas.”
Part III

UZBEK ISLAM

State Control, Resilience, and Resistance
Chapter Eight

Counter-Extremism, Secularism, and the Category of Religion in the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan

Should We Be Studying Islam at All?

Johan Rasanayagam

In February of 2015, the “Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015” came into law in the United Kingdom. As I was sitting down to start writing my contribution to this collection, the duties the new law places on universities, schools, local councils, the police, and other “specified authorities” became a live topic of concern in my own university and in the national media. Thinking through the implications for my own practice as a university academic, I was forcibly struck by the parallels between how extremism, Islam, and religion are constructed in this law, in the UK government’s counter-terrorism strategies and the guidance documents associated with them, and the discourse and practice of the Uzbekistan government that has been a focus for my research for a number of years. Is the UK not so very different from Uzbekistan after all? These reflections prompted me to explore the question here, to shift the theme of my chapter from locating Islam in Uzbekistan in global Muslim practices to a more specific and focused discussion of government counter-extremism policy in the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan. A second motive for the prominence of the UK in a volume dedicated to Uzbekistan is to address what I see as a tendency in Central Asian studies to overemphasize the distinctiveness and particularity of the region, while underplaying how Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states participate in global dynamics and processes that extend even beyond post-Soviet space.

THE UK GOVERNMENT’S COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

The main anxiety in UK universities about the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act has been the threat it poses to the principle and practice of freedom of speech and academic freedom. These concerns have not only been voiced
by universities themselves, but also by the parliamentary Human Rights Joint Committee and the National Union of Teachers, among others. Part 5 of the Act places a duty on specified authorities to have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism” (article 26:1). The significant point is that this duty goes further than preventing or reporting of violent acts or incitement to violence. The guidance that accompanies the Act makes clear that specified authorities, including universities, are required to challenge extremist ideas. As stated in the guidance, “This includes not just violent extremism but also non-violent extremism, which can create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism and can popularize views which terrorists exploit” (paragraph 38).

Part 5 of the Bill puts the UK Government’s “Prevent Strategy” on a statutory footing. Prevent is part of the UK’s counterterrorism strategy “Contest” and the latest version of Prevent was produced in 2011. Its aim is to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. It covers both domestic and overseas contexts, but the emphasis in the Prevent document is on measures to be taken in the United Kingdom. The document recognizes that the UK faces a range of terrorist threats, including the historic threat from Northern Irish Republican and Loyalist groups, threats from extreme right-wing groups and individuals, and a number of others such as those connected to the Israel-Palestine conflict. However, it recognizes al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other like-minded militant Islamist groups as posing the most significant terrorist threat.

The Prevent Strategy does, in fact, make a distinction between extremism that is expressed in nonviolent ways and radicalization. As defined in the document’s glossary:

**Extremism** is vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas.

**Radicalisation** refers to the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism.

The document makes clear that holding and expressing extremist ideas is not illegal in Britain, is protected by European Human Rights legislation, and that the government is fully committed to protecting freedom of speech. At the same time, it sees radicalization as driven by ideology that sanctions the use of violence. The line between extremism and radicalization is therefore blurred because the ideas promoted by extremist individuals and organiza-
tions can feed into the radicalization process and provide a coherent narrative that justifies terrorist violence. In a situation where “specified authorities” and their employees are expected to monitor those who use their services, this ambiguity has resulted in a number of controversial cases of individuals being referred to the authorities. For example, the BBC reported in January 2016 that in England and Wales 415 children under the age of ten had been referred to the government’s deradicalization program over the previous four years. Another widely reported case was that of a postgraduate student on a counterterrorism course at Staffordshire University who was referred to the authorities in September 2015 when an official of the university observed him reading a book on counterterrorism in the institution’s own library. The university later apologized to the student. This ambiguity is made further apparent in the government’s announcement, in the Queen’s Speech following the general election in May 2015, of its intention to enact an “Extremism Bill” that states as its objectives:

• to strengthen government and law enforcement powers to stop extremists promoting views and behavior that undermine British values
• to protect the public from the serious harm extremists intend to cause to individuals, communities, and the values we live by
• to address the gap in government and law enforcement’s powers to deal with extremism that falls below the thresholds in counterterrorism legislation.

The intended bill includes what it calls “banning,” “disruption,” and “closure” orders and measures to prevent the broadcast of what are judged to be extremist material and to block extremists from working with children.

THE UZBEKISTAN GOVERNMENT’S DEFINITION OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

There are some striking parallels in the understanding of extremism and Islam as expressed in the UK’s Prevent Strategy and the Uzbekistan government’s policy and practice. The definition of extremism in the Prevent Strategy—being in opposition to “fundamental British values” and as an ideology that needs to be countered at the level of ideas or counterideology—mirrors closely Uzbekistan government discourse that positions Islamic extremism in opposition to its own construction of Uzbek national values. As I have argued in previous publications, this discourse subordinates Islam within the idea of “Uzbekness” (*O’zbekchilik*), which is constructed as the historically
developed complex of national spiritual values and personality traits. An authentically Central Asian Islam that is part of this heritage, characterized as tolerant, open to other religious traditions, and nonpolitical, is contrasted with “alien” forms of Islam that are portrayed as dangerous, counter to Uzbek spiritual values, and politically motivated. The authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan utilizes its construction of authentic national values as a tool of governance. Local authorities, imams of mosques (which are under the supervision of the quasi-state Muslim Board of Uzbekistan), and citizens themselves are instructed by the government to be on the lookout for signs of deviance among their neighbors and mosque congregations. Citizens in Uzbekistan live in a state of what I have called existential vulnerability, in which they must present their engagement in Islamic practice in terms of authentic Uzbek tradition or risk drawing the attention of the state security apparatuses, so that even converts to different Christian denominations have been accused by law-enforcement bodies of being “Wahhabi,” Islamic extremists, and therefore a threat to national security.

UK AND UZBEKISTAN: THE PRODUCTION OF ISLAM

This comparison between the policies of the UK and Uzbekistan governments might seem trivial. Can the United Kingdom really be equated with Uzbekistan in terms of freedom of conscience and an individual’s ability to practice Islam or any other religion as he or she sees fit? This chapter does not seek to compare the UK and Uzbekistan in terms of limits to religious freedoms per se, but rather to explore the parallels between the two state contexts for what they tell us about how religion and Islam are produced as categories that enable particular interventions within state projects. Talal Asad has argued that there is nothing natural or universal about the category of religion, but that it is the “historical product of discursive processes.” The category of religion comes into being, moreover, in a relation with secularism itself. Secularism for Asad is not the separation of two pre-existing and objectively identifiable spheres: politics and religion. Secularism produces those categories along with others such as public and private, and the subjectivities and sensibilities appropriate to them. Another anthropologist, Hussein Ali Agrama, has further argued that we need to shift our attention from what secularism is, as in a separation of “religion” and “politics,” to what secularism does. He sees secularism as “a set of processes and structures of power wherein the question of where to draw the line between religion and politics continually arises and acquires a distinctive salience.”

Taking secularism in these terms not only cautions against treating “religion” or “Islam” as objective or analytical categories that can be simply ap-
plied to understand or classify empirical phenomena. It also directs attention to how they are produced within particular state projects, so that the Islam that is produced in such a project is an entirely different object from the Islam that emerges in the understanding of a particular Muslim. Recognizing this puts into question the legitimacy and effectiveness of employing “religion” or “Islam” as analytical terms for anthropological or social scientific analysis more generally.

**CONSTRUCTING ISLAM AS IDEOLOGY**

Both the UK and Uzbekistan governments approach extremism as ideology from which vulnerable citizens need to be protected and against which a counterideology needs to be put forward. This leads both governments not only to draw lines between “religion” and “politics” in their own specific ways, but to intervene actively in determining the nature and content of Islam itself. Section 7.2 of the UK’s post-2011 Prevent Strategy states its objectives as being to:

- respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism
- prevent people from being drawn into terrorism
- work with a wide range of sectors where there are risks of radicalization

This represents a key shift in the approach to dealing with extremism. While the pre-2011 version of the strategy concentrated on policies aimed at the integration of minority groups and community cohesion so as to tackle the material causes that lead individuals to support or engage in terrorism, the revised document puts the emphasis on challenging extremism as ideology (Prevent, section 6). Promoting community cohesion and integration in order to increase the “resilience of communities to violent extremism” (Prevent, section 6.23) is, in the post-2011 strategy, largely left to the ongoing work of relevant government departments such as the Department for Communities and Local Government. Prevent is targeted more directly at countering extremist ideology, those who promote it, and those who are vulnerable to it.

Both the UK Prevent Strategy and the Uzbekistan government make what Tashkent terms the “consciousness” of the individual an object of state intervention. The booklet published by the Uzbekistan government entitled “The Idea of National Independence” (Milliy istiqlol g‘oyasi) contains sections entitled “The struggle for the consciousness of the individual in the contemporary world” and “The development of Uzbekistan in the sphere of ideology.” Uzbekistan’s National Ideology is intended to shape a desired con-
Chapter Eight

sciousness and, as Andrew March has pointed out, to provide the population with immunity from alien ideological threats, not just political Islamism but also ethnonationalisms and great power hegemony. “The Idea of National Independence” itself speaks of a need to provide the population with “ideological immunization.”

The explicit effort to produce and inculcate in citizens a national ideology is perhaps an inheritance of the Marxism of the Soviet Union, but the UK government’s counterterrorism policy has adopted an approach that is similar in essential ways. Indeed, on occasion the language used in relation to the application of this policy in schools has also employed the metaphor of inoculation. The Prevent Strategy document itself adopts the language of protection and safeguarding of vulnerable children and adults. Specifically, vulnerability “describes the condition of being capable of being injured; difficult to defend; open to moral or ideological attack.” Once vulnerable individuals are identified, the Channel Duty Guidance states that specified authorities—such as schools, universities, or National Health Service bodies—are required to refer them to the Channel program that is part of Prevent. Channel is tasked with identifying such individuals, assessing the risk that they might be drawn into terrorism, and formulating “support plans” to divert them from this path. In cases where an initial assessment of a referred individual by dedicated Channel practitioners in the police and local government authorities concludes that intervention is appropriate, a Multi-Agency Panel will be formed to draw up a “support package.” Members of such a panel might include representatives from educational institutions, health services, and other specified authorities appropriate to the particular circumstances of the individual, and the Channel document stipulates that their intervention should be “considered alongside other early intervention measures such as work undertaken to support and divert young people from anti-social behavior, gangs or drugs.”

The Prevent and Channel documents provide guidance for identifying vulnerable individuals. Prevent states that support for violence is associated with a lack of trust for democratic government, a sense that the Muslim community is being unfairly treated such as though the use by the police of “stop and search” powers, perceptions of biased and Islamophobic media coverage, and UK foreign policy interventions in the Muslim world. Channel lists behavioral indicators including spending increasing time in the company of other suspected extremists, changing styles of dress and appearance to accord with the group, identifying other groups as threatening or responsible for all social or political ills, and using insulting or derogatory labels for them.
“Official Islam”

A significant effect of framing extremism as ideology is that it leads governments to respond by supporting and promoting an “official Islam.” This is another significant parallel between the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan. The production of an official Islam in Uzbekistan has been commented upon by a number of observers, both in the sense of placing the Islamic infrastructure of mosques and madrasas under state control via the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan and in seeking to develop and enforce an official theological position. While in the UK mosques and imams are not state or quasi-state institutions and functionaries as they are in Uzbekistan, counterradicalization efforts have led the government to support a particular theological interpretation that it characterizes as mainstream and moderate. The Prevent Strategy contains an analysis of the ideology associated with al-Qaeda and similar groups that call for the overthrow of what they consider to be “un-Islamic” governments, including those of Muslim-majority states. The document states that the role of the UK government is to address and disprove the claims of terrorist and extremist groups, including through the promotion of alternative theological interpretations of sacred text. It recognizes the difficulties of the government taking a position on matters of theology directly, but it outlines how the government seeks to work with civil society groups and activists, such as mosques, community leaders, Muslim chaplains in prisons, and academics in the field of Islamic studies, which has been designated a “strategically important and vulnerable subject” (Prevent, section 8.36), to promote a “mainstream message of Islam” (Prevent, section 8.37). To this end, the government has supported a series of roadshows around the country and abroad, including those organized by “Radical Middle Way” that describes its mission as to “promote a mainstream, moderate understanding of Islam that young people can relate to.”

Samuel Rascoff, a professor of law at New York University, has identified the establishment of an “official Islam” in the counterradicalization efforts of the U.S. government that, he argues, has taken its lead from the UK. He describes state support for “moderate” theological interpretations of sacred text in official documents of the U.S. State Department and the pronouncements of the president and his senior advisors, as well as in theological texts produced by the U.S. military for use in detention facilities in Iraq to refute the radical interpretations of Islam of some prisoners. Rascoff presents this as a constitutional problem in the United States, where the establishment clause of the First Amendment prohibits state support for one religion over another. For Saba Mahmood this is, in fact, an essential feature of secularism. Following Asad, she argues that secularism is not an effort to banish religion from
the public domain but to shape the form it takes and the subjectivities it endorses, so that nation-states have often had to act as “de-facto theologians.” She argues that U.S. foreign policy in the Muslim world has sought to reform Islam in a direction that turns Muslims away from anti-Western, “extremist” interpretations and to fashion Muslims as compliant citizens of liberal democracies. It has done this by promoting a particular hermeneutical approach to sacred text. In Mahmood’s analysis, U.S. policy sets up as its target a “traditionalist” Islam that produces a literalist, ahistorical reading of the Quran, one that renders it inaccessible to ordinary Muslims who then need to follow the guidance of Islamic scholars. Instead, U.S. policy promotes a liberal approach to sacred text. A Muslim needs to be an autonomous, enlightened subject who critically interprets scripture as literature, placing the Quran in the historical setting of its revelation and searching for meaning beyond a literal reading. U.S. policy therefore takes a theological position on the nature of Islamic sacred text and how an individual should relate to it.

**Islam and State Secularism**

An examination of the counterradicalization efforts of the U.S. and U.K. governments, as well as the Uzbekistan government’s discourses on extremism, brings into sharp focus how Islam comes to be constructed within the state project of secularism. The specific character of Islam differs from one form of the state secular project to another. Mahmood’s account of the U.S. promotion of a liberal Islam and the Muslim as a critical, liberal subject is very different from the Uzbekistan government’s construction of Islam as an aspect of a national spiritual heritage. In Uzbekistan the opposition is between an authentic “Uzbekness” and foreign, alien, and dangerous ideas. Legitimate membership in society requires citizens to embody an authentic culture and spiritual heritage, part of which includes practicing a Central Asian Islam. Official, state ideology is intended to express and reinforce a morality that is viewed as natural to the Uzbek person. Those who express an understanding of Islam that is judged to conflict with Uzbek national spiritual values are seen as in some way inauthentic and placed outside the body politic as unnatural, perverse, or misguided; hence the need for ideological immunization.

What is common to these various state secular projects is the production of religion itself as an object that can be manipulated as a tool of public policy. This is what Gregory Starrett, writing about the use of Islam in school textbooks in Mubarak’s Egypt, has called the “functionalization of the religious tradition,” and what Patrick Eisenlohr, writing about Mauritius, has described as the “governmentality of secularism.” In Mauritius, which has a Hindu majority and a significant Muslim minority population, secularism
is expressed as a political ideal of “unity in diversity,” enacted in the state’s neutrality toward a number of “ancestral” religious traditions. The state actively supports and subsidizes the activities of religious organizations and the public celebration of religious festivals that are framed in those terms, “in order to shape responsible citizens suitable for successful coexistence with others in an officially plural society.”

**RELIGION AS AN ANALYTICAL CATEGORY**

When framed as ideology, religion is produced as a set of ideas and moral values manifested in sacred texts and their interpretations. Different religions can then be placed in the same frame with other religions and nonreligious ideologies, as well as alongside national values in relation to which they can be judged to be compatible or not. Outside of state discourses, religion is understood as a conceptual category by many of the people that anthropologists and other scholars encounter in their work. However, as scholars we should hesitate before adopting religion as an objective category for analysis as opposed to examining how particular constructions of religion or Islam are produced in specific historical circumstances. We should hesitate before assuming that particular ideas, practices, or processes can be naturally or easily placed within categories such as religion, politics, or culture that exist independent of the contexts that produce them.

In my own work in Uzbekistan I found no analytical value in the category of religion. Religion as ideology, or even alternatively viewed as a defined sphere of human experience concerned with beliefs about the supernatural, divine, or extrahuman, a sphere of the sacred or the spiritual in opposition to the profane, fails to capture the diverse experience through which an individual develops a sense of what it means to be a Muslim. Some practices might fit within this category, such as memorizing and reciting the Quran, studying sacred texts and their interpretation at one of the madrasas that have opened since independence, or performing the daily prayers.

However, is a wedding or a funeral a religious, a social, or a cultural occasion? Both involve identifiably “Islamic” elements, such as the *nikoh*, the portion of the marriage presided over by an imam, or the *janoza*, the funeral prayer. But they also incorporate elements that do not fit within the religion frame, such as the festive (or commemorative) meal, a version of which was an element in all the collective festive gatherings (*to’y*) I attended, whether weddings, *mavlud* commemorations of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, or even *gap*, the regular gatherings of friends, colleagues, former classmates, and other groups. As I have argued more fully elsewhere in relation to the
village near Andijon where I conducted much of my research in Uzbekistan, a marriage is not a discrete ritual event that can be analyzed in terms of its separate religious, social, or cultural elements. Rather, the actual event of the marriage is a moment within an ongoing life project. Parents accumulate the dowries for their daughters over a number of years. Friends, neighbors, and kin contribute to the financing of the weddings and other life-cycle rituals of each others’ households. These events are organized with the involvement of the mahalla leadership, often using collectively owned cooking pots, crockery, and so on. Holding such events, and attending those of others, binds people in networks of exchange and participation in a community.36

An individual’s understanding of what it means to be a Muslim is not determined in a discrete religious sphere but develops in the unfolding of a life that includes the ongoing sociality with others, attending the life-cycle and ritual events of kin, neighbors, and friends, marrying off and settling their children appropriately, and taking a full part in common projects such as building a road through the neighborhood or building a mosque. This directed me away from framing my writing as an account of religion or Islam in Uzbekistan, but instead towards exploring how individuals developed a moral self, a sense of what it meant to be a good person, to lead a good life. A moral self that is understood as a Muslim self is not confined to a supposedly “religious” sphere.

If the category of religion makes little sense, the category of Islam as one religion distinct from other religions is equally unhelpful. What I mean here is Islam as an object for scholarly analysis. I will return to how we might understand Islam in other ways later. The experience of illness and healing is a context that shows particularly clearly the problems of approaching Islam in this way. In my research, I found that for many this involved the intervention of spirits, and it was significant in developing their understandings of what it means to be a Muslim. In the accounts of many Soviet-era ethnographers, distinctions are made between a pure Islam and pre-Islamic survivals of shamanism. Gleb Snezarev documents a detailed demonology of supernatural spirit beings among Khorazm Uzbeks in the 1950s and 1960s including, among others, jinn, who inhabit abandoned buildings and cemeteries and who can harm human beings, or pari, who can be both benevolent and harmful toward humans. Those afflicted by such spirits would seek treatment by specialists that Snezarev terms “shamans,” locally known as parkhon, folbin, or bakshy, who are able to subordinate the spirits. He describes the different illnesses and treatments and how a person becomes a shaman, but the point I am making here is that he distinguishes between a genuine Islam and the pre-Islamic residues of other religious practices of which shamanism is a part.37 Vladimir Bazilov makes a similar distinction in his analysis of how shamanism became Islamized and incorporated into the local practice of Islam and Sufism in the region.38
In my own research, however, I found that the cosmologies of different healers were highly diverse in contrast to the distinct typologies of spirits, treatments, and ritual specialists documented by Snezarev. The practice of healing with spirits and the cosmologies associated with them are not the enactment of a commonly shared and coherent system. Rather, for most healers they were a creative working out of a moral self in the flow of their own life experience, resulting in individual understandings of the healing process and the nature of the spirits they engaged. For many others, of course, including the imams of officially registered mosques, their practice was un-Islamic, the corruption of true, divinely revealed Islam by a false, human tradition. The distinctions between Islam and other traditions is therefore one made by many Muslims themselves. But the understanding of Islam by a Muslim needs to be interpreted as arising from the moral reasoning of that particular individual, contributing to the development of their own moral self, rather than as a universally applicable category for analysis. If not, the anthropologist places him or herself in the position of deciding who is—and who is not—a proper Muslim, what falls legitimately within Islam and what does not, and this dismisses the moral understandings of many—if not the majority—of those I encountered in Uzbekistan. For many healers, their spirits and healing practices, while rejected by some, were central to the working out of their own moral selves that they understood to be Muslim, and some indeed saw themselves as missionaries calling people back to Islam after the Soviet decades of enforced atheism.

THERE ARE AS MANY ISLAMS AS THERE ARE MUSLIMS

Islam, if it becomes an object, does so in the development within an individual of a moral self, and this self emerges in the flow of experience that does not sit within categorical boundaries of religion, culture, or the social. In a very real sense, there are as many Islams as there are Muslims. Islam, understood in this way, is unintelligible to the state secular category of religion. If we return to the United Kingdom, the call by the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams for the statutory law of the secular state to recognize Islamic Sharia law makes this unintelligibility all the more evident. Specifically, the former archbishop is addressing the tension between a universal law to which all citizens have equal access and to which they are equally accountable, and the ability of the citizen in a diverse and plural society to have their own rationalities recognized in the legal process. Ethnic, cultural, or religious affiliations, he argues, produce different modes and contexts of belonging, but where the citizen of the secular state is subject to a uniform law, this diversity is confined to a private sphere of individual...
choice. As Williams frames the problem: “If the law of the land takes no account of what might be for certain agents a proper rationale for behavior ... it fails in a significant way to communicate with someone involved in the legal process.” Although his intervention is addressed to the recognition of Sharia law, the former archbishop sees this as an issue for all religious believers that has surfaced, for example, in the arguments by Catholic adoption agencies that they be exempt from antidiscrimination legislation that they see as forcing them to support same-sex relationships. For Williams, it is important to allow this “private” space a public voice because it is the primary source of moral creativity and vision in society.

Williams deals with three possible objections to the recognition of Sharia law. The first is how to deal with competing interpretations of sacred text or indeed to differentiate legitimate textual interpretation from cultural practice. The second is the danger that such recognition might deprive some members of a minority community of rights or liberties that they would otherwise enjoy under universal, secular law. Williams has in mind here such issues as repressive or retrograde treatment of women in matters of marriage and divorce. The third problem is that a system of legal pluralism would destroy the principle of universal rights and equality of all citizens under the law. Williams addresses the first problem with the establishment of a recognized authority that could act for the religious group, such as a form of the existing Islamic Sharia councils to which I will return later. His response to the second and third problems is the idea of the common good that is not specifically derived from Islamic law or from any particular religious tradition, but is shared across all of society. Williams looks to Muslim majority states themselves as precedent for this, where membership of an Islamically defined Ummah transcends national state boundaries but where, at the same time, multiple faith communities share a common citizenship, so that identities are dual, both as a citizen and as a Muslim believer. In the UK context, the idea of the common good would mean that no “supplementary” jurisdiction would have the power to deny a member of a minority group the rights granted to other citizens.

Williams seeks recognition for the fact that in plural secular societies “citizenship itself is a complex phenomenon not bound up with any one level of communal belonging but involving them all.” The problem, however, is with his conception of being a Muslim as group belonging, which ultimately frames his intervention in the categories of the secular state. He understands being Muslim as belonging to an Ummah, a community of Muslims, a religious community defined in terms of a coherent and shared set of beliefs. It is these beliefs, recast as ideology, that the Uzbekistan and UK governments attempt to regulate in different ways and to different extents. He sees the United Kingdom as a plural society made up of a number of distinctive but
overlapping belongings. This makes possible the imagination of a “Muslim community” that can be represented by a unified Sharia council that could make authoritative rulings on matters of theology and interpretation of the sacred texts. The Muslim community then exists alongside other groups, defined in religious, ethnic, or cultural terms, but all living under a shared moral ideal of the common good. This is essentially the state secular vision that in its UK version imagines a multicultural society of distinctive religious and cultural groups united under a respect for “core British values.” The problem is that Islam as an object that emerges in the working out of a moral self, as I have described in Uzbekistan, is unintelligible to this statist vision.

Responding to the former archbishop’s proposals, Samia Bano criticizes him for not recognizing the diversity within what he assumes to be a single Muslim community, and for assuming that Sharia law can be thought of as a coherent legal system. She points out that the Islamic legal systems in Muslim countries, which for the most part concern personal law, vary from one state context to the other, and that the Sharia councils in the UK represent different schools of Islamic thought. Moreover, in her study of the operation of these councils, she found a conflict between women who primarily approached the councils to obtain a Muslim divorce certificate, and the Islamic scholars attached to them, who saw their primary objective as being to reconcile the couple and save the marriage. She documents instances of women forced to sit close to violent husbands against whom they had obtained court injunctions, and husbands who used the opportunity to negotiate access to children and financial settlements in “the shadow of the law.” Bano argues that formalizing the Sharia councils in the way the former archbishop suggests might produce an essentialized vision of Muslim identities that are homogenous, fixed, and unchanging.

Beyond the issue of the diversity of Islam and Muslims, the important point is that a secular state judicial system and a Muslim’s recourse to the Sharia as a mode of resolving issues in their own lives are essentially different kinds of reasoning that cannot be equated. John Bowen identifies this difference as two distinct registers in the operation of Sharia councils in the United Kingdom, which he terms “legalism” and “spirituality.” The register of “legalism” concerns achieving practical solutions by negotiating, through the Sharia councils, state judicial systems in the UK and abroad. The register of “spirituality,” on the other hand, concerns the legitimacy of Sharia councils that extends beyond the formal legal resolution. People’s recourse to the Sharia councils in this register was not about obtaining a legal ruling or practical solution but about seeking guidance on how to lead a good life and developing a moral, Muslim self. Hussein Ali Agrama makes a similar observation in his comparison between the Fatwa Council of Al-Azhar mosque
and the Personal Status courts in Egypt. Both institutions base their decisions on Islamic Sharia, both predominantly deal with family issues, and many of the Personal Status court judges have been trained in Al-Azhar’s Faculty of Sharia and Law. While the courts were an expression of the authority of a corrupt and repressive state, he argues that the muftis issuing fatwas saw themselves as engaging in a pedagogical practice. For fatwa seekers, Agrama uses Foucault’s concept of “care of the self” to argue that the fatwa is an ethical practice “by which selves, in the multiplicity of their affairs, are maintained and advanced as part of Islamic tradition.”

**ISLAMIC TRADITION**

How can we understand the “Islamic tradition” that Agrama refers to? I have been arguing that scholars should not take Islam as an analytical object and that Islam becomes an object only within the developing moral self of a Muslim. The object for scholarly study here is not Islam, as such, but the process by which an individual develops their own particular understanding of Islam, and the conditions of possibility within which this proceeds. A legitimate scholarly object that might be called the “Islamic tradition” is the historically developed body of philosophy, theology, and thought that takes as a central reference the fact of Divine Revelation through the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the lives of people who identify with this tradition in different ways. This again is very different from the state secular objects of Islam or religion. It is not a coherent ideology or set of beliefs but a developing body of philosophy, interpretation, and debate, both textual and lived. This understanding of an Islamic tradition does not constitute a community to which individuals can belong in the way Archbishop Williams suggests, and many of those who relate to the Islamic tradition in their own ways might well reject others who do so as un-Islamic or misguided.

Asad has suggested that anthropologists approach Islam as a “discursive tradition.” Islam as an object for anthropological analysis is not the textual tradition itself, but the historically rooted discursive production that seeks to establish correct belief and practice, and the relations of power and the institutions through which this is enacted. What is particularly interesting is Asad’s idea of “tradition.” The debates and struggles among Muslims to Authoritatively determine “orthodoxy” are mutually intelligible because they refer to common texts, histories, and sacred geographies. A self becomes a specifically Muslim self, and an argument is an Islamic argument, when it is located in this tradition. As Agrama puts it, “It is through fatwas . . . that the gap between the fixed past and a constantly changing present and future is bridged.”
In Asad’s discursive tradition the focus is on processes by which different interpretations are produced and authorized, or by which moral, ethical selves come into being. But even this dynamic, process-oriented approach is too objective. It would have excluded much of the experience of individuals I encountered in Uzbekistan, through which they developed moral selves that they understood to be Muslim. Contributing to the collective effort of constructing a road through a neighborhood, or settling children well, would not fit within even Asad’s broad notion of an Islam tradition. Furthermore, experiences of illness and healing, or of dream encounters with spirit beings, for some contributed to developing a moral self that were understood in terms of Islam, while for others these experiences were central to becoming Christian.

For some time now anthropologists have at least implicitly acknowledged this problem by simply sidestepping the question of how to delineate Islam as an object for study, addressing instead the ways different interpretations of Islam are produced and debated, how ethical selves are produced, or specific practices such as veiling or prayer. But the danger here is that Islam as a global or universal object remains the implicit, unexamined grounding for these analyses. The very existence of a subdiscipline of an anthropology of Islam, a body of literature that identifies as the key analytic in its study of individuals, groups or processes that they are “Muslim,” is a problem that has begun to be acknowledged. If we do not explicitly and deliberately abandon Islam as an analytical category that has universal application, rather than recognize that Islam is a personal relationship with the divine and becomes an object only within the moral self of an individual, we risk acting like a state and making our own interventions that explicitly or implicitly define what Islam is or is not. Even if this is not our intention, we risk analytical slippage, where the Islam we seek to understand in our writing contributes to the objectiveness of the Islam that is produced in different state secular projects, whether the “liberal” objects of the United Kingdom and the United States, or the “authoritarian” ones of Uzbekistan.

NOTES

1. Schedule 6 of the Act details specified authorities.

4. Concerns were also raised in the March 2016 conference of the National Union of Teachers that some aspects of the government’s Prevent Strategy inhibits the free discussion in schools (accessed March 29, 2016, https://www.teachers.org.uk/news-events/conference-2016/prevent-strategy).

5. “Revised Prevent Duty Guidelines for England and Wales: Guidance for specified authorities in England and Wales on the duty in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.” Crown copyright 2015.


16. This last objective refers to universities, schools, and the other specified authorities covered by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act.

17. In the Russian translation the term for consciousness is soznanie. In Uzbek it is ong.

19. Mafkuraviy immunitet (Milliy istiqlol g’oyasi: 7).
23. Ibid., section 1.1.
24. Ibid., section 2.11.
27. Khalid, Islam after Communism; Louw, Everyday Islam; Rasanayagam, Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan.
37. Gilep P. Snezarev, Remnants of Pre-Islamic Beliefs and Rituals among the Khorezm Uzbeks (Berlin: Reinhold Scheltzer Verlag, 2003).
42. Ibid., 269.
Chapter Nine

At the Crossroads of Religion and Regime Security

Teaching Islam in Uzbekistan

Sebastien Peyrouse

The broad reforms introduced by Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s included a degree of religious liberalization. In Uzbekistan, this coincided with a phenomenon observed in the Muslim world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: namely, the expansion and transfer of religious socialization from the essentially private—and, in the Soviet case, clandestine—sector to new or officialized public institutions. After independence in December 1991, the Uzbek government had to respond to this new context and to the expectations of its population, which was over 90 percent Muslim. It did so, first, by decreeing religious freedom for all, although this was quickly breached; second, by promoting Islam as the country’s historical and cultural patrimony; and third, by providing believers with the chance to have religious instruction, something the Soviet regime had severely restricted. For believers, gaining access to knowledge (‘ilim) through Islamic instruction lies at the core of Islamic dogma and practice: the Quran refers to it more than seven hundred times.1

The teaching of Islam, and Islam as a possible basis for an educational system, form part of a general reflection on the individual’s right to instill and receive religious and/or secular values. Such education shapes individual identity, conscience, and beliefs. It constitutes “a total social phenomenon, in which knowledge, politics, and social networks interact in a complex and generative manner.”2 The degree of initiative that governments provide to the family and the religious institution—the mosque and the madrasa—has been the target of constant struggle, compromise, and arrangements.3 How could Tashkent craft a cohesive religious policy that responds to the diversity of thinking, beyond the supposed unity of Muslim belief and feelings of identity?
Chapter Nine

The teaching of Islam, its educational institutions (governmental or private establishments, secular or religious ones), its actors (teachers and students, believers or nonbelievers), and its curricula (the choice of subject matters taught and the integration in them of Islamic concepts, *tawhīd*) have been the subject of many debates that have accentuated their differences, both in time and space. All of these have been variously shaped by the political, intellectual, and social developments of the modern era. Globalization has added to the difficulty of managing religion, which is undergoing hybridization or glocalization as a result of ongoing collisions between global, standardized cultural aspects and local cultural aspects. In Uzbekistan, as elsewhere, to speak of a society that would coincide with a single culture, one confined to a delimited territorial space, is meaningless. Population flows across borders have fragmented authorities, upset social hierarchies, and profoundly challenged traditions of knowledge and faith, as well as their practice.

Moreover, for more than ten years, debates on teaching Islam have received an increasingly security-oriented inflection. After it was revealed that some Taliban, members of al-Qaeda, and Islamic militants of Muslim states, such as Indonesia, had been educated in madrasas, these institutions and their teachings came to be regarded as instruments for promoting radicalism and violence. Many Muslim states have favored secular educational systems, based on the Western model, over Quranic schools, “suspected of wanting to compete with states, in the name of a unavowed Islamism, for a share of the power of instruction and ideological dissemination.” Others consider, however, that the attention brought to Islamic education in the debate on terrorism is overly simplistic. For them, these establishments stand unjustly accused of producing extremism and fomenting anti-Western sentiment; they are, on the contrary, important places of teaching and instruction for millions of Muslims and work to complement the national education system.

Adopting a policy that he legitimated by referring to the experience of the decolonized Muslim world and the extremist excesses it faced, President Islam Karimov set about securitizing religious education, which resulted in strict control over both institutions and actors. This chapter examines how the Uzbek government manages and supervises the teaching of Islam in its theological, cultural, and historical dimensions through officially recognized institutions: secular and religious schools, and institutes of higher education. It does not address either the private and unofficial setting of religious teaching (family, clandestine circles), or the relevant means of spreading this religious knowledge (journals, leaflets, or other means of communication). The first part of the chapter presents how the government conceptualized and functioned the teaching of Islam. Then it goes on to analyze the implementation of this policy; first, by looking at the institutional aspect: what institutions
are authorized to teach Islam and how are they and their actors—teachers and students—supervised in a way that matches the security aims of the authorities? Next, it delves into the pedagogical aspect: how does the government supervise the subjects taught in religious schools, and what place does Islam and its teaching have in secular public schools? The chapter concludes by investigating the impact of the government’s approach in light of experiments undertaken abroad, in particular in other postcolonial Muslim states.9

Studying Muslim education in its concrete implications, which remain largely unknown,10 proves especially difficult in Uzbekistan. The regime’s authoritarianism prevents independent opinion polls from being undertaken, considerably limiting the possibilities for foreign scholars to carry out fieldwork on topics deemed sensitive. The regime has its own datasets that are collected by local groups (researchers, teachers, members of the administration), most of whom are vassals of the political authorities, and by the security services (police and secret services). These datasets are generally corrupted through the impact of authoritarianism, which lead many interviewees to censor themselves, and study directors may adapt the findings to fit the government’s expectations. The lack of sources, on which the government’s policies are built, nevertheless ought not to prevent the elaboration of considerations on the teaching of Islam in Uzbekistan. By referring to issues that other Muslim states have faced and the data that has been collected in them, data not available in Uzbekistan, I try here to highlight several questions for which neither observers nor the Uzbek government (out of its concern for regime security) can answer, and the potential dangers arising from that ignorance.

THE GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE TO POPULAR EXPECTATIONS

Muslims of Uzbekistan in Search of Religious Culture

After seventy years of official Soviet atheism, the religious freedom established upon independence fueled an interest among Central Asian populations for religion in general, and for Islam, in particular. In the 1990s, half of all households in rural areas refused to send their children to school on Fridays so that they could participate in prayer.11 Beyond prayer, and the four other pillars of Islam to which all believers are supposed to subscribe, religious study is considered a duty, a mode of worship.12 Each Muslim has to absorb the basic knowledge of the Quran, the canonical words, the deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (hadith), and the so-called law of God (Sharia). For many, this knowledge is to be learned at the earliest possible age, either in a
private (family) or public (school) setting. A World Values Survey revealed that half of the Uzbekistani population (54 percent) favors religious teaching in public schools. However, in their desire to acquire knowledge of Islam, the aspirations of believers are, in Uzbekistan as elsewhere, extremely diverse. These various aspirations reflect identity questions; local morals; and, in the Uzbek case, the many political, economic, and social issues occasioned by the fall of the Soviet regime.

Acquiring knowledge of the Quran is conceived as a discipline. As the Quran constitutes the divine word, the embodied Book is, even when not understood, believed to provide moral direction. Besides, many parents believe in the permanence of the process whereby the abstract (the Quran) is grafted onto the physical (the body). In the post-Soviet context, which is deeply marked by the principles of authoritarian secularism, Islamic education often pertains less to the memorizing of theological doctrines than to inculcation and values—social and familial ones—that the so-called vacuum resulting from the collapse of the communist system is seen to have threatened. Although the previous regime was largely decried for its antireligious policies, since the 1990s the Uzbek population has become ever more nostalgic for the moral order that the Soviet regime managed to establish. After 1991, Islam Karimov and his regime tried to maintain a moral frame, using a mix of authoritarian political propaganda and social organizations, such as the youth organizations Kamalot, Kelazhak ovozi (the voice of the future), and Sen elgiz Emassan (you are not alone). For many parents, however, the state has nonetheless failed in this task. They thus consider that it will fall to Islam and its teachings, as carried out through its institutions and its teachers, to provide moral guidelines. Enrolling one’s children in Muslim religious education classes is a way of dissuading them from wandering the streets and leading a dissolute life.

Learning the Quran is also a key part of socialization. For many young believers, acquiring—and exhibiting—one’s religious knowledge is about making a show of respect toward one’s family circle: the child, and, later, the adolescent, imitates his or her parents by praying and reciting the Quran. This social act goes beyond the family circle: in Tajikistan, Manja Stephan has shown that “Islam offers an ‘honorable’ option for urban youth in order to enhance their social status.” The knowledge and practice of Islam are tools of local integration (in the district, and in one’s social circle more generally), and for youth indicates their adult status to their entourage.

Finally, Islamic education has the potential to be part of a dissenting repertoire. In some Muslim regions of the former USSR, such as Tatarstan, such teaching is viewed as a response to the declared secularism of the political authorities, as a motor of desecularization from below: the teaching of Islam
is intended to contribute to reintegrating religion into the social realm, and even to challenging the values and validity of the official secular education system. In Uzbekistan, the ongoing economic crisis, the lack of state investment, and a decline in the number of trained teachers put the post-independence education system under particular pressure. Islamic instruction and its pedagogical institutions can therefore be seen as a response to the degradation of the official governmental education system, something that has been observed in other countries such as Morocco.

Moreover, Islam and its teaching raise questions about the very identity of the educational system. In many Muslim countries, education is seen as too Westernized and as having no basis in a national religious ethos. A Westernized system is held to produce individuals who are unaware of their traditions, their historical and cultural heritage, and unable to meet the challenges they face. Moreover, the secular education experience has often yielded little relief from unemployment, economic, or social issues. Consequently, in many Muslim states, such as Egypt, a majority of the student population believe that an education grounded in Islamic principles would improve the quality of instruction and provide them with better prospects for the future.

The Government’s Response: Functionalizing Islam and Its Teaching

The Uzbek authorities sought to respond to the diversity of the population’s hopes and to the numerous issues raised by Islamic education in the first post-independence years. A law on religious freedom, passed in 1992, prohibited state atheism and recognized the Muslim religion as one of the nation’s cultural and historical foundations. Karimov sought to counter the weakening of local traditional Islam as represented by the Hanafi school, which, according to the rector of the Islamic University of Tashkent, would fuel the spread of radical ideas under the Soviet regime.

Despite this awareness, the government displayed extreme caution toward Islam and its teaching, noting the risks that its unsupervised development can incur, as the experience of several other Muslim states bears out. Shoaizim Minnovarov, one of the highest officials in religious affairs from 1997 to 2006, deplored the attempts by heads of Muslim states to draw on Islamic doctrine to respond to the political and social issues of the time. In secular-authoritarian Uzbekistan, an “Islamic solution,” one that would meet the population’s expectations, which the government cannot possibly satisfy, could contribute to delegitimizing the authorities and open up space for the opposition. The risk is compounded as religious practice is growing among youths, who are notoriously “more responsive to political trends, to opportunities for action,
than almost any other group in the population.” The Uzbek government has thus sought to prevent Islam’s potential hold over individual lives, against the will of many Muslim theoreticians for whom Islamic education is a process that engages the rational as much as the spiritual and social dimensions of the individual, so as to supply him or her with a comprehensive life code, a harmonious Weltanschauung as represented by the concept of Tawhid.

To justify its actions, the government has relied on a security rhetoric. Specifically, the government needs to supervise religious education to forestall the situation that a number of decolonized countries have encountered, namely fundamentalist groups taking advantage of the moral and political vacuum to insert themselves. For the Uzbek authorities, the religious focus of many schools constitutes an important factor in the development of extremism. According to these authorities, by using concepts, which they label “medieval” (the caliphate, slogans of Islamic equality [islamskoe ravenstvo], and Sharia law), religious education in countries like Pakistan enabled radical groups and organizations to enter the system of religious education, and, in Afghanistan, the emergence of the Taliban. For them, in a nation-state founded, at least partially, on religious principles, the dogged development of a religious education system that fails to take into account the specificities of national thinking (natsional’noe myshlenie) and that ignores the local political and social context, would cause irremediable harm to secular education in the Muslim world.

Following the example of leaders in Qajar Iran, the Ottoman Empire, or Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Uzbekistan has sought to objectify and functionalize Islam and its teaching. Religious instruction (Religiovedcheskoe obrazovanie) is officially tasked with: (1) educating youths in a spirit of interethnic (mezhnational’nyi) and interreligious (mezhreligioznyi) concordance, (2) contributing to the creation of a shared cultural framework, and (3) stabilizing the political contents of religion and shaping it as a regime-friendly discourse. Duly administered, Islam and its teaching, which must put “less stress on individual autonomy than it does on the consensus (ijma) of the community (Ummah) and respect for the social contexts and traditions in which an individual originates,” meets the objectives of an authoritarian regime. While the Western liberal education system encourages students to base their individual beliefs on rational principles and avoid a “blind reliance on authority,” Islam considers that “encouraging students to question their moral beliefs may merely make them confused and unmeshed with society as it is.” The Uzbek government and Islam come together, then, by preventing the emergence of an extreme form of individualism that would reject the world and implicitly encourage people to contest the powers that be.

The functionalizing of Islamic education is set within a strict legislative and institutional framework, as well as a strict separation of the education
system from religion. The right to secular education is granted to citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan irrespective of their attitude toward religion. Religious disciplines are banned from inclusion in the curricula of the educational system. According to the law “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” of May 1, 1998, “No one will have to undertake obligatory religious instruction” (article 3). The teaching of Islam is also prohibited in secular public schools (article 4, paragraph 9). Uzbekistan has no private schools that provide Islamic instruction, unlike Pakistan, where the growth of this type of school has diminished the appeal of religious schools. Lastly, all religious teaching in private family circles is illegal: many Muslims have been arrested and imprisoned in Uzbekistan for having organized instruction and discussion sessions on the Quran in their homes.

The Uzbek authorities oppose any religious interference in educational institutions. This opposition distinguishes it from other post-Soviet states, where secular schools, such as those in Russia, have gradually introduced religious education; and from Muslim states, such as Libya, where schools, themselves based on the Western model, have incorporated an Islamic component into their curriculum in order to respond to critics’ claims that their education is too Westernized. In Uzbekistan, teaching the theological dimension of Islam has been limited to secondary-level religious schools—madrasas—and some higher education institutes.

MANAGING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, TEACHERS, AND STUDENTS

The Space of Teaching: Madrasas and Higher Institutions

Religious schools enjoy notable popularity in the Muslim world. They compete with secular schools for students, sometimes from kindergarten onward, as we see in Black Africa or Asia. In Indonesia, close to one-quarter of children of primary and secondary school age attend Quranic schools (pesantrens). In Morocco, a large number of students left the public education system in the 1980s and began attending religious schools instead.

Quranic schools offer, first and foremost, an alternative method of education that meets pious and religious standards. For many parents, these schools provide their children with a religious focus that is often absent from the national school curriculum. Beyond the appeal of Islamic education, these schools are often shaped by the shortcomings of public schools, as well as by the relative scarcity of public schools in rural areas. The religious school also presents a possible answer to household poverty and exclusion: in Morocco, despite improvement to the primary school system, Quranic education
has nevertheless continued its gradual rise. It can become essential for house-
holds in economic crisis, as their children may have been barred from secular
institutions due to poor performance. Religious schools, lastly, provide ac-
cess to an education that is unavailable in state schools: in Tatarstan, some
students attend them to learn Arabic and undergo complementary religious
education.

Despite the antireligious repression in Uzbekistan and the country’s off-
official atheism until the last years of perestroika, there were two religious
schools in operation under the Soviet regime: the madrasa Mir i Arab, which
closed in the late 1920s but reopened in 1945, and the Imam al-Boukhari In-
stitute, which opened in Tashkent in 1971. These original Muslim schools,
bolstered by the opening of many others in the late 1980s, fueled the religious
revival that a section of the population aspires to today. The development
of Islamic teaching establishments can be advantageous if the government
is able to supervise it. As Hefner and Zaman have shown, the growth of a
network of madrasas dating to medieval times contributed to recentralizing
and homogenizing Islamic knowledge and authority.

As such, the Uzbek government, claiming to base itself on the experience
of the Muslim world, has very strictly supervised the organization of religious
schools in order to avoid three possible pitfalls tied to their development.
In many Muslim states, Quranic schools have proven difficult to keep under
control: such Quranic schools have an oral tradition, no entry requirements,
and are often ad hoc institutions in that they do not answer to the state or a
specific administration, but are organized by teachers, the local community,
or members of the local ulema. They are unstable and may expire along with
the master-teacher who heads them, but they are also flexible and able to cre-
te themselves anew elsewhere. This potential nomadism of religious teach-
ing has the capacity to escape the control of the Uzbek authorities. Further, in
contrast with secular education establishments, the madrasa enjoy an inherent
legitimacy owing to their religious foundations. Consequently, they have the
ability to resist the party line of the political authorities, to undermine their
legitimacy by revealing their inability to maintain and develop the education
system, and to establish Islam as an alternative model. Lastly, for over two
decades now, the key issues surrounding Muslim schools have visibly altered.
After the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the numerous ensuing incidents claimed
by Islamist movements, the questions tied to Islamic teaching establishments
shifted from being an academic debate that was essentially internal to the
education sector to being a national and international political debate: the
final report of the 9/11 Commission and much of the media came to present
madrasas as factories churning out Taliban in Afghanistan and as incubators
of extremism. Thus, by invoking the Afghan example, the Uzbek government
has regularly likened madrasas to Jihad factories liable to foster a return to so-called medieval values that undermine recent advances.\textsuperscript{55}

The government has responded to these potential threats by restricting the number of institutions authorized to dispense religious teaching. Uzbekistan had one hundred madrasas in 1992,\textsuperscript{56} twenty of which were under the jurisdiction of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. Many failed to meet Uzbek educational standards and were closed down. The \textit{hujras}, unofficial schools or classes for men, provided Islamic courses under the Soviet regime, and several educational institutions that opened during perestroika or after independence were also shuttered. The government has also used administrative procedures to limit the opening of religious education institutions throughout the country and has closed some to reduce the number of them as well. All communities seeking to open a religious school have to submit an application to the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU). After reviewing the application, the MBU presents the proposal to the Religious Affairs Committee, which convenes a special college comprising members of various ministries. If the application is endorsed, the madrasa is registered but its land is placed at the MBU’s disposal. This regulation grants the government significant leverage, as it can seize the real estate at any time.\textsuperscript{57}

The Uzbek administration has abused this registration procedure to limit the growth of Islamic education establishments since the early 1990s, and even to reduce their number. In 1998, the Uzbek administration issued a decree demanding that religious schools re-register, leading to the closure of eight madrasas that had been under the jurisdiction of the MBU but that, according to government sources, did not meet the required criteria. Among these madrasas, Khwaja Sayyid-Ahmad in Margelan, which opened after independence, and the Lyceum “Fath,” located in Tashkent oblast and founded in 1992 in cooperation with a Turkish organization, ipek Egitim ve Medeniyet Yaktı, were devoted to training the MBU’s imam-khatibs.\textsuperscript{58}Fewer than eighty students have been allowed to graduate from this school. In 1998, more than three dozen madrasas that did not fall under the MBU’s remit were closed.

The government also targeted several religious schools that had been built or restored thanks to funding received postindependence from Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and other foreign sources. In the early 2000s, the government put an end to this source of financing: it denounced the risk of fundamentalist Islam, especially of Wahhabism, and the possible spread of alternative political programs suffused by foreign experiments. Sixteen private Turkish Fethullah Gülen schools, which had opened in the 1990s, were suspected of spreading a version of Islam outside the authorities’ control and closed in 2001.\textsuperscript{59} Lastly, unlike neighboring Kazakhstan,
Uzbekistan refused to join the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), which promotes new educational theories and the learning of Arabic in non-Arabic-speaking countries. The Uzbek authorities view the organization with great suspicion.

The government maintains a limited network of religious schools, which it deems sufficient to cover the country’s entire geographical space. These institutions are set up as sites for knowledge canonization and political control over religious affairs. Quranic schools have no choice other than to yield to government policy. Their role is prescribed as being to train an elite tasked with supporting the authorities and its official discourse. In 1991, a new madrasa, Kukaldash, opened in Tashkent, where it trains 150 students over four-year cycles. In Bukhara, the Madrasa Mir-i Arab takes 100 students for a three-year course of study. In the Samarkand region, the madrasa of the Imam al Bukhari, opened in 1991, is responsible for teaching religion, while an extremely limited network of Islamic education institutions operates in the Fergana Valley, considered one of the hearts of Islam in the country. The two main schools there are the madrasa mullah Qirghiz in Namangan, and the madrasa Sayyid Muhyi-l-Din Makhdum, located in the Andijon region, which welcomes between 100 and 150 students each year. In the country’s west, the official education of Islam is undertaken in Urgench in the Khorezm region by the madrasa Fakhryddin al-Razi, which trains 50 students and, in the town of Nukus, Karakalpakstan, by the Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Beruni madrasa. Lastly, in the south, Kashkadaria has a madrasa Khwaja Bukhari, named after a Sufi from the Naqshbandiyya sect. At the national level, two madrasas are reserved for women, Juybar-i Kalan, in Bukhara, and Khadicha-yi Kubra, in Tashkent.

Three higher education institutions provide Islamic studies. The Islamic institute of Tashkent, opened in 1971 under the name of Imam al-Bukhari, has more than 500 students and 125 teachers. However, the main one is the Tashkent Islamic University, created in 1999. An emblem of Islamic teaching in the region, this university is tasked with “profoundly studying and carefully preserving the rich and unique spiritual and cultural heritage of Islam for future generations.” It has around five hundred students and one hundred teachers as well as preparatory classes (tenth and eleventh grades) for students who choose to commit to entering university. In 1992, the Institute of Oriental Studies of Tashkent also opened a department of Islamic studies that trains between thirty and forty students each year.

Close Surveillance of Teachers and Students

The strict control of religious schools finds further expression in the close supervision of teachers and students. The government thereby seeks to pre-
At the Crossroads of Religion and Regime Security

vent a development observed in some African Muslim states, in which many Quranic schools became sites of learning without a constituted permanent faculty, making them difficult to control. Such teachers present themselves as independent entrepreneurs of religious knowledge who, through their religious understanding, whether real or self-declared, attract a group of followers and enjoy considerable esteem. Furthermore, in line with Soviet tradition, many teachers believe that society is responsible for the moral education of youth. As most of these teachers are Muslim, the boundary between the secular individual, as defined by state school, and the believer, which the majority of the Uzbek population count itself as being, is porous. The Uzbek government sees itself as preventing a phenomenon of desecularization from below, something that certain sections of the population desire, and that may potentially receive support from teachers, but that would jeopardize the principle of separation of religion and state. Teachers are able to establish themselves as the custodians of Islam’s immutability, contribute to the development of religious concepts in the social realm, and thereby challenge the political authorities. The government is thus faced with two questions: upstream, how it is possible to form a teaching body and supervise its training, and, downstream, how it is possible to ensure loyalty and prevent all attempts at spreading discourses that veer from the official political line?

Issues surrounding teacher training become all the more important with a reduction in the number of Islamic educational establishments. Despite the creation, in the early 1990s, of a department of Islamic studies tasked with training Muslim cadres, the government has struggled to recruit teachers. It has had to have recourse to the local imams of towns and villages, or even to young graduates of madrasas and other religious institutions, whether graduates of hujra, or those who have participated in exchange programs with foreign states, in particular Saudi Arabia. As the number of madrasas grew throughout the country, the Uzbek authorities began to deplore the poor instructional skills of Islamic teachers. They denounced the so-called imams, considered to be without culture or formal Islamic training, as well as the presence of foreign missionaries, whose courses they regarded as little more than sermons.

In the 1990s, the government tightened its control further by requiring teachers of religion to have completed a religious education and obtained a state diploma. This new regulation disqualified most mullahs and scholars from the hujra milieus from teaching. The religious teachers—mudarris— are now effectively regulated by a system of financial aid, which can be suspended in case of disagreement with the state authorities or if their political loyalties are in doubt. Contacts between teachers and the international community have also been restricted. Uzbekistan largely reduced exchanges with foreign Islamic universities, such as the al-Azhar University in Egypt.
Teachers of Islam are now supposed to be trained nearly exclusively within Uzbekistan. To this end, in 2008 the government opened an Imam International Center in Samarkand, Imam Buhari, one of the main functions of which is to improve the instruction of khatibs imams.71

Downstream, religious teachers are closely supervised by the governing boards of their establishments, and they can only teach within its facilities. While in Black Africa some public schools began to employ Quranic teachers in order to reduce the exodus of students leaving them to join Quranic schools, in Uzbekistan no religious figure authorized to teach in the religious schools is permitted to provide any introduction to Islam in secular public schools. The government has forbidden teachers in Quranic schools from giving courses outside public school hours (a common practice in some Muslim states, such as in Yemen, where children are allowed to go to both types of school72), and religious teachers from acting as tutors for struggling students.

Lastly, the authorities monitor the students very closely. Every individual aspiring to undertake religious studies must first complete a general secondary education.73 Admission to religious schools is closely scrutinized: in interviews, teachers are supposed to verify the political opinions of prospective students, to make sure of their patriotism by asking questions about the president’s life or the Uzbek national anthem, and to check that these students do not harbor any sympathies for strains of Islam of which the authorities do not approve. Once admitted, the students are regularly questioned by the security services, and the teachers are obliged to report on any individual suspected of deviance. The political authorities thereby mean to prevent the emergence of a politicized Islamic discourse that, as occurred in Indonesia, denounces overly liberal or deviant Islamic teachings that promote religious pluralism.74

Despite Uzbekistan’s prestigious Muslim history, the number of Islamic educational institutions is very limited, mostly due to the official restrictions enforced by the political authorities. Taken together, Islamic educational establishments in the country offer only a limited number of places to candidates seeking religious studies. However, this limitation is also due to a weighty historical legacy: its educational system, imported from Russia under the Tsarist and then Soviet regimes, was retained after independence. Despite some reforms, “traditional” schooling—that is, schooling stamped by Islamic traditions as they existed in Central Asia prior to colonization—was marginalized. The Soviet regime replaced the vast majority of religious schools with a large network of secular public schools. Today, despite the immense difficulties facing the Uzbek education system (lack of financing and teachers, a decline in the educational levels of students, corruption throughout the
system), the network of secular schools established under the Soviet regime is largely still in place.

Besides, the atheist policy of the Soviet regime, followed by the authoritarian secularism of the Karimov regime, marginalized religious schools in the minds of the population. Unlike in other Muslim states, Uzbekistan’s religious schools are not seen as a real alternative: a majority of the population consider that, while they may provide religious training, they do not provide the rigorous, modern education that will lead to a good job. According to a sociological study done by RanoUbaidullaieva, only 1 percent of the persons interviewed mentioned the Islamic University as being among the five most prestigious higher education institutions. This unpopularity is not specific to Post-Soviet Central Asia. It is found in other decolonized societies, such as on the Ivory Coast, where, despite the prestigious history of Islamic education in the country, such education is often seen as providing few job prospects.

However, the absence of sociological studies and the repression exerted by the political authorities in Uzbekistan prevents any reliable estimate about the demographics of the population that would be interested in a religious education, were they to have the opportunity. Despite the limited popularity of Islamic schools, it is likely that more youths would go to them if they were given the opportunity. Muslims in Uzbekistan frequently decry the lack of Islamic institutions in their country as well as the reduced number of students that each institution is able to train.

The state’s decreed boundary between the religious schools where Islam is taught and the secular institutions where religious education is prohibited nonetheless has proven porous. The physical interior of the secular institutions is pervaded by a population of believers who all bring with them their cultural, familial, and religious baggage. In Quranic schools, owing to the interference and its unwavering insistence on the principle of separation of religion and state, the political authorities risk upsetting the expectations of a fraction of students. Similar to many secular states, Uzbekistan has to manage to preserve, in and through the content of its education, the secular/religious separation, both in the secular and in the religious schools, a separation that some theoreticians of Islam and potentially also sections of the population, desire to reduce. How can Islam be broached in public schools, since the Islamic religion, to which the majority subscribe, is recognized by the government as a cultural and historical heritage, and a significant fraction of the population longs for it to be taken as such? Also how to combine and frame the concepts of Islam and of secularism in the subjects taught in religious schools?
Chapter Nine

CAN ISLAM HAVE A PLACE IN UZBEKISTAN’S SCHOOLS?

Theories according to which an Islamic education system would resolve the plight of Muslims are widespread in Islamic literature: the educational system ought to be saturated with the values of Islam. . . . It is necessary for Muslims to . . . have only one educational system, a compulsory one for every man and woman. . . . This education will bring a quick revolution in the thinking, feeling, and actions of Muslims.78

In this view, Islam has a duty to infuse the courses and subjects taught in secular and religious schools alike. These debates are carried by various Muslim populations throughout the world, although it remains difficult to estimate their tenor in the authoritarian Uzbek context. In Egypt, for example, one study showed that 67 percent of students support the teaching of history, biology, finance, and other subjects from an Islamic perspective.79

Beyond the common desire, held by Muslim theoreticians and sections of believers, to suffuse education with Islamic conceptions, the modalities by which such conceptions can be included in the curricula are hotly debated, both in the Muslim world and beyond. As Gandolfi has shown, “Its unique cognitive system, its singular teaching methods, its specific cultural, religious and political functions make an Islamic instruction one with varied and evolving forms.”80 So-called modernist tendencies, which promote the principle of individual reasoning (ijtihad), regularly confront conservative, or even fundamentalist,81 circles that favor the principle of following precedents (taqlid).82

The Uzbek authorities have adopted a clear stance on these questions by denouncing attempts by fundamentalist or terrorist groups to influence curricula, a phenomenon that has been observed in certain Muslim states:

A rupture in the balance between secular education and religious education, the exclusive development of this latter on the basis of medieval dogma, which is ignorant of religious, spiritual, and national specificities, makes religious education the ideal terrain for spreading a politicized version of Islam, religious fundamentalism, and extremism.83

Consequently, the government has strived to functionalize, both in secular and in religious schools, the curricula and texts used to teach Islam, not only in its theological and philosophical dimensions but also in its cultural and historical ones.

Subjects Taught in Religious Schools

The Uzbek government felt compelled to take a stance on two founding principles of Islamic education, namely the concept of knowledge in Islam
and learning by heart. For some theologians, the content of education must agree with the definition of knowledge in Islam itself. This definition has two principles: revealed knowledge, which is termed “divine,” and knowledge derived from reason, which emanates from the physical universe and the human mind. Revealed knowledge is grasped as a postulate and, as such, takes precedence. This concept finds a real echo in Uzbekistan, where, in 2011, one-third of Uzbekistani youths under age twenty-nine were said to hold that “whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right.”

On this view, science has to “understand and realize the meaning of the spirit of divine knowledge in its widest sense, for personal and social development.” Consequently, education is to shape a being subject to God and his laws, according to the principle of oneness (tawhid), for which all aspects of life, both spiritual and temporal, are united in one harmonious whole. Consequently, relativism, due to its veneration of human reason over so-called divine revelation, a motif of secular liberal education, conflicts with Islamic educational theory and is considered overtly damaging. Doubt and skepticism are said to form children who are incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, justice and injustice, truth and falsehood. For secular policymakers, this attitude, according to which all non-Islamic belief is false or partially false, prescribes a refusal of all nonreligious ideology and fuels religious intolerance.

Furthermore, learning by heart, a mode of teaching that prevails in many religious schools, also raises questions. Memorizing is presented as a way to preserve the Book in its exact form, such as the Prophet Muhammad revealed it, and as a means of embodying this text in the being of the students. This principle remains very controversial, since most students are said to learn to recite the verses without understanding the content. The rare studies carried out on the contribution of Quranic schools at the cognitive level—for example, in Morocco—have shown that children have a strong aptitude for memorization, but a weak capacity for abstraction and reflection.

With these two principles—the precedence of divine knowledge and learning by heart—the Quranic school is seen to be an institution that prepares students less for professional life and a future than to shape a believer who is subject to concepts potentially opposed by the official political narrative. Particularly alert to this risk, in 1999 the government set up new curricula to bring the education provided in religious schools closer to the standards of the state education system. The government regularly refers to the Jadids, who aptly reformed Islam and its teaching, renounced so-called medieval conceptions, and introduced new disciplines such as foreign languages, physics and chemistry, mathematics, economics, agronomics, and so on. Madrasas are compelled to include the subjects taught in the secular Uzbek schools, and to teach them according to nonreligious principles. These subjects are included so as to prepare students for active life and, for a government that is cautious about producing too many religious cadres, to redirect some of these students...
toward secular education. Recitation of the Quran (*tajwid*) only arrives in the fourth and final year and is closely monitored: in 1997 the government opened a special department reserved for such learning within the Islamic Institute of Tashkent, where about twenty hand-picked students can take a two-year course that is supervised by twelve mudarris.\(^93\)

The institutions of higher learning rest on an identical principle. The Tashkent Islamic Institute has been reformed several times in order to strengthen the secular teaching of religious texts. Apart from religious subjects *Tafsir* (exegesis), *fiqh* (Muslim law), hadith (actions and words of the prophet), and Arabic, the Institute provides a general education in accordance with strictly secular principles, such as the history of Uzbekistan, the “theory and practice of the building a new democratic society in Uzbekistan,” political studies, physical education, and the natural sciences.

To guarantee the secular content of teaching, the government requires the same textbooks used in secular public institutes to also be adopted by Islamic schools and institutes; no textbook specific to religious schools can be used for secular subjects. On the other hand, the government has issued twenty textbooks for teaching Islam, textbooks written by high state functionaries in charge of religious affairs or by the highest local Islamic authorities. The main ones, *Perevod znacheniy smyslov Korana* and *Islam i fundamentalist-skie techeniya*, are authored, respectively, by A. Mansurov and A. Tulepov, both vice presidents of the Uzbekistan Muslim Spiritual Board. A series of textbooks *Vy sprashivali* (*You Asked*) written between 2007 and 2013 by the mufti of Uzbekistan, U. Alimov, responds to questions on fatwas and contemporary aspects of the *fiqh*. In 2011 and 2012 several new textbooks, in both Russian and Uzbek, such as *History of Islam*, *Koranovedenie* (*Quran Studies*), *Khadisovedenie* (*Hadiths Studies*), *Islamovedenie* (*Islamic Studies*), *Sufizm* (*Sufism*), and *Sunnitskoe uchenie* (*Sunni Doctrine*)\(^94\) were published specifically for teachers in religious institutes. By setting these textbooks as the only authorized resources, the government centralized the content of theological education and censored all discourse that independent ulemas might attempt to spread in religious institutions.

**SECULAR SCHOOLS: ISLAMIC CULTURE AND HISTORY VERSUS THEOLOGY**

For sections of the Muslim populations, the absence of religion, or the lack of the religious elements in the curricula of public schools, as justified by the principle of separation of religion and state, belies the official discourses that claim Islam as one of the country’s historical and cultural foundations. In Egypt, several sociological surveys have shown that a majority of students
believe that the content of education does not align with their interpretation of the national and Islamic character.95

The Uzbek government’s stance in this debate involved subjecting the teaching of Islam, in both its religious and historical dimensions, to very strict supervision in secular schools. In the early 1990s, in response to the population’s wishes, the elementary and middle schools incorporated some teaching about Islam into their syllabi. However, school administrators struggled to supervise the content of this teaching, and works by some Salafist theologians of the Arab world crept into secular public institutes.96 The Uzbek authorities reacted rapidly. First, they forbade the importation of religious works.97 Second, they stripped Islamic instruction in public schools of most of its theological and philosophical content, thereby confining it within an essentially local and historical dimension: secondary-level students study the biographies of theologians and thinkers who were born on Uzbek territory, such as Imam al-Bukhari, as well as extracts of hadiths translated into Uzbek.98 Verses of the Quran and hadiths are integrated less in their religious dimension than from a secular perspective that promotes familial and social respect.99

On the other hand, the government has diluted Islam by incorporating it into a general course on religious studies as such—religiovedenie—in which all the religions present on Uzbek territory are taught: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and so on. Taught using textbooks of Religious Studies (Religiovenenie), Ethics (Etika), Foundations of Spirituality (Osnovy dukhovnosti) or the history of world religions, these courses present the cultural and historical foundations of the main religions and of religious rites (religioznye obryady). Using this approach, the Uzbek authorities claim not to be favoring one religion over another, and prohibit all forms of propaganda that promote any one of them, instead seeking to instill religious tolerance in pupils and students. These religion courses include sessions on the state’s recommended ways to prevent religious extremism and terrorism. In the higher educational institutions, religion is also examined from a juridical perspective: students have to take a course on the freedom of conscience in Uzbekistan and on the laws pertaining to religious organizations.100

Lastly, the Uzbek authorities further diluted Islam by integrating it into a so-called enlightenment and spiritual education (manaviyat va marifat), or moral and spiritual education (dukhovno-nravstvennoe vospitanie),101 which is taught instead of the scientific atheism from Soviet times. This curriculum, presented as the founding principle of independent Uzbekistan’s education system,102 rests on so-called patriotic and national values—cultural, familial, and popular traditions, respect for a moral multisecular heritage that is to be transmitted from generation to generation—into which Islam is implicitly included but not highlighted.103
CONCLUSION

Today Uzbekistan, more than almost any other Soviet successor state, still resists the advance of Islamic education. Following the example of many Muslim states after gaining independence, the government sought to modernize the country using a secular education model inspired by the former colonizer. However, it refused and even ignored the potential conflict between secularized education and traditional Islamic thinking, which has bourgeoned over the last twenty-five years. Religion and state, despite their stipulated separation in the constitution, remain closely linked, intermingled, and each is influencing the Islamic revival in Uzbek society. The proliferation of institutions of religious education throughout the world attests to Islam’s appeal to some sections of the population. Taking into account the experiences of other countries, the very strict restrictions placed on the teaching of Islam in Uzbekistan raise several questions.

Despite the repression enacted against religion in general and religious education in particular, nonstandard streams of religious knowledge have continued to be studied and transmitted beyond the circles of ulemas. As the Turkish experience shows, this policy risks pushing less moderate strains to join clandestine networks, and therefore to fall out of the authorities’ surveillance networks. Mustafa Kemal undertook one of the most radical programs of secularization in the Muslim world. By denouncing the madrasas as “degenerated ruins, unable to be reformed,” by forbidding the hajj between 1934 and 1947 as well as Sufi lodges, and by eliminating higher Islamic education, Turkish authorities indirectly fueled the creation, a quarter of a century later, of an underground educational system. In Uzbekistan, while the government’s intention was to have religious education come out of its Soviet-era family confines and enter public space, by restricting the sites of education, and despite the continuance of some madrasas and religious education institutions, the teaching of Islam remains part of a private or familial clandestine sector outside the control of the political authorities. 104

Owing to its authoritarianism, censorship, and repression, Uzbek authorities have considerably reduced the means it has to prevent the violence against which it means to fight. Many Muslim states, despite their authoritarianism, drafted their policies with the results of opinion polls and surveys in mind. In Indonesia, studies have shown that more than 50 percent of high school students justify the use of violence in the name of Islam, a viewpoint shared by a fraction of teachers. Another study showed that one-quarter of students wanted to rejoin the ranks of the Islamic Defenders Front to fight against “foreigners who hate Islam,” and attack nightclubs, brothels, and gambling houses. 105 The absence of data in Uzbekistan throws a dark veil
over our knowledge of the expectations, hopes, and frustrations of believers, in particular of young people, and considerably reduces the elements of reflection required for developing a policy on religious education, and for understanding the potential excesses that emanate from it.

The extremely authoritarian management of Islamic education in Uzbekistan has prioritized regime security. In the name of a struggle against so-called medieval concepts, the authorities have reduced the framework imparted to religious teaching, both in its form (institutions) and in its content (place of Islam and modes of its teaching in secular and religious schools), in favor of a strictly secular education that allegedly meets the demands of modernity. In this case, however, policy implementation often occurs to the detriment of the population. Contrary to the expectations of some educational experts, who urge schooling as a remedy for “archaic mentalities,” the growth of secular education in many Muslim states has actually encouraged an attachment to Islam more than it has dissuaded it. The population regards the reduction, and even the exclusion, of religion from education as an attack on local culture and values: such values justify, for some believers, a traditional religious education, and might fuel the infiltrations and protests of students who demand a variant of Islam more in line with their expectations.

Islamic education is not a static phenomenon rooted in timeless medieval or traditional values: it evolves under influence of transformative forces in the world (religious reforms, nationalism, domestic policies, mass education, etc.). The recentering of Islam in modern times has benefitted from new forms of governance, electronic media, and mass education, which have enabled the political authorities to go beyond the ranks of the ulema and to attain the consciousness and lifestyle of ordinary Muslims. However, all these efforts at recentering have been outflanked by a new pluralization of knowledge and authority, which has given rise to new approaches about what it means to be a Muslim, further undermining the government’s ambitions of systematic control. Adopting a policy essentially grounded in regime security, according to which all alternative political, economic, social, or religious discourse is grasped as a threat to the powers that be, the Uzbek authorities run the risk of producing effects that are largely contrary to their declared ambitions and fueling the development of networks that escape their control.

Islam Karimov’s death and Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s assumption of power in September 2016 has reopened the debate on the direction of the Uzbek political regime and on its possible approach to managing religious life. The new president, renowned for his astuteness about the struggles of Uzbekistani society, will need to counter the radicalization of the country’s youth, a phenomenon that, while pertaining to an extreme minority, is growing. There is little chance that the new president will put the country’s extremely authoritarian
organization into question; however, pursuing a policy of repression against religion in general, and against religious education in particular, is liable to push the population of believers deeper underground, and to fuel the discourses of radical movements that portray believers as victims of a dictatorial and anti-Muslim political regime.

NOTES


10. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


26. Shoazim Minovarov chaired the Committee for Religious Affairs, the government’s official body for supervising religions.


31. Minavarov, “K voprosu o sisteme religioznogo obrazovaniya v Uzbekistane,” 143.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 142.
45. For Morocco, see Tawil, “Quranic Education and Social Change in Northern Morocco,” 506.
46. Ibid., 507.
50. Ibid., 4.
52. Ibid., 271.
55. Minavarov, “K voprosu o sisteme religioznogo obrazovaniya v Uzbekistane.”
58. Ibid., 256.
60. This information on Islamic education institutions is largely taken from the article by Muminov, Gafurov, and Shigabdinov, “Islamic Education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Uzbekistan.”
63. Ibid., 264; See the official website of the university: www.tiu.uz.
66. Most Russian teachers left the country in the 1990s and 2000s.
68. Minavarov, “K voprosu o sisteme religioznogo obrazovaniya v Uzbekistane,” 144.
72. Boyle, “Memorization and Learning in Islamic Schools,” 484.
75. More than two-thirds cite the state university, more than one-quarter the Financial Institute, 38 percent the State Technical University, and 35.9 percent the Tashkent Aviation Institute. See Rano Ubaidullaieva, “Sociological Research and Educational Reform in Uzbekistan,” *International Society Science Journal* 56, no. 179 (March 2004): 97.
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77. In the case of Tatarstan, for example, see Suleymanova, “Islam as Moral Education,” 161.


83. Minavarov, “K voprosu o sisteme religioznogo obrazovaniya v Uzbekistane,” 144.


88. Ibid., 349.


95. Cook, “Islam and Egyptian Higher Education.”

96. Olcott and Ziyaeva, “Islam in Uzbekistan.”

97. Ibid., 20.


105. Afrianty, “Islamic Education and Youth Extremism in Indonesia,” 139.


Chapter Ten

Moral Exemplars and Ordinary Ethics

Sufism in Bukhara

Maria Louw

In May 2011, for the first time in more than ten years, I was back in Bukhara where I had lived for some time in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, studying Sufism and everyday Islam. This time I was there for two weeks only. Although we had not really managed to keep up contact in the years that had passed, I succeeded in tracking down some of the Naqshbandi Muslim women I had come to know when I lived there. I was excited to hear how their lives had been, how they had experienced developments in Uzbekistan during the last decade, and updates on the bonds with Sufis in other parts of the world that they were starting to establish when I was there. I knew that the women’s mosque—where they used to come to perform dhikr (remembering God with repetitive invocations of his names and various religious formulas) together—had been closed: “suspicious” things had allegedly been going on there. Perhaps the best-known Naqshbandi in the city, Sadrid-din Salim Buxoriy, an historian and author of several books and pamphlets about the Naqshbandiyya, had passed away. Rumors had that he died when his son was arrested for religious extremism after a trip to Turkey: this had apparently been too much for him to bear.

I met with four of my Naqshbandi acquaintances in Mukaram’s home. All was fine, they assured me. Not like ten years ago. The moral character of people had improved. Thanks to President Islam Karimov, Bukhara had become such a beautiful place. (There had actually been quite a lot of reconstruction work in the old part of Bukhara during the last few years: many residents of Bukhara’s old city had their homes expropriated to make room for the new hotels and shops that were to attract more tourists to the place. There were also flower decorations everywhere, as the president had just visited). Lots of shrines—including those for central links in the Naqshbandiyya silsila,
spiritual chain—had been restored with state money. And, they continued, it was actually not a problem that the mosque had been closed. They did not have to meet anyway, as they—unlike ten years ago—had lots of books about the Naqshbandiyah: they could just read them and practice back home. In Naqshbandiyah, they added, it is not important to pray together as everything is *xuﬁyya* (inner). They understood things better and were better Sufis today—there really was not much to talk about.

Then Dilfuza joined us, a bit later than the others. Now the conversation took a turn: Dilfuza started to talk about the Apocalypse. She had seen a film that predicted that the Apocalypse would take place in 2012—and later a documentary on television and a prominent Russian clairvoyant had confirmed this. Maybe, she said, this was a warning to people that they had to behave better, because it made them think more about their life after death. People nowadays acted in repulsive ways. Mukaram cut her off with what seemed a strained smile and said that this was not true: that we may just have a tendency to focus on those who do not behave properly, while not paying attention to those who actually behave well. Dilfuza kept silent the rest of the afternoon.

I left Mukaram’s apartment perplexed. The silence with which they stifled Dilfuza’s remarks—and their insistence that things were going great, with Sufism and with society as such—contrasted sharply with the way the women, as I knew them ten years back, used to talk about their engagement in Sufism as well as the way they used to describe the ethics—or the lack thereof—that characterized their surroundings: What stood out was neither their understanding of Sufism nor the moral maturity of people around them. Rather, it was consistent feelings of vulnerability, doubt, and imperfection—and the sense that real Sufism could not possibly thrive in a society like the post-Soviet Uzbek one.

In this chapter, this shift of outlook will be my point of departure for discussing how Sufism has been approached in state policies and discourses as well as how it has been understood and practiced among Naqshbandis in Uzbekistan, from the early years of independence and until today. I argue that the 1990s were characterized by an emphasis on imperfection: the idea that real Sufism had been lost due to the seventy years of Soviet rule, and that much work was needed in order to restore it to its proper state—but also by efforts, at all levels, to revive it and the hope that it was indeed possible to do so. With increasing control and crackdown on Islam, these efforts to revive Sufism, however, have gradually been replaced by resignation among many ordinary Sufi practitioners and a hyperprivatization of Sufism away from its highly stylized and state-controlled forms.4
NAQSHBANDIYYA IN BUKHARA

Sufism has a long history in Central Asia, where it played a major role in converting people to Islam, particularly in the nomadic regions. Some of the world’s larger Sufi orders originate in the region: the Kubrawiyya and the Yasaviyya in the twelfth century and the Naqshbandiyya in the fourteenth century. The Naqshbandiyya, in particular, has played a very important role in the region throughout history. Leading Naqshbandis were patronized by most major post-medieval rulers, served as their spiritual and political advisers, and drew legitimacy to their rule. One of the greatest Naqshbandi shaykhs, Xoja Ahror (1404–1490), cultivated a relationship with the ruling classes with the intention of serving the world through the exercise of political power, and he had a major influence over the rulers of his time. He established the Naqshbandi tariqa (way or order) as the most influential in Central Asia, and his disciples started its dissemination in most Muslim regions of the world, making it one of the world’s most widespread Sufi orders. From this time, political involvement became a frequent feature of the history of the Naqshbandiyya. In Central Asia the close relationship between Naqshbandiyya and the ruling classes continued through the Shaybanid, Ashtarkhanid, and Manghit dynasties, right down to the last Bukharan emir, Sayid Olimxon, who was said to be a disciple of a Naqshbandi shaykh.

In the Soviet period, the campaigns against Islam targeted the Sufi orders. They were seen as clandestine, anti-Soviet organizations comprised of Muslim fanatics. Shrines and shrine pilgrimage, furthermore—related, though not coincident, with Sufism—became major targets for anti-Islamic measures and propaganda. Religious authorities connected with these places were persecuted. As for the shrines themselves, most of the smaller shrines were destroyed or left to decay, whereas many of the main shrine centers were preserved as museums or tourist attractions. They were rebranded as monuments of Central Asian architecture expressing an earlier stage in the development of the culture of the proletariat.

SUFISM AND MUSLIMNESS IN POST-SOVIET UZBEKISTAN

In the Soviet period, the Sufi orders of the Soviet Union enjoyed a virtually mythological status among the few Western scholars who were interested in Islam in this part of the world. They were seen as focal points for resistance to the Soviet regime, well-organized underground movements that were able to preserve religious knowledge and traditions among the more general population. Studies by these scholars tended to mirror Soviet discourses on
Sufism, only the normative signs were inverted: the irrational and reactionary Muslims in Soviet discourse were paralleled in Western scholarship by the noble Muslim fighting for his cultural integrity.  

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, there were expectations that a thriving Sufi tradition would be found in the region. However, in the beginning of the 1990s, disappointed scholars wrote about the disappearance, degeneration, and corruption of the Central Asian Sufi tradition. Instead of proper Sufism, they found “self-declared Sufis,” either without formal attachment to any Sufi order or with very limited knowledge of Sufism. They found Muslims who visited the burial places of Sufi shaykhs of past times in search of blessings, but who lacked an understanding of the depths of Sufism. Scholars also found governments that used and abused Sufism for their own ideological purposes. What they found was thus practices and ideas that did not live up to their expectations of what real Sufism was. A common theme in what was written on Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia in the 1990s was thus how the seventy years of Soviet rule had undermined people’s knowledge of Islam.  

Interestingly, these diagnoses largely reflected how Sufis themselves—as well as many locals for whom Sufism was a source of inspiration—thought about Sufism in Central Asia at the time. If there was a theme that permeated the way Naqshbandis in Bukhara talked about Sufism in the late 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, it was the loss of knowledge. People repeatedly emphasized that what they practiced was not real Sufism; it did not even come close. This idea—that “real” Sufism is a past phenomenon—actually has a long history in Sufism. But it was perhaps accentuated in a context like that of post-Soviet Uzbekistan, which was characterized by a general ethos of postcolonial loss: Where “the seventy Soviet years” were regularly blamed for everything from economic chaos and political corruption to religious and moral ignorance and confusion: a secular theodicy, which explained the presence of evil in a society that was supposedly led by good and progressive forces—and through which people, thus, could complain about the state of affairs in society without criticising the regime too much or too openly.  

In the time up to and around the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the union republics’ independence in 1991, many Uzbeks started to hope for a more liberal society where the freedom of faith would be guaranteed. Instead, the country merely became authoritarian in a new way. For example, the government launched repeated crackdowns on Islamic activism in an attempt to limit the influence of unofficial Islamic movements and groups, presenting religious “extremism” or “Wahhabism” as the most serious threat to the state and nation. However, it also sought to co-opt Islam as an element
Moral Exemplars and Ordinary Ethics

in its state-building projects and as a source of legitimacy. As in the other post-Soviet Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan has experienced efforts to construct a distinct national ideology and narrative of nationhood, built on images of the country’s great historical antiquity and importance. Islam has figured centrally in these efforts: President Karimov regularly referred to Islam in political speeches, essays, and interviews, lamenting the destruction of Islamic culture and of ancient moral principles—or more precisely of Uzbek Musulmonchilik (“Muslimness”)—during the Soviet years, picturing this Uzbek Muslimness as both intrinsic to Uzbek identity and under continuous attack from outside “extremist” or “Wahhabi” forces.

The form of Islam that has been promoted by the government in Uzbekistan is formally based on the Sunni Islam of the Hanafi School. In practice, however, the most diverse thinkers and mystics who have a connection with the present territory of Uzbekistan have been co-opted to the ideology of national independence as the progenitors of an official nationalist ideology, as if their views were mere manifestations of a single spiritual thread running through history. Aspects of the Sufi tradition, notably, have consistently been pictured as expressions of a kind of Islam that developed in harmony with the Uzbek national character. Furthermore—and quite ironically, considering Naqshbandiyya’s long history of involvement in politics—it is presented as inherently nonpolitical. A distinction has been made, then, between “good” Uzbek Islam, which is portrayed as indigenous, tolerant, and nonpolitical, and “bad,” “extremist,” or “Wahhabi” Islam, which is characterized as alien, antithetical to national spiritual values, intolerant, and politically motivated. The interpretations of Islam that are seen to be in accordance with the ideology of national independence are promoted through the muftiate, which issues outlines for the sermons to be held during the Friday prayer.

One aspect of the revival of the Sufi tradition in Uzbekistan has been the appearance of numerous books, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and television and radio broadcasts on the lives and teachings of Central Asia’s avliyo (saints), in which they figure as moral exemplars—realizations or personifications of a society’s most important values—in new ways. In an analysis of hagiographic literature from post-Soviet Uzbekistan, Jürgen Paul has demonstrated how central saintly figures in this literature have been invested with qualities that are in demand—that is, promoted by the government—at the present political juncture: “serve society, work honestly, do not stick your head out, listen to what your ‘ancestors’ say, do not aspire to self-fulfillment if this means a really individual effort,” values which are interpreted as “national” rather than “Muslim,” canonizing, as it were, the avliyo in question as saints of the nation.
In addition, Sufism as such was interpreted in new ways. Alexandre Papas has read the work of Najmiddin Komilov (d. 2012), who served as adviser to President Karimov on cultural and religious issues and who published extensively on Islam. Papas points out that in his publications *Tasavvuf 1. yoki Komil Inson Ahloqi* (Sufism 1. Or the Virtues of the Perfect Man) and *Tasavvuf 2. Tavhid Asrori* (Sufism 2. The Secrets of Unity), Komilov formulated a distinction between “incorrect” and “correct” Sufism, the former leading to dogmatism and fanaticism and the latter leading to the progress of humankind and consisting basically of private spirituality and loyalty to public authority. The Sufi heritage, in other words, was interpreted as containing the seeds of secularism within itself.

More conspicuous was the rebuilding and restoration of the country’s Sufi heritage in the form of shrines connected with avliyo. Patronage over shrines was indeed one of President Karimov’s most common reference points for the argument that his government had worked toward the rehabilitation of the nation’s Islamic tradition. During the late Gorbachev years and in the years following independence, numerous saints connected with the area that is now Uzbekistan were rehabilitated and celebrated, their shrines restored and reopened with state funding. In 1989, for example, the mosque at the shrine of Bahauddin Naqshband (1318–1389)—who lent his name to the Naqshbandiya sufi tariqa and played a great role in the development of its teaching—was officially reopened. In 1993, Bahauddin Naqshband’s 675th birthday was celebrated with the inauguration of his newly restored shrine complex, an event closely followed by state media. Several notable figures participated in the ceremony, including the mufti Hajji Muxtar Abdullaev, President Karimov, and numerous Sufi shaykhs from all over the Muslim world. Billboards featuring the sayings of central Naqshbandi avliyo were erected. Bukhara’s main street, once named after Vladimir Lenin, was renamed after Bahauddin Naqshband. There was a boom in newspaper articles and academic and popular books and pamphlets on the Naqshbandi tradition in Central Asia, and Bahauddin Naqshband’s mystical poetry was translated from Persian into Uzbek.

In this period, however, the rebuilding of shrines and rehabilitation of avliyo was not solely a state-controlled affair. Many efforts also took place on the local level to rebuild and restore sacred places that had been left to decay. Such efforts linked individual life stories and sometimes stories of whole communities with the larger Islamic revival in the country, as people devoted their lives to rebuild and serve a shrine that stood out as particularly meaningful to them and which had, in some cases, been a place they and their families used to secretly visit during Soviet times.
Sufism was in many ways omnipresent in Uzbekistan, but also conspicuously absent. In any case, the Bukhara Naqshbandis I knew often commented on the absence of “real” Sufism; the absence of “real” Sufi shaykhs (most found the idea that there might be avliyo in Uzbekistan today absurd), and the absence of a real understanding of Sufism, even among those who practiced it. There was, however, also a widespread hope that it was possible to restore the Sufi tradition, if not to its former glory, then at least to something that would make better people and a better society. Just as there were local-level efforts to rebuild the material Sufi heritage, there were also efforts to restore the Naqshbandiyya Sufi tariqa.

THE REEMERGENCE OF NAQSHBANDIYYA

Around the time of Uzbekistan’s independence, new networks of Naqshbandis were established, and some surviving networks reemerged from the underground. In addition, connections with Naqshbandis in other parts of the world were reestablished as Sufi shaykhs and followers, notably from Turkey and Pakistan, came to visit the region. The Naqshbandis I came to know during my fieldwork in Bukhara in 1998–2000 had all become practicing Sufis in the years right before or after independence; most of them were part of a network around Bobo Tesha (d. 1997), an elderly charismatic pir (spiritual leader) who had served his own pir somewhere in the mountains in the Kashgar Daryo region for around fifty years before he came to Bukhara after independence. The Naqshbandis had rather diverse backgrounds, but they tended to belong to the middle class: scholars, students, intellectuals, teachers, craftsmen, and artisans; men as well as women.

As they explained it to me, the central feature of Sufism—and what motivated their engagement in it—was the constant work on the self. They strove to cultivate themselves, particularly their senses, in order to perceive other, deeper, and more spiritual aspects of the world around them and thus to become able to live a life characterized by religiously grounded ethics in a predominantly secular society.

Talking about the moral and spiritual constitution of a human being, Bukhara Naqshbandis focus on the classical concepts of qalb (heart or soul), ruh (spirit), aql (intellect), and nafs (desire, ego, or base instincts) that have grounded theories of human psychology throughout the history of Sufism. In classical Sufi psychology the nafs is considered to be the moral person’s greatest enemy: it does not merely encourage a person to act amorally, it also seeks to legitimize amoral acts. A Naqshbandi is encouraged to act contrary
to the demands of the nafs in order to tame it and gain control of it. More extreme forms of nafs-jihad are rare in Naqshbandiyya, which tends to consider excessive asceticism risky and incompatible with the modern world. Classical methods for taming and training the nafs, however, like fasting and sleeplessness, are practiced. Most importantly, however, the Sufi seeks to tame the nafs through the *dhikr*—that is, the remembrance or recollection of God in the form of repetitive invocations of his names and various religious formulas.

Naqshbandiyya is known for its inner or unspoken (*xufiya*), dhikr. This dhikr is also referred to as the dhikr of the heart (Uzb.: *dhikr qalbi*). When the dhikr is focused in the heart—that is, in the center of the battle between good and evil in a human being—the body will be cleansed, physically and spiritually, and the nafs will be tamed. By taming the nafs, a person will experience the opening of the “eye of the heart” and the “ear of the heart” (Uzb.: *qalb ko’zi, qalb quloqi*): a person whose heart senses have been opened will start becoming more sensitive to God’s demands as well as the demands of people around him or her, more able to feel people’s inner lives, and become more attuned to the ethical demands of the Other.

The ultimate goal is to make the dhikr a habit for the heart and thus dissolve the distinction between the worldly and the transcendent, to fill each act with the presence of God and make an ordinary life into a journey toward God. Central to Naqshbandiyya is the rejection of extreme asceticism and the emphasis on world-affirming ethics, the idea that one should not turn one’s back to the world, but combine spiritual development with a this-worldly engagement: “The heart with God; the hand at work,” according to a saying attributed to Bahaudin Naqshband, patron saint of Bukhara and a central figure in the development of the teachings of Naqshbandiyya. This idea has been interpreted in various ways through the history of the Naqshbandiyya—as a call for adaptation to society, as a call for jihad against society, and everything in between. For the Naqshbandis I met in Bukhara, it was a continuous source of reflection, and their very engagement in Sufism seemed to be characterized by a continuous effort to strike a balance between this-worldliness and transcendence, between attention to God’s demands and the demands of people around them. Sometimes they criticized and tried to steer away from the evils they encountered in the surrounding society—the cynicism, greediness, and materialism they found characteristic of it—sometimes they emphasized the need to engage in it and make a living, pointing out that entrepreneurial spirit and responsibility are central virtues in Islam, and particularly in the Naqshbandiyya. In short, rather than providing them with easy answers to questions about how they should lead their lives and a ready-made template for virtuous subject formation, their engagement in Naqshbandiyya prompted them to continuously ask themselves such questions.
AN IMPOSSIBLE BALANCE

The Naqshbandis I met during my fieldworks in Bukhara in 1998–2000 often emphasized that it was more important than ever to tame the nafs, as the uncontrolled nafs seemed to control peoples’ lives and make them obsessed with money, power, and commodities. As Bibi Raja, an elderly woman put it:

Today, the nafs controls people. For example, there are many people with a strong nafs who travel to Russia or the Arab countries to do business and earn money. One day they might have a surplus, but the next day they may be ruined and loose everything; house, car. This is because of the nafs. It is better to have an ordinary salary and wait for better times. One day you have something. The next day you have nothing. But nowadays people have no patience.

The uncontrolled nafs, some of them emphasized, also expressed itself in the way politicians abused Sufism to promote their own interests, even when they have no idea about what real Sufism is. Despite the fact that Sufism had been approved by the government as an expression of genuine Uzbek “Muslimness,” many Naqshbandis experienced harassment by local authorities who suspected that they may hold antistate views due to their strong devotion to Islam. They also recognized the rule of the nafs from themselves and the way they were themselves constantly tempted by the surrounding society and the values prominent there.

A perennial question for them, then, was how to live a virtuous life and control the nafs in a society where it was tempted all the time. The solution, to them, was certainly not social isolation—many had a more ambiguous attitude toward the pursuit of money, power, and material goods that they found to characterize post-Soviet society. They emphasized the contemporary importance of the Naqshbandiyya idea that one should not turn one’s back to society, but engage in it, as difficult times made it necessary for everyone to work hard, not merely for themselves and their families, but also for their country. Their image of prominent Naqshbandi avliyo, for example, that Bahaudin Naqshband was a craftsman who served his community and provided for his family, resonated well with the way they had been put forward as moral exemplars in nationalist discourses. Some expressed the view that the best way to serve God was through hard work, and that Naqshbandiyya was the perfect way to practice Islam in a capitalist society as it was a Sufi order that emphasized the value of hard work and of not wasting one’s time (as compared with the dervishes of previous times who, they thought, had disturbed public order and sponged off others). Idleness was, according to many, one of the vices that permeated society; it was a remnant from Soviet times where “one did not have to work” because the state took care of you. Take,
for example, Erkin, a middle-aged businessman who had established a small clothes manufacturing company in the years after independence: although he emphasized the importance of nafs-jihad, he also stressed that the nafs is not merely a central and necessary constituent of the human being, but that there were also some, for Naqshbandiyya, central moral values attached to it:

The nafs encourage competition. For example, if your nafs . . . if you want to eat something, you have to create it. I am a tailor. If you produce clothes and sell them, you compete. Because of the nafs. Bahauddin Naqshband said, “the heart with God, the hand at work.” That is, do not just sit and say “Allah!” You have to work. There is also a saying: “If you make an effort, I will bless you” [Uzb: Sendan harakat, mendan barakat]. These are the words of God. I cannot live without work; I hate to see lazy people. . . . God hates lazy people, and Satan attacks them.

Many of the Naqshbandis were, like Erkin, involved in business. Some Naqshbandis worked at Bukhara’s bazaars, places they found morally dubious because people tended to cheat each other, to lie, to trade in goods that were haram (forbidden). Greed and materialism ruled the bazaars. The Naqshbandis explained that they would practice the dhikr while they worked, trying to make themselves immune from the temptations of the market. They strove, in other words, to tame capitalism, cleanse it of its evil aspects and transform it into what Daromir Rudnycky, in a discussion of Islam and neoliberalism in Indonesia, has termed a “spiritual economy”: a kind of convergence between Islamic and capitalist ethics that seeks to cultivate subjects who are simultaneously pious and productive. This convergence represents values such as self-discipline, entrepreneurism, and accountability as Islamic virtues that lead to success in this world as well as the other world.33 Most of the Naqshbandis I knew, however, remained ambivalent about the market logic and the focus on consumption that had begun to characterize post-Soviet Uzbek society. They regarded the “spiritual economy” in which Islam and a market economy are perfectly reconciled as being very hard to realize in practice. The ideal balance between immanence and transcendence, rather, remained an ideal that might have been attainable by the moral exemplars of the past, but which was hard to reach in contemporary society.

The Naqshbandis also faced challenges in relation to other vices they experienced as characterizing post-Soviet society. For example, Muazzam—one of the women I met up with in Muraram’s apartment in 2011—found it difficult to reconcile being a good Sufi with being a good family and community member, translating the moral exemplars of past Sufis into an ordinary ethics that was actually possible to live and perform in contemporary society.
When I first met her, in 1999, Muazzam was a middle-aged woman who lived with her parents in a small flat in Bukhara. Telling me about her growing engagement in “spiritual” matters, she recounted how she had started to develop an interest in Islam in 1983. Back then, as she told it, she was sick and unable to do anything. Then she had a dream in which an old man came to her and scolded her for sitting passively at home. He said that she had to become Muslim and start healing people, using the techniques of her ancestors—which she did, although in a discreet way (this was back in the Soviet days when the practice of religion was strongly discouraged). Then Gorbachev came to power, and things started changing. Muazzam, like many others, found herself exploring what it meant to be Muslim. She felt that there was something missing from her life, and that she needed a deeper understanding of the forces that made her able to heal others. She did many things wrong at that time, she recalled, and felt the need to improve her character.

In 1998, and after having been introduced to it by a friend, she decided to become a follower of the Naqshbandiyya tariqa. She and her parents, however, had long felt closely connected with Bahaudin Naqshband. During the first seven years of her parents’ marriage they were unable to have children. Then they went to the shrine of Bahaudin Naqshband to pray, and shortly thereafter Muazzam’s brother was born—followed by nine more children. Since then, the family had paid annual visits to the Bahaudin Naqshband shrine complex in order to sacrifice a sheep and express their gratitude.

“We are Sufis,” Muazzam said, referring to the group of Naqshbandi women she met with regularly, “but we are not like Sufis in the past. In Bahaudin Naqshband’s time, they were very pure, very close to God. Their devotion to Islam was so big that they would not interrupt their prayers, even if a fire broke loose around them, or an invading army stood next to them. Today we have forgotten what real Sufism is.”

In her own self-understanding, then, Muazzam was not a “real” Sufi. However, starting to practice Sufism, she had experienced some changes to her character: Previously, she tended to fight and quarrel with her neighbors and to spread gossip, but now she had become more humble and calm. This newfound strength in her character, however, was accompanied by what she experienced as an increasing sensitivity or porosity, particularly in relation to things that are haram. She first experienced this when her brother got married. As is common practice among relatives, she had offered her help, but on the day of the wedding she fell ill, and no doctors were able to help her. She knew that her affliction was the result of the vodka and the pork sausages that were served at the wedding feast and the drunkenness, gossiping, and improper behavior that characterized it. The next time she fell similarly ill
was also on the occasion of a wedding, this time her sister’s: she wanted to help, but she fell ill. Then she realized that she could no longer participate in such events.

When Muazzam started telling her tale, it was as a story that was meant to illustrate how her character had changed for the better; how she had become able to stay away from things, acts, and events that are forbidden or considered inappropriate according to Islam; what it meant to have one’s heart’s eye and ears opened. But as she told me the story, she increasingly seemed to be filled with sadness: she recounted how she had cried because she was no longer able to help with the celebration, even though she knew it was out of her control—it was God who would not let her help. One night, she had a very vivid dream in which her sister came to her, asking her for a cup of water. Muazzam did not grant her wish, but shut the door in her face.

Muazzam was not sure about the meaning of that dream. She knew that it might be her nafs trying to trick her into indulging in what was haram—the nafs does indeed sometimes play tricks with a person’s dreams, trying to make them seem like visions. But the very vividness of the dream and the way it kept sitting in her body after she woke up, although she wanted to shake it off—something that often distinguishes visionary dreams of divine origin from “ordinary” dreams (which are seen as meaningless or stemming from unconscious desires)\(^3\)\(^4\)—made her doubt that what she was doing was right; blurred the distinction between what was right and wrong, between which demands she should respond to and which she should ignore.

When Muazzam was not able to participate in the weddings of her brother and sister, she did not merely create distance between herself and beloved family members—who were especially important to her as she had never married and started a family of her own—but also between herself and local ideas about what it means to be Muslim. Events that mark important moments in the life of a Muslim—circumcision, marriage, and death—involve the exchange of gifts and hospitality and are important contexts for the establishment and maintenance of social networks.\(^3\)\(^5\) Religious authorities quite often criticize them, pointing out that they are not sanctioned by scripture and that the great expenses involved in throwing them is an unnecessary burden for many families to bear. Nonetheless, it is widely considered essential for a Muslim to participate in them, thus showing oneself as a person who contributes to the cohesion of the community.\(^3\)\(^6\) This participation is a central activity of Central Asian families, particularly women. These activities create important social networks that become increasingly important in times of stress and hardship. In other words, for Muazzam this was no simple conflict between “religious” piety and “social” norms, as living up to one’s social obligations, in local understandings, is considered absolutely central to Muslimness. By
avoiding what was haram, she acted in ways that were regarded as rather inappropriate in local understandings of what it means to be a good Muslim. As a result, people who did not know her well could become suspicious: was she actually a “Wahhabi”?37

SUFISM AND WAHHABI PARANOIA

Although they hardly felt that true “Muslimness” had manifested in post-Soviet Uzbek society, Bukhara Naqshbandis usually accommodated to official narratives and the way they promoted Naqshbandiyya teachings. They also seemed to agree with the government policy of keeping religion a personal, interior matter. Although they expressed varying views on the sincerity of the politicians promoting aspects of the Naqshbandiyya tradition—everything from the idea that President Karimov may be avliyo to the view that present-day politicians just made cynical use of the teaching for their own benefit—most of them approved of the way popular versions of the Naqshbandiyya teaching had been promoted in the country. They believed that knowledge about Naqshbandiyya’s teaching, however superficial, might raise people’s morality, pushing them in the right direction, and that it might also serve as a moral defense against wrong ideas, such as those associated with “Wahhabism.”

However, the Naqshbandis I talked with were also very aware that although Naqshbandiyya was promoted as popular tradition, it was not very likely that the Uzbek government was interested in seeing the Naqshbandiyya tariqa grow in strength and influence. Several of them had experienced harassment from local officials. Though depicted as directed against an external threat, the crackdown on Islam has influenced the lifeworlds of ordinary Muslims and created a paranoid climate where virtually anyone who expresses devotion to Islam, or who is critical of local customs and traditions, risks being labeled “Wahhabi”; where people are never quite sure which ways of expressing religious identity make them appear suspicious, and which qualify them as good Muslims in the eyes of their neighbors or local authorities.38 This also affected the ways the Naqshbandis I knew were able to practice and express their faith. They took care not to attract attention or engage in acts that could be seen as politically motivated or proselytizing—being acutely aware that those who express their faith too overtly or “mix up” religion and politics in a way that is seen as problematic, risk being accused of religious extremism and attempts to undermine the secular state. Nonetheless, they often enjoyed great respect in their local communities and were consulted in religious as well as worldly matters by relatives, neighbors, colleagues, and classmates.39
As Bibi Raja put it: “Many people today are afraid of religion because of the Wahhabis. It is difficult. We do not spread our knowledge openly, but only show our good sides. Then sometimes people come to us for advice. But the Naqshbandiyya is *xuфиyya*, we should not show off.”

Dilfuza, whom I introduced in the opening section, was one of the people I knew who talked most openly about how difficult it could be to live with this state of affairs at times. When I first met her in 1998, she had struck me as one of the most government-loyal Muslims I had met during my fieldwork. Official rhetoric often echoed in her words when she talked about the reasons for her engagement in Naqshbandiyya, contrasting her understanding of Islam with that of the “Wahhabis” and their political aspirations and use of violence and terror. She often expressed her gratitude to President Karimov for guaranteeing freedom of religion, for making it possible to show one’s Muslim identity overtly, and for making it possible for her son to have a religious education. In the prayers with which she closed our conversations, she would usually include some wishes for the well-being of the president.

When I returned to Bukhara in 2000, Dilfuza seemed disillusioned. The first time I visited her and asked if things had changed in Uzbekistan since I left, she hesitantly told me that people had become afraid of Islam, that many mosques had closed, and that there was no freedom of religion in the country. She told me about the difficulties her son experienced as a practicing Muslim in a student hostel in Tashkent. Whenever he wanted to read *namaz*, she told me, he had to do it secretly. If he wanted to keep his *ro’za* (fast) during Ramadan, he had to be very discreet as well. This was all because people were afraid of Islam, and because some people seemed to think that a person who prays is a Wahhabi. She had also herself experienced that other people sometimes regarded her strong religious devotion with suspicion—and once she had been questioned about it by officials who did not know anything about Islam, “who could not tell the difference between the Quran and the collected works of Lenin,” as she put it with a smile.

**EVERYTHING IS XUФИYYA: FROM HOPE TO RESIGNATION?**

The challenges faced by Naqshbandis in Uzbekistan, Muslims who strove to live Sufism as ordinary ethics, stood out in a sharper light to me after my short visit in 2011 and the meeting with Mukaram and the other women. By then all the doubt, ambiguity, and remorse connected with their efforts to practice Sufism had apparently been replaced by clarification—but a clarification that hardly seemed convincing, given the political developments in the country in the first decade of the new millennium. Measures against “Wah-
habism” or “extremism” reached a peak in the aftermath of a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999 that were attributed to Islamic extremists. Later, on May 13, 2005, hundreds of protesters were killed in the city of Andijon: according to the Uzbek government they were armed extremists, but according to international human rights groups the majority were unarmed civilians who had gathered to protest against economic hardship and authoritarian rule. Independent human rights and crisis watch organizations have regularly documented how these crackdowns have hit not only Islamic radicals and militants but also their families, as well as thousands of ordinary, pious practicing Muslims, who have been exiled, jailed, tortured, and sentenced to long prison terms for antistate activities and alleged links with Islamic fundamentalists. These crackdowns, as already mentioned, have also affected the Sufis of my acquaintance who eventually stopped meeting up to do dhikr together in order not to cause suspicion. They were also increasingly isolated from Sufi networks outside of Uzbekistan: whereas Sufi shaykhs from other parts of the world had been relatively free to visit the country since 1991, now they were increasingly refused visas.40 Also saints’ shrines were subjected to tighter control by authorities: Places that had previously been restored and run by local efforts were taken over by the mufti, refurbished anew, and used as places to promote the latest official ideology (during my 2011 visit, for example, plaques had been put up at most shrines in Bukhara, promoting the “year of small businesses and entrepreneurship”).41 In 2003, the Bahaudin Naqshbandi shrine complex was renovated, and a new entrance named the “Islam gate” was erected (people jokingly pointed out that it was not really clear whether it referred to Islam the religion or to Islam Karimov, the president). When I visited there in 2011, the beggars who had flocked around the entrance to the shrine when I was there in 1998–2000 were gone, and so were the little stands where locals sold everything from chewing gum to religious literature and amulets to visitors. As a foreigner, furthermore, I had to buy an entrance ticket to the place, which, in many ways, appeared more as a museum for official national history than a sacred place.42

Against this background of increasing control and persecution, my Naqshbandi acquaintances assured me that all was fine, so it seemed. But their declarations primarily reflected their resignation to the fact that Sufism, other than in highly stylized and/or state-controlled forms, had, to a large extent, become hyperprivatized: “everything is xufiyya,” (inner), as they said, referring to the inner dhikr characteristic of Naqshbandiyya, but using the concept in a much more comprehensive way to denote a way of being-in-the-world where religion was indeed a hyperprivatized matter. Whereas there was a strong tone of hope in the talk about imperfection—the difficulties today had to do with a past that would be replaced with something better—there was a
certain hopelessness in the insistence that all was good: Years had passed, the “transition” to freedom and democracy had not really led anywhere, and now, some twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the “seventy Soviet years” was no longer a convincing secular theodicy that could be invoked when talking about ignorance and injustice. The ethics of imperfection had, instead, become part of the culturally intimate, something that one did not discuss with a stranger. After a ten-year absence, sadly, I tended to be seen as a stranger and was left with the task of inferring meaning from silences, ambiguous remarks, and gaps in the conversation: most obviously in the silencing of Dilfuza’s reflections about the Day of Judgment being near, but also in other remarks and gestures. Muazzam, for example, gave me a small plastic ring she had bought when she was on Hajj a couple of years ago. She told me that she thought she had seen me in Mecca. She shouted my name, but I—or the person she thought was I—disappeared in the crowd. Now, after being assured that I had in fact not been to Mecca, she reasoned that she had had a vision while there: a vision that meant that I would return to see her in Bukhara. Wondrous things happen in Mecca, she said, and expressed her gratitude that she had been able to accomplish the Hajj before her death. It was an amazing experience, being in a community of Muslims from all around the world. She did not want to leave; she cried when she returned to Bukhara.

Before leaving Mukaram’s apartment, I presented her with the book I wrote based on my Bukhara research. Mukaram’s eyes filled with tears, and she told me how much it meant to her that I had written the book and made it possible for people around the world to read about Bukhara and the Naqshbandiya there. Bukhara is a very special place, she emphasized, and she was so grateful for being born here and to the president for bringing it back to its past glory. Then, when I was leaving, she asked me if I knew any European Naqshbandis with whom they could get into contact: they wanted to know more, she said, but they were still physically disconnected from Naqshbandis in the rest of the world.

“Everything is xufiya,” they emphasized, but despite their resignation and the hyperprivatization of Sufism, Bukhara Naqshbandis, so it seemed, were still reaching out to, and expressed a longing for being part of, a wider Muslim and Sufi Ummah.

NOTES

2. See also Martha Brill Olcott, “Sufism in Central Asia: A Force for Moderation or a Cause for Politicization?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,

3. All names in this chapter are pseudonyms.

4. This chapter is based on anthropological fieldwork in Bukhara in 1998–2000 and 2011.

5. *Tasawwuf*, or Sufism, designates the “mystical” dimension of Islam. Sufism developed out of an ascetic trend in early Islam that emphasized detachment from the material world. A devotional aspect was later added that made love of God characteristic of Sufism, the desire to overcome the gulf between human experience and the Divine: to have direct experience of God. In the twelfth century, Sufism began a process toward institutionalization into more formally organized religious *tariqas* (ways or orders) based on the principle of the relationship between the *murid* (disciple or aspirant) and *murshid, shaykh*, or *pir* (master, guide). It became the *murshid*’s task to guide the *murid* through the stages of mystical experience along the path on the basis of his own experience, helping the *murid* dispersing the veils that hide the self from God, thus achieving mystical union with God. See John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 100–01; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).


14. As reflected, for example, in the often quoted saying of Abu’l-Hasan Bushandi (d. 960), “Sufism today is a name without reality, whereas once it was a reality without a name.”  
17. Throughout the whole of the former Soviet Union, including Uzbekistan, the term “Wahhabi” is widely used—in what Muriel Atkin has aptly called the “rhetoric of Islamophobia”—as a shorthand for the general idea of Islamic menace and as an umbrella designator for Muslims considered to be a threat to the established system. Muriel Atkin, “The Rhetoric of Islamophobia,” *Central Asia and Caucasus Journal* 1 (2000): 123–32.  
20. See also Papas, “The Sufi and the President in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan.”  
21. Referring to a person who is close to God, a friend of God, the term avliyo may be translated with the term ‘saint.’ In Arabic, avliyo is the plural form of wali. In Uzbekistan, however, avliyo is commonly used as singular. Papas, “The Sufi and the President in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan”; Schubel, “Post-Soviet Hagiography.”


26. Louw, “Allah Always Hears the Prayers of a Traveler.”


30. This world-affirming ethics was famously added to Naqshbandiyya’s doctrine by Bahaudin Naqshband, most importantly through the principle of *zilvat dar anzuman* (“solitude in the crowd”), meaning the principle of combining worldly and spiritual activities, of being inwardly concentrated on God while outwardly involved in the life of the community (cf. Algar, “Political Aspects of Naqshbandi History,” 152; Zelkina, In Quest for God and Freedom, 82–83; Olcott, “Sufism in Central Asia,” 5–6).

31. In Central Asia, more often than not, there has been a close relationship between Naqshbandiyya and the ruling classes (Algar, “A Brief History of the Naqshbandi Order,” 16; Algar, “Political Aspects of Naqshbandi History,” 126–27; Levin, The Hundred Thousand Fools of God, 106; Schubel, “Post-Soviet Hagiography”; Zelkina, In Quest for God and Freedom, 81–83). However, Naqshbandiyya has also provided organization and leadership for many conflicts, including jihad against Russian colonists in North Caucasus in 1830–1859, against Russians and Soviets in parts of Turkestan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as rebellions against Chinese rule in Xinjiang (Bennigsen and Wimbush, Mystics and Commissars, 3; Manz 1987; John O. Voll, “Central Asia as Part of the Modern Islamic World,” in Central Asia in Historical Perspective, ed. Beatrice Forbes Manz (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 65; Zarcone, “Sufi Movements”; Zelkina, In Quest for God and Freedom).

32. Louw, Everyday Islam.


37. For an expanded discussion of the complex moral emotions among Sufis in Uzbekistan with a point of departure in Muazzam’s story, see Maria Louw, “Haunting as Moral Engine: Ethical Striving and Moral Aphorias among Sufis in Uzbekistan,” in Moral Engines.

38. As Johan Rasanayagam and Irene Hilgers have demonstrated, even Christians in Uzbekistan are sometimes accused of “Wahhabism” (Rasanayagam, Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan); Irene Hilgers, Why Do Uzbeks Have to Be Muslims? Exploring Religiosity in the Ferghana Valley (Munich: Lit Verlag, 2009); Peshkova, Women, Islam, and Identity.


41. Louw, “Allah Always Hears the Prayers of a Traveler.”

42. Ibid.

43. Herzfeld, Cultural Intimacy, 3.
Chapter Eleven

The Evolving Uzbek Jihad

Islamist Militant
Recruiting and State Responses

Noah Tucker

The war in Syria has altered the Uzbek Islamist militant movement in ways that few analysts would have predicted at the turn of the twenty-first century. Between roughly 1999 and 2001, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) successfully mobilized hundreds of recruits to fight alongside the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. Based across the Amu Darya River from its eponymous target, the IMU came to symbolize a worst-case scenario for post-Soviet Uzbekistan and became the justification for the state’s notorious crackdowns on religious expression, framed as counterterrorism policy. Much has changed in the intervening years, including the focus of the global Transnational Salafi Jihadist movement and its recruiting methods and tools. The approaches of the Uzbekistani government have shifted very little since the mid-1990s, however, adapting neither to new recruiting methods and technologies nor to the reality that a large percentage of its young male citizens no longer reside inside the country because of economic circumstances, nor the dramatic shift in focus of the Uzbek Islamist militants themselves that the state’s policies are designed to counteract.

Policies created to combat the pre-9/11 version of the IMU were little altered after 9/11, when the Afghanistan–Pakistan battleground was markedly altered as the group suffered heavy losses at the hands of Northern Alliance troops and U.S. special forces. Driven out of Afghanistan into the mountainous frontier territory of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), the IMU and smaller groups of Central Asian militants, like its splinter group the Islamic Jihad Union, had hoped to recruit Central Asians and to eventually expand their activities into the region, but they became trapped in the NWFP for almost fifteen years. In many cases, they became almost wholly subordinated to other groups whose primary goals did not extend outside the borders of Pakistan: the main body of the IMU, for example, sacrificed
a large portion of its shrinking membership in suicide attacks against Baluch police stations and other internal targets that reflected the goals of its sponsor, Tehrik-i-Taliban (Pakistani Taliban). The groups in Pakistan had long dwindled to fractions of their peak strength in 2000–2001 and had not conducted significant operations in Central Asia since 2004.

By 2013, however, the focus of Central Asian violent extremism abruptly shifted to the Syrian conflict and away from Pakistan. Already by early 2015 foreign recruitment efforts for the conflict in Syria had surpassed the levels seen during the peak of the Afghan war in the 1980s.

Faced with extremely difficult operational conditions and trouble raising funds, in 2013 the Uzbek-led militant groups—the largest of the Central Asian Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)—publicly acknowledged that new recruits and veteran fighters were being lured into the Syrian conflict. The IMU complained that it was far cheaper, easier, and more feasible for recruits—especially those drawn from the seven million Central Asian migrant workers facing rampant discrimination and tightening immigration laws in Russia—to reach Syria via Turkey rather than Pakistan. As the focus of the global Salafi-jihadist movement shifted to Syria, IMU and IJU statements admitted that many veteran fighters were abandoning the Afghanistan–Pakistan zone as well as the mountains of Dagestan and Chechnya in the Russian Federation for Syria and Iraq. In addition to the shift in fighters, the number of camp followers—including families, children, and group members who perform support tasks—far exceeds the number of active fighters, though total numbers are even more difficult to estimate. By many accounts, however, they now outnumber the total presence of Central Asians ever affiliated with the IMU and the Taliban, which never exceeded some two thousand people.

Uzbek fighters in Syria appear to be distributed into two broad affiliations, mirroring the larger fault lines of the Syrian conflict. The first, known as the “Aleppo Uzbeks,” comprises several smaller brigades allied with—or part of—Jabhat al-Nusra (which adopted the name “Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham” in 2016) and were based around the opposition stronghold of Aleppo in Northern Syria until they were driven into Idlib province following the fall of Aleppo in December 2016. The second are those Central Asians fighting as part of ISIS, based in ar-Raqqa in Syria and in Mosul in Iraq until mid-2017.

Three Uzbek-led groups operate in Idlib allied with or as part of al-Qaeda’s Syrian wing, Jabhat al-Nusra. The largest of these, the Imam al-Bukhoriy Brigade (Imom Buxoriiy Katibasi, or KIB) represents itself—at least for fundraising purposes—as a distinct militant organization led by a self-described veteran of the Afghanistan and Pakistan conflict named “Shaykh Salohiddin,” whom the IMU describes as a former high-ranking fund-raiser who operated in the Middle East and left the group, taking his funding sources with him.
until his assassination by an ISIS militant in 2017. Though exact numbers are difficult to estimate, at its height KIB appeared to have four hundred–seven hundred members and likely surpassed the IMU in 2014 to become the largest Central Asian-led VEO in the world. The organization maintained a highly professional military training camp near Aleppo and promised to provide new members with weapons and specialized training. The group pledged allegiance to mullah Omar of the Taliban in late 2014 (which may indicate prior connections and funding for its veteran commander), but operates in Syria in coordination with larger umbrella originations like the Islamic Front and, specifically with Jabhat al-Nusra, conducting joint operations with the Uzbek brigades that operate inside the al-Qaeda Syria affiliate.

The Uzbek Brigade of Jabhat al-Nusra, which has sometimes maintained a media and recruiting presence online as Jannat Oshiqlari (“Those Who Long for Heaven,” a common jihadist trope) and at times refers to itself as the Tavhid va Jihod Katibasi (Tauhid and Jihad Brigade), emerged in August 2014 as a distinct subgroup within Al-Nusra Front (ANF) led by an ethnic Uzbek commander from Southern Kyrgyzstan named Amir Abu Saloh. Within the same larger organization, the Seyfullah Shishani Jamaat, a mixed group of Russian-speaking fighters from the Caucasus and Central Asia, is currently led by an Uzbek named Amir Ubayda al Madaniy. The three groups in the Aleppo block released videos showing cooperative operations in which they fight side-by-side, promote one another as allies, and cross-promote sermons and speeches by the leaders of each group.

Within ISIS, members from Central Asia were at least initially divided into brigades by shared language and ethnicity, as the group does not recognize secular states. Media statements indicate distinct formations of Kazakhs, Uzbeks (who appear to be from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan), and Tajiks. In reality, the militants are known to fight in battalions less cleanly divided along ethnic lines (some Uzbeks and Tajiks fought under the Chechen commander Umar Shishani, for example). Estimates of the size for each battalion vary widely, and they are frequently reorganized upon the death—or, occasionally, the promotion—of a field commander.

The situation, affiliations, and brigade-level leadership for Uzbeks and other Central Asians fighting in the conflict changes rapidly, sometimes so quickly it can be difficult to record. Central Asians participating in the conflict, especially in the Aleppo group, have been involved in some of the worst fighting of the intense Syrian conflict; commanders are frequently killed and groups change names and identities rapidly as leadership changes or alliances shift. A large group (potentially several hundred) of Central Asians who fought together with Russian-speaking militants from the Caucasus in Jaysh Muhajireen wal Ansar (JMWA), for example, split in late 2013 as
the organization divided between those loyal to ANF and al-Qaeda (who stayed in JMWA under the command of Chechen Amir Seyfulloh) and those who joined ISIS with Chechen Amir Umar Shishani and an Uzbek subcommander. Through all these feuds and splits, even as Uzbeks on both sides conduct aggressive recruiting for their own groups and produce media on their operations, neither side acknowledged the split nor the conflict between ANF and ISIS. This is a marked difference between Central Asian recruiting and discussion about the conflict and what takes place in Arabic or even in Russian on the Caucasus-focused jihadist forums like Kavkaz Center or Adamalla.com, where jihadist sympathizers and Syrian war supporters dissect every leadership change or whiff of dissent down to extreme minutiae. For Central Asians, the details of the conflict and the frequently warring factions that fight it are obscure. For those interested in joining, it is a conflict about grand narratives that offer meaning to the frustrated lives of marginalized migrant workers.

This chapter examines those narratives and the messaging tactics and strategies used by Uzbek Islamist militants in Syria, outlining the way these have changed to adapt to new technologies—particularly social media sites now widely available on mobile phones as well as new situations, shifting focus from Uzbeks living inside Uzbekistan to the estimated one million Uzbekistani citizens living as economic labor migrants in Russia, Turkey, and Europe. The second section will consider Uzbekistan’s state responses, which, like those of its neighboring states, have largely failed to adapt to new conditions and continue to use the same approaches that were developed in the 1990s, while noting recent innovations that may signal a partial shift in focus to enlisting the help of popular religious leaders in exposing the brutality of ISIS specifically. In conclusion, the chapter argues that, based on the evidence presented, past approaches to countering violent extremism in Uzbekistan were frequently counterproductive, failed to address the issues that caused extremist messaging to resonate with a small portion of the Uzbekistani population, and have failed to adapt to significant changes in Uzbek Islamist insurgencies and appear to frequently misrepresent those changes for short-term political gain. Most importantly, past approaches treated all expressions of Islam outside of direct government control as the primary driver for militant extremist recruiting. The chapter suggests that a better strategy would be for the Uzbekistani government itself to enlist the help of Muslim leaders whose lives and teaching extend beyond the reach of the state-aligned official religious establishment, moving past current approaches that ignore the massive outflow of migrant workers to adverse environments where they are stripped of family, community, and religious support mechanisms and have been recruited into extremist organizations at exponentially higher rates than at home.
Beginning in 2013 and continuing through most of 2014, ethnic Uzbeks became the only Central Asian contingent inside ISIS to have developed their own sophisticated messaging operations targeted at co-ethnics in their own language through a media service called KhilofatNews, several video studios, and related social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, and video-sharing sites including YouTube and Vimeo. ISIS Uzbeks reject secular state borders in the region and target co-ethnics in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and those working in Russia or other countries. The videos never made concrete claims about the number of Uzbeks who had joined ISIS, but they triggered a wave of alarm across the region and helped put a Central Asian face on the organization for the first time. Although most of these services ceased to function and the early Uzbek spokesmen for ISIS have all disappeared in the fog of war, ISIS messaging in Uzbek continues to spread in jihadist sympathizer networks. It is shared in groups popular with migrant laborers from members operating personal profiles on social media and from sympathizers, including IMU supporters, who promote ISIS official messages in Russian—sometimes offering their own translations—and share materials that have already been created, including abundant mainstream media coverage of the group’s military operations.

Formal media units for the Aleppo/Idlib militants each produce new videos, memes, translations, and news stories on a regular basis and distribute them on multiple platforms in a way that reflects a deliberate social media strategy. Media created by the Aleppo Uzbek militant groups is also republished by Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) operators, who continue to maintain an erratic but outsized presence in Uzbek-language jihadist social media and long hosted the largest single archive of translated al-Qaeda media on the Uzbek-language Internet that moved from website to website as successive iterations were shut down by authorities.

Despite this well-organized effort to support Uzbek jihadists fighting around Aleppo, social media users, Russian and regional media, and Central Asian governments (and presumably the public) continue to pay far more attention to and receive more information about ISIS than this much larger constellation of Aleppo Uzbeks. Local media in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan also routinely promote the idea that ISIS is a danger to Central Asia. Even without an organized social media effort in the Central Asian languages, ISIS promoters in the Central Asia benefit from instant brand recognition and a steady stream of Russian resources created by operators or sympathizers who translate official media and distribute them through group pages, especially on Odnoklassniki. Heavily used by Central Asian labor
migrants in Russia—the primary online recruiting ground for all Central Asian jihadist groups—Odnoklassniki is the most popular social networking site for both Uzbeks and Tajiks. Although Facebook has grown quickly in the past two years and now reportedly has 300,000 users in Uzbekistan, Odnoklassniki had up to 2.5 million Uzbek users as of early 2014.

Much of the Uzbek-language ISIS content on Odnoklassniki comes from Uzbeks who list their location as Syria or Iraq and appear to be active members of the organization—not trained media operatives, but rather young militants who use social media to document their own lives and interests just like their peers around the world. ISIS content in Russian, Uzbek, and Tajik appears to be more prevalent on Odnoklassniki than any other social network, especially in groups that attract Central Asian migrant laborers, and more Central Asians who claim to be fighting with ISIS appear to maintain profiles on the network.

The pro-ISIS content shared by Central Asian Odnoklassniki users and documented by this research came from users who were originally mostly from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. They interacted with content in each of those languages in addition to Russian, content largely copied from Russian-language groups specifically created to promote translations of official ISIS media, as well as from international mainstream news sources in Russian, Turkish, or English. Sympathetic users promote stories that show either successes of the group or appear to show acts of cruelty committed by Shia Iraqi or Iranian soldiers or U.S. military personnel—a photo shared by one self-identified ISIS member who claimed to live in Raqqa, Syria, for example is falsely captioned as a U.S. soldier overseeing a “Shia mercenary beheading a Sunni.”

While larger studies would be needed to make broad conclusions about what attracts Central Asians to the group, there are distinct patterns in the content posted by self-identified Uzbek and Tajik ISIS members and promoters. Unlike the official media wings that create and promote original content, including videos and other sophisticated messages, members and sympathizers on Odnoklassniki post relatively little original content targeted at shaping the information environment or convincing new recruits. Instead, they repost ready-made content from other sources tailored specifically for social media—short videos, memes, photos, and simple religious content designed to be “liked” (in Odnoklassniki parlance, nazhimat’ klassno, to “click Awesome!”) and reposted by the maximum number of users.

Many pro-ISIS users or self-identified members on Odnoklassniki are also concerned with migrant-worker issues and participate in the same discussions that trend among their peers—they repost or discuss, for example, RFE/RL Uzbek Service articles about domestic pressure likely to be created by the
sudden return of migrant laborers to Uzbekistan, or the November 2015 viral video\textsuperscript{25} of a Moscow police cadet beating a Tajik migrant worker in a metro station when he attempted to ride without a ticket. They consistently emphasize a perception of subaltern status and victimization, sometimes directed at Russians but more often at the United States\textsuperscript{26} and Israel, attributing the hardship that they experience in life to their Muslim identity and portraying the Islamic State as the champion of oppressed Muslims everywhere. One widely shared post\textsuperscript{27} taken from a Russian pro-ISIS group quotes a response the group’s administrator says he received to a video of a Western hostage beheading: “I watched the film . . . seven or eight times, and I have never felt so much life-force in myself and so much elation [vozvysheniia] from [the fact] that I am a Muslim.”

Similar to the content that used to be promoted by Uzbek ISIS operators, official ISIS media promoted in Russian on Odnoklassniki follow a twin narrative: photos and videos show veiled girls attending well-appointed schools\textsuperscript{28} or cities with carnival rides or other signs of happiness and progress—depicting the Islamic State as utopia for an oppressed people—while others show unblinking evidence of the violence the group is willing to commit in order to expand the territory of this new state and to defeat the “enemies” of the Sunnis, including photos and videos of the massacre of Yazidis\textsuperscript{29} and Shias or the grotesque beheading of Western hostages.

As has long been the case with Central Asian ISIS supporters, two broad topics are conspicuously absent from these discussions on Odnoklassniki: meaningful religious content and even a basic awareness among sympathizers (or acknowledgment among those who claim to be members living in Syria or Iraq) of the conflict between ISIS and other Syrian opposition groups. Religious discussion among ISIS members and supporters on the network rarely goes beyond reposting lists of the “40 Hadiths on Jihad” and memes that attempt to convince other Muslims not to celebrate Christmas or that dictate the exact position in which one should stand when beginning prayers. Unlike the content on popular jihadist forums in Russian like Adamalla.com, there was zero acknowledgment of a conflict between ISIS and other jihadist groups and seemingly just as little awareness among those who promote ISIS media—many Central Asian sympathizers promote ISIS material in Russian- and Uzbek-language articles and memes from the al-Buxoriy Brigade or Uzbeks in ANF\textsuperscript{30} at the same time, oblivious of the fact that the two groups are on opposite sides of an intense conflict.

The evidence available from social media does not support claims that “thousands” of Central Asians are fighting for ISIS, but it could somewhat support estimates made by the Uzbekistani muftiate that several hundred Uzbekistani citizens have joined the group. Although official Uzbek-language
Chapter Eleven

Messaging has been disrupted or shut down by the commercial services that hosted it, their brand presence on social media remains ubiquitous, and messaging in Uzbek is widely available. Messages targeted at Uzbeks by ISIS social media operators and sympathizers highlights the spectacular violence the group uses to advance its goals and the participation of Uzbeks in that violence.\(^{31}\) Widespread coverage of media operations by ISIS’s official media wing, al-Hayat, as well as international and local media attention on ISIS military operations in both Iraq and Syria, help the ISIS brand to dominate online discussions of the conflict and its potential effects on Central Asia. The overwhelming majority of Uzbeks on social media reject ISIS narratives and are appalled by graphic content used to advertise the group’s violent tactics. But the focus on ISIS, rather than the multiple other groups in the Syrian conflict that include Uzbeks in their ranks, facilitates ISIS claims that they have replaced al-Qaeda\(^{32}\) as the vanguard of the Salafi-jihadist movement and are a political embodiment of a transnational Sunni Muslim identity.

ISIS has also had some notable success in winning a few high-profile sympathizers among Uzbeks online. In 2015, for example, a highly networked, hard-line Salafist figure known only as “al-Kosoniy”\(^{33}\) on several platforms changed from cautiously supporting jihadist ideas to actively promoting ISIS and advancing theological justification for conflict with Shias and other non-Sunni religious groups\(^{34}\) on Facebook. Although he reveals very little about his real identity, al-Kosoniy is a respected activist in Salafist networks and has a larger—and broader—Facebook network than any of ISIS’s now-defunct official profiles ever gained. While he does not claim to hold any official position in an Islamic institution, to date al-Kosoniy is the most influential Muslim figure on social media to adopt a position supporting ISIS from any of the Central Asian states and may have helped inspire the April 2017 Stockholm attack that killed five people.\(^{35}\)

The vast majority of Uzbeks online, however, avoid jihadist sympathizers or Salafist networks and encounter ISIS messaging through coverage in the mainstream media. Even the vast majority of organized Salafist networks online, led by Uzbek emigres living and working primarily in the Middle East, reject terrorism and ISIS and challenge its supporters and sympathizers online.

Uzbek-language domestic coverage of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts focuses almost exclusively on ISIS and ignores other Uzbek-led groups and battalions that appear to have larger numbers of Uzbeks in their ranks and to conduct more active messaging operations on social media in narrow jihadist sympathizers networks. Wide coverage of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’s pledge of bayat (allegiance) to ISIS further enhances the public impression that ISIS dominates the Uzbek jihadist movement and that Cen-
Azerbaijan who join the Syrian/Iraqi conflict join ISIS almost exclusively, arguably distorting the public's already limited information on the nature of the Syrian conflict and the ways in which their compatriots are drawn into it.

STATE RESPONSES TO ISIS MESSAGING

Regional states with significant Uzbek populations (including Russia, where Uzbeks make up the largest group of labor migrants) primarily respond to ISIS messaging by exaggerating the group's threat to the region. This approach is likely designed to pressure the public to support incumbent regimes and current policies or, in the case of Russia, to support an argument that the Central Asian states need to join Russia-led international organizations to protect their security. State-supported media and state responses do little to acknowledge or address the problem of recruiting among migrant laborers—where the states admit that most recruiting takes place—but instead often portray ISIS as an imminent existential threat to their territorial sovereignty that should be countered by military means, arrests, and assassination. Exclusive focus on ISIS allows Central Asian governments with Uzbek populations to argue that they are part of a grand coalition that faces a common enemy and to demonize the rest of the Syrian opposition, other Islamic groups and figures, and, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, ethnic Uzbeks as a group.

In the months before the March 30, 2015 presidential election in Uzbekistan, state-approved media regularly reported unsubstantiated rumors that ISIS was actively targeting Uzbekistan and was gathering an invasion force on the border of Turkmenistan. Several popular Uzbekistan-based publications republished and translated the Russian articles that initiated these rumors. Uzbekistani authorities frequently claimed to uncover “ISIS flags” inside Uzbekistan, including reports that one was allegedly installed on the roof of the parliament building in Tashkent during a wave of what the government claimed were “ISIS-related arrests of up to 200 people” in and around Tashkent. State-approved media interpreted these events as signs that the group was already active inside the country, but upon closer examination the evidence supporting many of these claims became deeply problematic and even drew indignation and mockery from some Uzbek social media users.

In November 2015, Uzbekistani state-approved media transmitted a report allegedly leaked from the security services that twelve “Salafis” had been arrested while attempting to travel to Syria to join ISIS using a facilitator identified as a local leader of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Many Uzbek social media users were quick to believe the story, unaware or inattentive to the fact that HT and ISIS mutually reject one another; in particular, HT rejects claims by ISIS
to have the authority to declare and rule a Caliphate—ample evidence shows that ISIS militants follow a policy of executing members of any other Islamic group that reject their authority. Multiple studies and outside expert assessments have shown that the Uzbekistan National Security Service frequently uses allegations of membership in a banned organization to fill arrest quotas or to prosecute anyone targeted by local authorities because of political opposition or even economic rivalry. In January 2016, for example, the trial began for an Armenian Christian businessman in the Jizzakh region who, along with several of his employees, was accused of ISIS membership based on no more evidence than a beard he grew as part of an Armenian mourning ritual after the death of his younger brother and a confession reportedly made under torture. His family and neighbors confirm that local authorities had been trying to pressure him to sell a successful farm that he owned for several months before his arrest.

Overall, Uzbekistan’s response to the threat of suspected Islamist extremist groups has been consistent for the past decade and a half—the tactics adopted by the National Security Service (SNB) have not been significantly updated or adapted to counter a specific threat from ISIS. Migrant workers returning from Russia are frequently arrested on suspicion of supporting extremist groups, while popular ethnic Uzbek imams living outside the borders of Uzbekistan have been targeted for assassination in plots that much of the public believes are initiated by the Uzbekistani National Security Service. These include the widely respected imam Obidxon Qori Nazarov, who survived an assassination attempt in Sweden in 2012; Syrian opposition supporter “Shaykh” Abdulloh Bukhoriy, who was shot to death outside his madrasa in Istanbul in December 2014; and Kyrgyzstan-based imam Rashod Qori Kamalov, who announced just after the Bukhoriy attack that Turkish security services had warned him that they had uncovered evidence of an assassination plot against him. His father, prominent imam Muhammadrafiq Kamalov, was killed in an Uzbekistani–Kyrgyzstani joint security services operation in 2006 that sparked significant public protest in Southern Kyrgyzstan.

The second-largest ethnic Uzbek population in the region resides in Kyrgyzstan, where they have been frequently targeted in ethnic violence and are commonly associated with Islamic extremism by outspoken nationalist politicians. Kyrgyzstani state responses have similarly focused almost exclusively on ISIS in addressing the Syrian/Iraqi conflict and targeted the ethnic Uzbek minority in the south on charges of collaborating with ISIS. In January 2016 Kyrgyzstan’s Security Service alleged that they had uncovered several cases of citizens traveling to fight in Syria with ISIS, at least one of whom proved to be an ethnic Uzbek who had fled the country after his release from serving three years in prison on false murder charges following ethnic conflict
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in 2010. In 2015 Osh authorities arrested Rashod Qori Kamalov, the most prominent ethnic Uzbek imam still in the country after the 2010 conflict, on charges of supporting militant groups in Syria. Kyrgyzstani authorities provided no evidence beyond “expert testimony” interpreting the imam’s “physical gestures” and facial expressions, which were used to support the lesser charge of “inciting religious extremism.” Nevertheless, two courts convicted Kamalov, sentencing him first to five years in a minimum-security prison; when Kamalov lost an appeal in November 2015, his sentence was increased to ten years in a high-security prison.

Finally, Russia-based media targeting Central Asia, particularly state-owned and state-supported outlets, consistently present ISIS as a pressing threat to the region’s borders: reports through most of 2015, for example, claimed that ISIS had recruited “thousands” of supporters in Northern Afghanistan and was preparing to attack the region that never materialized; other articles feature Russian “security experts” who speculate that an ISIS invasion will force Russia to intervene militarily in the region to defend members of the Eurasian Economic Union (which Uzbekistan has consistently refused to join). Russian online media reports stress that Uzbek migrant workers are heavily recruited in Russia and that these groups are tied to organized crime, sometimes offering specific details about alleged recruiting organizations and locations but typically reporting no law-enforcement response.

PUBLIC RESPONSES

Conspiracy Theories and Anti-U.S. Sentiment

Public responses on social media to stories about ISIS are overwhelmingly negative, and many regard the group as a serious threat to the region. Comments responding to stories about ISIS atrocities or even in response to material promoted by ISIS supporters reveal fear of an ISIS advance and often cite “peace” (tinchlik) as the most important aspect of the status quo in the country. A significant number of these responses also tie the potential advance of ISIS to conspiracy theories that claim the group is a puppet of the United States and Israel and a U.S. plot, often citing al-Qaeda as a “precedent.” Fueled by Russian and Uzbekistani government messages, as well as conspiracy theory material from Middle Eastern networks, users cite these conspiracies perhaps more often than any other response and often connect Russian media reports about alleged U.S. attempts to “destabilize” the region to the rumored advance of ISIS toward Central Asia. These arguments resonate with messages promoted by Uzbek-language ISIS supporters, who frequently claim that ISIS is a Muslim response to U.S. and Western aggression.
Uzbekistani users frequently echo several of the government’s slogans, emphasizing the value they place on peace and stability (tinchlik va osoyishtalik) and expressing their strong preference for life under the rule of President Islam Karimov (and after his death in 2016, his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoev) rather than ISIS. Much of the state’s messaging campaign appears to have been originally designed to convince voters that stability and security in Uzbekistan depended on reelecting Karimov in 2015, when ISIS coverage first intensified in the national press. It is difficult to determine how many of these comments represent popular sentiment and how many are state-run information operations, but their volume and frequency, even sometimes from political dissidents, likely indicate that they represent a genuine public sentiment.

Social media activity and commentary among Uzbekistanis indicate that many, if not most, users believe that ISIS and most other (VEOs) are created, funded, or supplied by the United States, Israel, and other Western states. Uzbek social media users widely believe and disseminate conspiracy theories that argue that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is a former Mossad agent, that U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) attended meetings with the ISIS leadership, that al-Qaeda itself was a U.S. paramilitary puppet, and that the 9/11 attacks were a “false flag” operation designed to create negative public opinion about Muslims and provide a pretext to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. Jihadist operators and sympathizers frequently find themselves arguing with other Uzbeks that al-Qaeda or other militant Islamist organizations are real and capable of carrying out attacks. These conspiracy theories come from Middle Eastern forums and even from Western outlets, such as InfoWars, but in the Uzbek Internet space they most often come from Russian media.

The tiny minority of Uzbek social media users who support ISIS—particularly on Odnoklassniki, the network most frequently used by migrant laborers in Russia—portray the group as the primary opponent of the United States. They recruit Uzbeks online to join ISIS with the promise that they will fight the United States in Iraq. Uzbek ISIS supporters on social media blame the United States for the oppression of Central Asian governments and portray ISIS as the “Muslim counterforce” to Western imperialism and local authoritarianism all at once. These users sometimes echo conspiracy theories that the United States or Israel supports other Islamist VEOs—such as Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—in order to claim that they are the only “true” Islamic military force.

**ISIS as an Internal Threat to Muslims**

Uzbek social media users who self-identify as Muslims and participate in Islamic devotional groups more often respond to ISIS messages as an internal
dispute within Islam, one that they see as threatening to their own freedom to practice their religion and that they fear will likely lead others to associate Islam with what they see as unconscionable violence perpetrated by the Islamic State against other Muslims. Theologically literate Muslims who stand against ISIS ideology and tactics from a scriptural standpoint have some of the strongest and most resonant voices that condemn the group online; in contrast to state messaging in Uzbekistan, reformist (or Salafist) Muslim groups that are often viewed with suspicion by regional governments may be the most articulate opposition to ISIS on social media.

Many Uzbek Muslim social media users seized on the ISIS February 2015 video of the immolation of Jordanian Royal Air Force pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh to demonstrate that the group’s tactics flagrantly violate the teaching and traditions of the Prophet, who, according to hadiths, repeatedly forbade his followers from killing an animal or even an insect by fire. These hadiths resonated strongly with Uzbek Muslims, who frequently cited them following the June 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in response to multiple videos depicting Uzbeks burned alive by mobs of attackers. These and other responses express horror at the violence committed against innocents and protected categories of people, noting especially that their brutal treatment of prisoners, women, and children violates Islamic law.

Other self-identified devout reformist Uzbek Muslims on social media have adapted a theological criticism frequently used in the Middle Eastern information environment, identifying ISIS with the Kharajite heresy in the early history of Islam. Although the average Central Asian Muslim lacks the deep theological and historical background to grasp this parallel without extended explanation, it resonates highly among dedicated Reformist/Salafist devotional groups who are often primary targets for recruiting by ISIS and other Syria-based VEOs.

Several influential “independent” (i.e., not affiliated with Uzbekistan’s state-sponsored muftiate) Uzbek reformist religious leaders have condemned ISIS, notably including the now-imprisoned Kyrgyzstani imam Rashod Qori Kamalov. Immediately after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself Caliph of all Muslims in July 2014 and announced the “Islamic State,” Rashod Qori preached a Friday sermon in his mosque in Kara-Suu, Kyrgyzstan, condemning al-Baghdadi and citing scriptural and historical precedent from the period of the rashidun (the “rightly-guided caliphs”) that he argued proved that no man could appoint himself Caliph. Video of the sermon shared on YouTube and multiple social networking sites attracted over thirty-eight thousand views, exceeding the total for most Uzbek-language ISIS material. Paradoxically, video of this exact sermon was used by state prosecutors in Kamalov’s trial in the fall of 2015 to claim that Kamalov supported extremism.
Even Uzbeks in self-identified Islamist groups publicly oppose ISIS. As mentioned above, Hizb ut-Tahrir activists have particularly condemned ISIS and worked to draw a clear delineation between their own vision of the Caliphate—which they advocate creating by consensus of believers—and reaffirm that the group rejects violent means for political change. Uzbek Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Kyrgyzstan use Facebook to publicly refute statements by Kyrgyzstan’s National Security Service (GKNB) that the group has pledged to support ISIS in Syria. Other Uzbek Facebook users who support a global Sunni Muslim identity but reject ISIS’s claim to represent it have started a campaign to “take back” the ancient Black Banner of the Prophet (the flag used by ISIS), arguing that they too have a right to reject “colonial” national symbols without appearing to support a group they regard as heretical terrorists.

Efforts even by respected reformist Muslim activists online to counter ISIS messaging, drawing attention to contradictions between the ruthless tactics used by the group and Sharia law, are often complicated by the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories and broad distrust of all Western media. In a typical interaction of this type, the administrator of the Facebook group “Islom va Siyosat” (Islam and Politics) translated into Uzbek excerpts from a report detailing an ISIS bomb attack on a marketplace in Iraq just before Eid al Fitr celebrations—more than a hundred were killed and dozens more injured. The administrator calls the group #kallakesarlar (cutthroats, barbarians) and challenges anyone to defend their tactics in light of Islamic law. In the long thread that followed, not a single user offered support for ISIS or attempted to defend their tactics, but many attacked the administrator for “being so gullible as to believe what you read in the world media” and insisted that the story was fabricated as part of a conspiracy to make Muslims look bad in the eyes of the world. Similar responses frequently occur in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan—faced with the unsettling possibility that a group like ISIS could carry out unspeakable horrors in the name of Islam, many Uzbeks and others from Central Asia choose to believe that these horrors simply never happened; sometimes they go as far as to deny that the group exists at all.

**UZBEKISTAN SHIFTS COUNTERMESSAGING TACTICS TO ALIGN WITH RESONANT PUBLIC RESPONSES**

Following the March 2015 presidential election, the Karimov government abruptly shifted tactics on ISIS countermessaging, switching from selected leaks from the National Security Service that warned ISIS attacks were im-
minent to allowing the Directorate of Muslim Affairs (also known as the muftiate) to downplay the threat and characterize the ISIS conflict with other Muslims as a *fitna*—an intra-Islamic conflict, heresy, or conspiracy. With this, government messaging switched from calling for military measures to defend Uzbekistani territory to preventing recruitment. When a glossy pamphlet created by the Directorate of Muslim Affairs failed to attract significant public attention, the state took the unprecedented step of releasing Hayrullo Hamidov, a highly respected Islamic poet and teacher jailed on dubious terrorism charges in 2010, and made him the face of the anti-ISIS campaign with the assistance of one of the country’s most popular pop-culture media outlets. This tactic achieved broad and immediate resonance, attracted significant public attention, and prompted an official response from IMU and other dissenting Islamic figures.

In the weeks after the election, Uzbekistan used a muftiate spokesman to abruptly adjust the public estimate of citizens fighting in ISIS from five hundred down to only two hundred and launched a more nuanced campaign that uses prominent religious figures to counter ISIS narratives. The launch of the muftiate’s new pamphlet, *The ISIS Fitna (ISHID Fitnasi)*, was previewed on Sayyod.com, one of the most popular Uzbek-language pop-culture media outlets among both Uzbekistanis and Uzbeks living abroad, and advertised widely in the press following a conference that involved national and local state-approved imams and other local government figures. These efforts, however, were largely overlooked compared to the explosive response generated on social media by Hamidov’s first published new poem since his imprisonment in 2010. The state released Hamidov ostensibly in an amnesty in February 2015, which did not require the prosecutor’s office to review any of his original charges or to grant him an official pardon after he was convicted of “leading or organizing a terrorist organization.”

Hamidov’s poem, “The Iraq–Syria *Fitna*, The ISIS *Fitna*,” follows the outline of many of the arguments described above from religiously observant users. In rhythmic verse he condemns the group as an ultraviolent sect that has turned against all other Muslims and compares them to the Kharajite heresy, saying:

Everywhere bullets and shells are flying
Oases that once prospered are now burnt and dying
Islam has utterly no connection to this
[. . .]
Those still alive cry out *Rasulolloh!* (‘Save us, Prophet of Allah!’)
This revolting business is more than they can stand.
The tulip fields are watered now with human blood.
Chapter Eleven

The state’s decision to shift tactics and begin to use respected religious figures—even if it means releasing them from prison—to counter extremist messaging was unprecedented in Uzbekistan. IMU and ISIS supporters on social media frequently appealed to Uzbekistanis to revolt against the rule of Islam Karimov and support an Islamist state as a specific response to the oppression of religious freedom, widespread arrests of observant Muslims, and persecution of women wearing hijab. A mark of success for the state’s mixed tactic, both promoting and policing expressions of Islamic faith, is that a surprisingly high number of users counter these arguments in exactly the way state-controlled muftiate would hope—some post photos showing newly constructed mosques with full parking lots or pictures of people praying in state-run mosques. Others counter that they see women wearing hijab but have never seen a woman pulled off the street and arrested for violating a secular dress code. These responses, however, are meaningless to regime opponents who have personally experienced oppression or had to flee their homeland because their beliefs or outward expressions contradicted “state-approved” definitions of which mosques they could attend, whose sermons they could listen to, or when a simple scarf becomes a hijab. The state’s choice to promote Hamidov as a spokesperson for “Uzbek” Islam (as opposed to “foreign” Islam) has the potential to be interpreted as hypocrisy, given that the government imprisoned him for almost five full years on charges that he was a “terrorist.” In response to claims that Uzbek citizens enjoyed religious freedom under Karimov, one prominent ISIS and IMU supporter countered that one of his closest friends was framed for an attack on a state imam and imprisoned because he was an outwardly observant Muslim.

CONCLUSIONS: CHALLENGES FOR UZBEK COUNTEREXTREMIST MESSAGING

Most of Uzbekistan’s approaches to countering violent extremism are rooted in Soviet-era approaches to the same problems, as demonstrated by the similarity in counterextremism programs across the post-Soviet space. Central Asian governments’ understanding of the problem of recruiting for Syria specifically is somewhat difficult to assess based on their statements and actions. In 2015, for example, with elections in Tajikistan (parliament), Uzbekistan (presidential, following parliament in December 2014), Kyrgyzstan (parliament), and Kazakhstan (snap presidential elections), much of the focus of state messaging and state-friendly or -controlled media discussion focused almost exclusively on the narrative that the Islamic State has territorial ambitions in Central Asia and presents an imminent existential threat. Few outside
analysts or governments share this assessment then or now, and approaches based on this assumption seem unlikely to address the root attraction these groups hold for their Uzbek recruits. The shift from Afghanistan to Syria has changed the Uzbek Jihad in ways that appear now to be irrevocable, just as social media and globalization have deterritorialized and denationalized the Transnational Salafi Jihadist movement in ways that channel the Uzbeks recruited into it in very different directions than it did when recruits could simply cross the porous border marked by the Amu Darya and join IMU commander Juma Namangani’s Central Asian brigade in Northern Afghanistan. In that era, Uzbek Islamist militant messaging was indeed focused on the territory of Uzbekistan and the person of its first president, Islam Karimov, who was so famously confronted by Tohir Yuldosh—the future cofounder and spiritual leader of the IMU in Afghanistan and Pakistan—in Namangan in 1992 before Yuldosh was forced to flee Uzbekistan as Karimov cracked down on any political opponent who stood against him.

The evolution of the movement is symbolized perhaps most succinctly by the press releases of the Aleppo Uzbeks (now assessed to likely be the largest Uzbek Islamist militant coalition in history) marking Karimov’s death when it was announced on September 2, 2016. On the Tavhid va Jihod Brigade’s website, mixed with equal prominence stories of shooting down a Russian helicopter in Syria and the battles led by al-Qaeda affiliates in Yemen, the group issued a short notice reporting Karimov’s death as just another daily news story. After repeating details available from the international press, they added only a short editorial in line with militant ideology: “During the period of his presidency [Karimov] led a pitched battle against Islam and Islamic leaders. As a result of this struggle . . . not only in Uzbekistan but perhaps in territory of the whole Central Asian region Islam was plunged into a state of paralysis.” Within three days, the announcement was no longer even featured on the front page of the group’s website, replaced by news of battles and confrontations in Palestine, Libya, Syria, and other fronts far from Central Asia and more important to the global movement in which the Uzbeks in Tavhid va Jihod see themselves as frontline participants. An unofficial video announcement released by militants from the group was even more laconic. Asked to deliver a message to the “orphans” of Uzbekistan, two militants grin at the camera. The first sarcastically quips: “You will be led by another old man”; then the second adds, “and sent to pick cotton.”

Perhaps the single most important way in which Uzbekistan and its neighbors fail to respond to the new realities of the Syrian conflict, though, is in their neglect of the issue of migrant worker recruiting or the domestic factors that drive labor migration. No matter how effective they may be at preventing the spread of Syria- or Iraq-based violent extremist organizations from
expanding their recruiting or military operations into Central Asia, these policies may fail to counteract the problem of recruitment, since all available data indicate that most of it happens when citizens are pushed outside the territory of their home states and their supportive home communities.

As in other states in the region, an exclusive focus on ISIS in the Syrian/Iraqi conflict and its potential effect on Uzbeks in Central Asia obscures the intra-Islamic conflict and ISIS attacks against other organized militant groups fighting Syrian government forces. Responses to ISIS messaging that highlight the group’s violence against other Muslims are among the most resonant—treating ISIS as the only nonstate Islamist faction in the conflict both glosses over its internecine tactics and bolsters its claim that it is the only “truly Muslim” group opposed to Bashir al-Assad in Syria or the only one representing a global Sunni identity.

Uzbekistani and Russian policies of exaggerating ISIS’s ability to pose a military threat to the territory of the Central Asian states similarly only bolsters the group’s claims that they represent a unified Sunni political movement and that citizens of Uzbekistan must accept an authoritarian regime and Russian political dominance or support ISIS—exactly the message promoted by ISIS supporters aimed at citizens unhappy with authoritarianism and political and cultural dominance by external powers.

For the United States and its partners, the primary challenge in creating anti-ISIS messages that resonate with the Uzbek-speaking public is overcoming the ubiquitous conspiracy theories fed by Russian and local media that blame the United States for the ISIS threat. Persuading Uzbeks that external states are reliable partners with a shared interest in combatting a common threat and assisting in the development of strong ethnic Uzbek communities and institutions—particularly in Kyrgyzstan and among migrant workers in Russia and elsewhere—is the first task before other messaging is likely to resonate.

Uzbekistan’s decision to use trusted religious figures who have genuine popular influence, such as Hayrullo Hamidov, to counter ISIS recruitment reflects one of the most resonant public responses to ISIS messaging and is likely to be significantly more successful than past strategies. New support for ISIS by some members of the hard-line Uzbek Salafist networks on social media reaffirms the need to articulate theological responses by figures viewed as legitimate and authoritative.

Past regional government policies that resulted in the arrest, exile, or assassination of respected Islamic scholars who opposed violent extremist organizations and political violence but were critical of their own government have significantly narrowed the field of religious authorities available to assist in countering violent extremist messaging. While Uzbekistan released
one of its most influential Islamic figures from prison to improve its anti-ISIS campaign. Kyrgyzstan almost simultaneously imprisoned its most popular ethnic Uzbek imam who had already publicly condemned ISIS. Cooperation between independent religious figures and states need not be direct or coordinated, but strict restrictions on independent Islamic discourse of Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan make it difficult for grassroots anti-ISIS dialogue to develop. Restrictions on religious freedom also open opportunities for ISIS supporters to argue that there is an inherent conflict between Muslims and secular government authorities.

NOTES

1. While when adopting the name “Jabhat Fateh al-Sham” the alliance of groups formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra formally dissociated themselves from al-Qaeda, the Uzbek groups in this alliance, particularly Tauhid and Jihad Brigade, continue to produce and distribute ideological material that is often translated directly from Al Qaeda sources. Whether or not there is a direct control/command relationship or to what extent they may depend on Al Qaeda sources for funding is difficult to ascertain, but we can say with confidence that the Uzbek constellation of groups in Idlib continue to move in the general Al Qaeda orbit and are, as of July 2017, in a state of open warfare with ISIS.


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11. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0XGIW1XxWc.

12. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTRe2AUHuhgn33CTFXyN5uw/videos.


35. Investigation by Sweden TV4 and RFE/RL’s Uzbek Service Ozodlik discovered a social media relationship between al-Kosoniy and Rahmat Akilov, the migrant from Uzbekistan who conducted a deadly truck attack in Stockholm in April 2017. While it is unclear whether al-Kosoniy played any direct role in inspiring Akilov, who
confessed to the attack that killed five people and injured at least fourteen, Kosoniy was the only readily identifiable jihadist supporter in the social media data shared by investigators with the media organizations, https://www.rferl.org/a/stockholm-attack-led-double-live/28525330.html.

36. https://www.facebook.com/kunuznews/photos/a.454039411294491.106133.375620572469709/914177361947358/?type=1&comment_id=914180495280378&reply_comment_id=914222915276136&total_comments=9&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22%22R%22%22%7D.


42. https://www.facebook.com/groups/qorqmaymiz/permalink/733034590164154/.

43. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0CFoCSo88celSo5iNcrjGg.

44. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq5OW9cMY40.

45. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQlHwksKR1g.


59. Tucker, “Research Note.”
66. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtCkhX2-NM.
71. https://www.facebook.com/groups/347378472074108/.
73. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6D3dg3iq00.
75. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9q_EWkdUH2wJuXuY008A.
Part IV

RENEGOTIATING IDENTITIES
AND CULTURAL LEGACIES
Chapter Twelve

Be(com)ing Uzbek

Patterns of Identification and Processes of Assimilation

Peter Finke

Ethnic and national identities, and the challenges they pose to successful state building in the contemporary world, have been the topic of a vast literature that emerged in the last decades. The newly independent republics in Central Asia are no exception, and social scientists have taken a particular interest in Uzbekistan for a number of reasons. One of these is that its titular group, the Uzbeks, occupy a specific position in the overall configuration of the region. They are not only the largest indigenous population, with some thirty million individuals, but they are also the most centrally located, geographically as well as culturally. In addition to the state bearing their name, Uzbeks also form sizable minorities and often local majorities in the surrounding states of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.

This chapter examines how “Uzbekness” is conceptualized in this region, both within the state of Uzbekistan and among the diasporas who live beyond its boundaries. I argue that the very concept entails a flexibility and permeability that allows others to join without great obstacles if they see sufficient benefits to doing so. To be or become an Uzbek—in the contemporary meaning of a sedentary Turkic-speaker—has long been an attractive option due to their intermediate position between the Iranian oases dwellers and the pastoralists in the steppe belt. In some ways, it could be argued that the very existence of the Uzbeks in Central Asia is owed to the encounter between these two poles.1 The chapter will show that, in some parts of the region, there are still benefits to becoming Uzbek, while in others it has lost its attractiveness.

The background to this story is the process of nation building that began with the establishment of the Soviet republics in Central Asia during the 1920s and 1930s but greatly intensified after these gained independence in the early 1990s. Beyond the immediate challenges of economic and political transformation, the new states and their respective elites faced the imminent
task of defining a national image for its population that would significantly differentiate them from the others surrounding them. Different regimes followed different trajectories in this, which had impacts not only on the internal ethnic configuration but also for mutual relationships among the Central Asian states and beyond—including, for example, with Turkey, Iran, and China.

The academic literature is also fraught with disputes about “who are the Uzbeks?” and the apparent mismatch between the historical meaning of the word and its contemporary applications—that is, between descendants of nomadic invaders from the Dasht-i Qipchaq and the heirs of an old sedentary civilization. This opposition became particularly visible when the government of Uzbekistan decided to rebrand the medieval warlord and emperor Timur as the national hero of the country, despite his clearly non-Uzbek self-understanding. Another frequent claim in the literature is that traditionally identities were vague and flexible in Central Asia, and it took the Soviet national delimitation process to create, more or less artificially, the ethnic units of today. Whatever the basis would be, any attempt to establish a unifying national idea would violate some historical facts and was therefore deemed to fail.

This chapter will not discuss this issue. Obviously, national histories and ideologies are always a stretching and distorting of historical trajectories. Uzbekistan is therefore nothing unusual in this regard. What I will try to show is the peculiar way that Uzbeks have conceptualized ethnicity in contrast to other schemes in the region. At the bottom of this is an understanding of localities that not only define closeness and distance with others, but also the way that identity and personhood is transmitted from one generation to another. I have called this a “territorial model” elsewhere. It rests on a cognitive scheme that gives preference to the becoming of a member of a specific entity by way of socialization and cultural similarity. This contrasts with a “genealogical model,” the predominant understanding among Kazakhs or Kyrgyz—and indeed most of the world—which is concerned more with the affiliation people have toward particular “others” by birth. Obviously, switching is an easier process in the former case.

There is more to it, however, than differences in cognition, which, although shared within culturally patterned groups or categories, are ultimately the property of individuals. Ethnic boundaries also form institutional frameworks within which people can make reasonable assumptions about each other’s norms and actions. That does not mean that interaction across boundaries is impossible, but it usually implies different rules of conduct, which may not be as familiar and reliable as those within. In other words, belonging to specific ethnic or otherwise defined groups provides public goods and low-
ers transaction costs. As a consequence, however, there is always temptation to change one’s affiliation because other groups may be superior in certain respects—for example, by representing a majority favored by state politics.

I begin with a brief historical overview of the development of Uzbekness before turning to its different manifestations in the contemporary state bearing its name. Part of this is based on my own research in four rural settings within Uzbekistan and the respective ways that ethnic identity and mutual relationships are configured. This section is largely a summary of my earlier work. Next, I look at the fate of the “diasporas” as they represent a challenge to the model and thus deserve special attention. This is all the more true since the respective states are also undergoing rapid transformation that includes their relationship with Uzbekistan. For this part, I rely mainly on an ongoing research project on the Uzbek minorities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. In the conclusion I will revisit some overarching issues and add more recent developments and challenges to this picture. Time does not stand still, and the mass out-migration of Uzbeks in recent years is about to profoundly change perceptions about locality and belonging.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There is relatively little dispute on the origin of the ethnonym “Uzbek.” Scholars seem reasonably convinced that the name derives from Uzbek Khan (or rather Özbek Khan), a descendant of the Mongol emperor Chenggis Khan, who lived from 1282 to 1342 and was instrumental in the final Islamization in the realm of the Golden Horde. When and why the different groups settling in this territory adopted this as a generic term is not entirely clear, but the switch in religion may have been an important factor. A first period of political dominance that was labelled as being Uzbek was the rule of Abul-Khayr during the mid-fifteenth century. It was, however, short-lived and soon led to the secession of those tribal units that would later form the nucleus of the Kazakhs. At the turn of the sixteenth century a new confederation of Uzbeks emerged under the leadership of Muhammad Shaybaniy. He conquered the territories of contemporary Uzbekistan and expelled the last Timurid rulers, including Babur, who would centuries later became historical idols of the new state.

The period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century was characterized by several polities that in the literature are labeled as Uzbek Khanates or Emirates. Soon after the Shaybanid conquest, internal divisions led to the formation of three political entities with the centers being Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand. Until the early nineteenth century, all of these polities were ruled
by descendants of different lines of Chenggisids before they were toppled by other tribal leaders. A few decades later, the Tsarist expansion reached the oases to impose a colonial system upon the local population. By the year 1868 all of the territories had been brought under control and were henceforth governed by a type of indirect rule. In the case of Bukhara and Khiva, formal independence continued until 1924.¹¹

During these centuries the ethnic and linguistic configuration in the oases changed fundamentally. While there had been earlier Turkic invaders before the Shaybanids, the majority of the population had in all likelihood remained Iranian-speaking. During the early period most of the newcomers also settled in the steppe and desert belts but gradually started to settle in the oases.¹² This would contribute to the Turkification of the local population, although the changes in the ethnic composition differed for each of the oases, as will be explored in the following section. With their settlement, however, the descendants of the Uzbek tribes also changed language, adopting the Turkic dialects of those groups, such as the Qarakhanids, who had begun settling in the oases during the pre-Mongol period. Today, the vast majority of Uzbeks speak so-called Qarluq dialects, in contrast to the Qipchaq dialects inherited from the northern steppes. This is significant, because the latter dialects are closer to the contemporary languages of Kazakh and Kyrgyz.

The Uzbeks of today can thus be characterized as the product of a complex mixture of populations and languages over the course of the last 1,500 years, since the very first Turkic nomads reached the oases of Transoxania. In its contemporary form the language also reflects this process, as it is heavily influenced by Iranian vocabulary and grammar.¹³ This put the settled Turkic speakers, who did not call themselves Uzbeks at that time, into an intermediate position between the old established sedentary population, which had started to be called Tajik by that time, and the various nomadic or seminomadic groups outside of the oases, most of whom spoke Qipchaq and in some cases Oghuz variants of Turkic.¹⁴

With the establishment of Soviet rule in the 1920s, things changed profoundly. The new socialist ideals contained, somewhat paradoxically, a strong move toward strengthening ethnic distinctions. The “affirmative action empire”¹⁵ envisioned, at least temporarily, an outline that gave great credit to separate units defined on the basis of their differences as well as socioeconomic development. In the framework of the politics of national delimitation, two parallel processes took place. One was the fixation of ethnic units, such as the Uzbeks, and the assignment of each and every individual to one of them. The second was the creation of socialist republics, five in the case of Central Asia, and subordinate entities of lower status. The corresponding
ethnic entities, among them Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks, were awarded the highest level of evolutionary progress, nation, within the Soviet hierarchy.\textsuperscript{16}

Of these, Uzbekistan occupied the central and most densely populated part of the territory. Several authors have pointed to the fact that the Soviets favored the republic over others, such as by incorporating large tracks of land where the majority of people actually spoke Tajik.\textsuperscript{17} Others have elaborated on the mismatch mentioned above, namely that most of those who became “Uzbeks” at that time would not have thought of themselves as such before. On the contrary, in many regions the label had until then been reserved for the still seminomadic populations at the outskirts of the oases. But the Soviet engineers had decided to create the Uzbek nation as a manifestation of age-old sedentary civilizations, reaching back to the pre-Turkic period.\textsuperscript{18} While there had been disputes along the borders in all directions, the new concept was readily accepted, and today most people regard the label “Uzbek” as self-explanatory. As we will see later, those groups that could qualify as the real descendants of the original group, the so-called Qipchaq-Uzbeks, are seen as a peculiar variation of the general pattern.

Independence caught the elites in Uzbekistan by surprise, as they did with most of the other former Soviet republics. The sudden collapse of the USSR forced them not only to initiate economic reforms and to create a sovereign political system, but also to search for commonalities that would bind the people living in this state together or at least separate them from others. The process of nation-building in Uzbekistan has been observed with particular attention, not only because of it being the most populous of the new states, but also due to the perceived anomalies, such as the central role of the Timurid heritage (in contrast to the largely neglected Shaybanids). There is a striking degree of continuity with the Soviet past in terms of understanding Uzbekness as an ethnic concept that draws on an ancient sedentary culture, a moderate importance of Islam, and a strong attachment to the territory of the state as well as its component localities.\textsuperscript{19}

This understanding of Uzbekness and its titular state has led to minority policies characterized by assimilation rather than discrimination. I will elaborate on this by describing the ethnic configuration in four different sites within the country. These case studies do not claim to be representative of the whole, but rather they point to the fundamental, and constitutive, locality of the very concept. Uzbeks of different provenance have by definition to be different according to the respective setting they come from or live in. The territorial concept of ethnicity and nationhood, however, also implies little attention to those Uzbeks outside of the borders, as will be described in more detail later.
Chapter Twelve

FOUR CASES OF UZBEKNESS

The Oasis of Bukhara

The first of the four case studies within Uzbekistan is in the oasis of Bukhara or, more precisely, the district of Romitan. One of the oldest permanently settled spots in the world and famous for its legacy of Islamic scholarship, Bukhara inhibits a very prominent position within Central Asia. It is also one of the best-known places for tourism due to the countless architectural ruins from different historical eras. Located in the geographical center of contemporary Uzbekistan, Bukhara is largely surrounded by deserts and therefore fairly distant from the neighboring oases. This also affected the ethnic composition in the region. As there are no pasture areas anywhere nearby, the newly arrived nomads had to settle down and in most cases quickly assimilated into the local population.  

Today, Bukhara is famous throughout Uzbekistan as the stronghold of Tajikness in the country. Although officially they number only some five percent of the population in the province, the amount of native speakers of Tajik is probably around 50–60 percent. This is especially the case in the western and northern parts of the oasis where they form village clusters where differences with Uzbeks are hardly recognizable and, in fact, instantly denied. “We are one people with two languages,” is a frequent claim. By contrast, other groups settling in the region are less integrated, even if they speak closely related languages. This is true, for example, for the local Turkmens, who de facto speak Uzbek with a slight accent, or the Ironi, who are distinguished by their Shiite background.  

What is striking in this context is the nearly universal existence of bilingual proficiency, which is considered almost a cultural prerequisite. As a consequence, people fluidly switch languages on a daily basis, whether at work, on the street, or within the family. Some also change their primary tongue during their lifetime, perhaps due to marriage or a change of residence. There is even no clear tendency in public as regarding a dominance of Uzbek as the national idiom. In recent years, however, more and more schools using Tajik as the language of instruction have closed because parents believe their children will be at a disadvantage in their future careers. This has accelerated the centuries-old process of assimilation.  

Due to widespread bilingualism, marriages between Tajik- and Uzbek-speakers are not considered a problem, and they are indeed very common. In a survey conducted in several villages of Romitan district, almost half of all brides who had moved there from outside spoke a different mother tongue than their husbands. Very often, however, there was an existing kinship relationship between the two families to build on. Indeed, kinship and physical
proximity seemed much more important when choosing a marriage partner than language or ethnicity. This, of course, results in a situation where mixed families are the norm rather than the exception, and therefore any differences in cultural patterns and social organization are hard to sustain. 22

More important is a common idea of being Bukharians (buxorolik), and the two ethnonyms are rarely ever used in this sense. When asked what the ethnicity or language of a child born into a mixed family would be, the answer typically was “it depends.” One can even identify as Uzbek if both parents are Tajik but the larger surrounding neighborhood uses the other language. Belonging and personhood are thus fundamentally the consequence of socialization and a shared cultural environment. This, by definition, distances Uzbeks and Tajiks in Bukhara from those of other provenance and contributes to a strong sense of local identity. Other local groups, such as Turkmens, Kazakhs or Ironi, may integrate into this amalgamation depending on their perceived similarity in cultural attitudes.

The Fergana Valley

In contrast to Bukhara, the Fergana Valley is not an oasis in the strict sense but a long valley running some one hundred kilometers from west to east and approximately thirty kilometers north to south. Historically a less significant player than the locations further west, it is today of great importance for a number of reasons. One is its population density, with close to one-third of the population of Uzbekistan living here. Other factors are more ambivalent. On the one hand, the Fergana Valley is often considered the bastion of pure Uzbekness in terms of language and culture. 23 At the same time, it was the scene of most of the violent events and Islamist undertakings in recent years.

As in Bukhara, ecology affected the ethnic configuration over time. The Fergana Valley is not surrounded by deserts but encircled by mountain ranges. The mountains have always harbored various pastoral groups, as did the semi-desert in the very center of the valley. Therefore, the sedentary and nomadic groups lived in much closer proximity, resulting in a very complex and interwoven arrangement. Apart from Tajiks and Kyrgyz, who live scattered throughout the valley, there is a strong internal division among local Uzbeks. Some of these, in all likelihood, were at least seminomadic in the past, such as the Qipchaqs and the local Turks, another group that arrived during the pre-Mongol period. 24 Others trace their origin to neighboring Xinjiang, and sometimes call themselves Uygurs or Qashgarians.

These internal distinctions do, however, not create linguistic differences. In contrast to the Sharisabz site introduced below, the Qipchaq in the Fergana Valley, or to be more precise in Markhamat district where most of the
research was conducted, speak standard Uzbek. So do the Kyrgyz and Tajiks, many of whom have adopted Uzbek as their primary language without necessarily changing their ethnic belonging. Bilingualism is thus less common here, and Uzbek prevails. This also implies less switching in the course of a day or a lifetime. If Fergana Valley residents continue speaking Tajik, or teaching it to their children, they are also making more of a political or ethnic statement than is the case in Bukhara. But overall there is a clear trend toward Uzbekization, here also fostered by the government’s alleged belief that Tajiks are particularly susceptible to Islamist movements.

Mixed marriages exist and are quite common as well, but they have a different social standing and different consequences. As in Bukhara, many families prefer their children to marry kin to be better able to judge the mutual background and expectations. The reason is that children of mixed unions will ultimately tend toward becoming Uzbek or, to be more precise, a “pure” (chisto or taza) Uzbek, meaning with no additional attribute. This applies equally to marriages with Tajiks or Kyrgyz as among different types of Uzbeks. In fact, many taza Uzbeks expressed a preference for Tajik in-laws, rather than Turks or Qipchaqs, who are considered less culturally developed.

The situation in Markhamat and other parts of the Fergana Valley bears thus more signs of a primordial understanding of ethnicity than in Bukhara. Origin and family background play more of a role, although there is still a great deal of flexibility, and intermarriage is very common and even encouraged. What unites all groups is a shared feeling of cultural superiority toward other parts of the country, and indeed all of Central Asia. Within that, as had been the case in Bukhara, some are closer to a “cultural core” than others. Here as well, this would unite (pure) Uzbeks and Tajiks more than it does the Uzbeks with other Turkic groups.

The Oasis of Khorezm

At the very western end of Uzbekistan is the province of Khorezm. Historically, this name applied to a much larger region, parts of which are now attached to the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, where indeed the research for this case study was conducted, and to neighboring Turkmenistan. Similar to Bukhara, Khorezm was long a major player in Central Asia and has only recently been reduced to a political backwater. Even more isolated and distanced from other permanently inhabited places, Khorezm suffered particularly in recent years because of the ecological disaster of the Aral Sea, on which the oasis borders.

In ethnic terms Khorezm is unique in Central Asia, as the process of Turkification was completed here several centuries ago. Today, there are no Tajiks
left, and the region is populated by several Turkic-speaking groups. The situation is complicated, however, because the local Uzbeks divide into two distinct categories, one speaking an Oghuz dialect, the other a Qipchaq one. In Khojeyli, where I conducted research, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Karakalpaks, lived in more or less equal portions, complemented by a smaller number of Turkmens. This distinction is, however, not merely linguistic but also includes cultural and social markers. As descendants of the Shaybanid invasion, the Qipchaqs, according to the local narrative, have traditionally been seminomadic and show remnants of a clan system, which is unknown to the Oghuz Uzbeks. The importance of livestock rearing is indeed to some degree visible in local settlement structures, which resemble scattered homesteads separated by pastoral land, rather than compact villages as in Bukhara or the Fergana Valley.27

While Turkification is completed, it did not lead to the overall dominance of Uzbek. In fact, it seems that speakers of the four official languages hold each other at length and have settled into a kind of equilibrium where little assimilation occurs. This may indeed be a consequence of the absence of Tajiks who, in other settings, would be the decisive factor in strengthening the importance of Uzbek. Here, everyone speaks in his or her own language, which—with the exception of Turkmen—is fairly easily understandable to one another. This is helped by the fact that in Khojeyli the dominant local Uzbek dialect is the Qipchaq variant, akin to Kazakh and Karakalpak. Many people also master one of the other languages but seldom have the need to use them in everyday life. Also in public, each is recognized as an official idiom and, for example, announcements from the administration may also be written in Karakalpak, the official language in the province, or Kazakh, depending on the local configuration.

Intermarriages are equally rare, although not uncommon or frowned upon. The most frequent pairings were between Kazakhs and Karakalpaks, which are also the two groups most closely related culturally and linguistically. But as the settlements are separated by ethnie, smaller ones often defined by clan or lineage, interaction is less intensive than in other parts of Uzbekistan. As a consequence, families tend to be monoethnic or monolingual. Children of mixed unions would then become hybrids or in-betweens, without this having much of a negative connotation.

As in the other sites, there exists a strong sense of a common regional identity, which may at times include neighboring Khorezm province as well. Partly, this is based on a felt distance from and neglect by the central government, which seems to have abandoned the region in its ecological and economic misery. When it comes to internal distinctions, genealogies play a much greater role here, and the local conceptualization of ethnicity in
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Khojejyli is certainly the most primordial of the four settings. Boundaries are rather clear-cut, although not impassable, and there is very little assimilation going on in any direction.

Upper Qashqadarya

The fourth setting, the region around the twin cities of Shahrisabz and Kitob, or Upper Qashqadarya province, is equally not an oasis in the strict sense. It has an agricultural core surrounded by adjacent pasture areas that gradually merge into each other. The boundaries between the sedentary and nomadic realms were similarly never as clear-cut as, for example, in Bukhara. Located along the upper course of the Qashqadarya River and close to the surrounding mountains, it is a region of moderate abundance in terms of water and green lands. Historically, this area was never a key player, except for a brief period of time during the rise of Timur who was born in a village nearby.

The ecology of the area also affected the ethnic composition of the population. With sedentary agriculturalists and seminomadic pastoralists living in relatively close proximity, it was possible for the latter to settle at the outskirts of the fertile core without abandoning their previous lifestyle. This led to the current configuration where there are basically three distinct categories, although only two of them have a label of their own. The central settlements are inhabited primarily by Uzbeks who speak a dialect not very different from neighboring Samarkand or the Uzbek literary language. In the outer villages toward the steppe belt, however, a variant of Qipchaq is used that differs significantly. Its speakers are accordingly labeled as zhokchilar, those who say “zhok”—meaning “not,”—in contrast to speakers of standard Uzbek, who say “yok.” As this is not an official category, their number can only be estimated, but they form a sizable minority, and in some districts a majority, of the population. Finally, Tajik is spoken in many of the remote villages that comprise the third, less cohesive group.

It is, however, much more than a purely linguistic difference that divides the residents of this region. Both their dialect and settlements remind that the zhokchilar are descendants of former pastoralists and culturally akin to Kazakhs or Kyrgyz. They could, indeed, qualify as the real successors of the Shaybanid, or the Uzbeks proper, but in the local context their language and way of life is rather conceptualized as a substandard behavior. Therefore, there is little bilingualism in any other direction than toward literary or yokchi Uzbek. This holds true also for the Tajiks who apparently lost ground in the central settlements in the plains a long time ago. Assimilation is thus pretty much unidirectional here, as was the case in the Fergana Valley.

Mixed marriages similarly constitute the reason for a trend toward becoming yokchi Uzbeks. It is a bit less frequent due to the distances of the settle-
ment or the relative remoteness of both the zhokchi villages in the steppe and the Tajik ones in the mountains. But as in the other sites, they are not seen as something to be avoided by all means. Most cases therefore concern individuals who have moved to town or follow their spouses there. As zhokchi is neither a proper linguistic nor ethnic category, however, the result would not be understood as a mixed family either.

Again, one can describe a cultural core here, which is set locally as the default version of language and culture. This is similar to the Fergana Valley, which has the version of “pure” Uzbekness that is closest to the literary form. There is little ambivalence here, as the Tajiks are considered as outside the core due to their marginal location in the mountains, which also implies a less civilized way of life in the local understanding. But this is still not thought of as a primarily genetic process, so that people may change their identity and be readily accepted into the mainstream culture if they so choose. A person may have difficulty shedding their zhokchi dialect, but the next generation will be fully integrated and thus contribute to an ongoing “yokchization” of the population.

**UZBEK DIASPORAS IN CENTRAL ASIA AND BEYOND**

Next, we can check these findings by looking at the manifestations of Uzbekness outside the borders of the corresponding nation-state. For matters of size, indigeneity, and accessibility, we settled on Uzbeks in four neighboring countries: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Each of these represents a different situation in terms of economic and political status, local ethnic configurations and mutual relations, as well as the existence or nonexistence of conflicts. Thus, these four cases, in addition to the four in Uzbekistan, should shed light on processes of ethnic identification and demarcation. Three of the four sites had seen some sort of conflict during the last decades, in which local Uzbeks were, in one way or another, involved. At the same time, all of them represent cases of long-established ethnic communities, which have been part of the respective society for centuries. It would thus also be possible to study whether the described attractiveness of being Uzbek was and is also valid in a place where they represent a political minority, at least in recent times.

**Kyrgyzstan**

Kyrgyzstan was a very obvious choice for a project studying Uzbeks abroad. When research started, it had been just a few years since an outburst of violent conflicts in the southern provinces had cost the lives of hundreds of people,
the majority of which were Uzbeks. Following earlier clashes in 1990, this
time seemed to confirm an old animosity between the sedentary traders
and agriculturalists, on the one hand, and the traditionally pastoralist Kyrgyz,
on the other. Political turmoil led to the “Tulip Revolution” in 2005 and
economic deprivation in the more marginal rural areas, where ethnic Kyrgyz
outnumber ethnic Uzbeks.

These events changed interethnic relations and hierarchies fundamentally,
even in locations less affected by confrontations such as Nookat, the main site
of research within the project. Of course, the Kyrgyz already had a special
status as a titular ethnie controlling much of national and regional politics. But Uzbeks were regarded as more successful economically, and they domi-
nated the market. The short but bloody clashes in Osh and other settlements in
the summer of 2010, while internationally blamed on the Kyrgyz, have chal-
lenged the prevailing views. Uzbeks are still very much engaged in trade, but
if they own a business, they now likely have a Kyrgyz partner. In public and
private, Kyrgyz dominance is visible and approved. Uzbeks themselves seem
to accept this arrangement as a matter of fact and adapt accordingly. Those
with closer ties to Kyrgyz citizens make use of that, threatening others to “call
their Kyrgyz friends” to settle an issue. As neighboring Uzbekistan offers no
hope for support whatsoever, most Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan seem to have
accepted their fate and try to make the best out of it.

This situation also affects language usage. Kyrgyz has been the state
language in Kyrgyzstan since independence in 1991, but in everyday life,
especially in the marketplace, Uzbek has been equally prominent. This has
begun to change, and Kyrgyz are becoming less willing to switch language in
mid-conversation, while this seems to be much more common among Uzbeks
than it used to be. Also, families have started to send their children to Kyr-
gyz schools, which they believe will better prepare them for the future. The
Uzbek language has, however, regained some of its importance after having
almost disappeared from public in the years following the clashes of 2010.
Intermarriages have never been uncommon, although they are not frequent,
either. Mixed families faced serious problems during and after the conflicts,
but with time things have settled and mixed marriages rebounded. Today the
government encourages mixed marriages, presumably to reduce segregation
in case of renewed violence.

Interestingly, many people of both ethnicities have been reconsidering
their identities. While the case of Uzbeks taking on a Kyrgyz identity seems
obvious and often results in what people consider “fake ethnicities,” this is
less clear for the Kyrgyz. But by all accounts some Kyrgyz are still attracted
to “Uzbekness” due to the economic opportunities it entails. What is as strik-
ing, returning to the territorial concept introduced earlier, is that this happens
by settling in a certain mahalla, or organized neighborhood. To become an Uzbek, one has therefore first to adopt a corresponding local identity and belonging.

Kazakhstan

Southern Kazakhstan was included in the study not only because it contains one of the largest Uzbek minorities, long indigenous to the local setting, but also because it provides an important counterpoint to the three other sites. Up to the present day, the area has not experienced any serious conflicts or interethnic tensions, and while this is to some degree true for the whole state of Kazakhstan, relations between Uzbeks and the titular group seem particularly amiable. This may come as a surprise, insofar as the two respective states compete with each other for regional dominance in Central Asia and can hardly be said to be on friendly terms with each other.

Indeed, friendly mutual relations and a strong expression of loyalty toward the state of Kazakhstan very much characterize the positioning of local Uzbeks, fostered by a rather affirmative policy in this regard. Like other minorities in the country, they participate actively in the numerous occasions where slogans of “unity in diversity” and the like are commemorated. Uzbeks play an obvious role in the Assembly of Cultures due to their numerical strength, and they enjoy distinct radio and TV channels as well as other rights of cultural self-determination. This is, as mentioned, never combined with any regret at being citizens of Kazakhstan, and the neighboring state of Uzbekistan, merely a half-an-hour drive from the regional center of Shymkent, another fieldwork site, is hardly an attractive alternative to live in these days.

The two countries have experienced sharply different economic and political paths in recent decades. Kazakhstan weathered a period of severe crisis during the early and mid-1990s, but has experienced a remarkable boom since; while the situation in Uzbekistan is stagnating at best. Within Kazakhstan, the southern provinces have reaped the most benefits from economic recovery, and Shymkent region, a traditional trading hub, is no exception to this. By all accounts, Uzbeks play a prominent role in this and have on average seen their living standards increase during the last ten–fifteen years. And while maybe not the most democratic place on earth, individual freedoms are certainly much more developed than in Uzbekistan. Thus, Kazakhstan is, for most of them, a more attractive place to live, both for economic and political reasons.

This loyalty does have, however, an impact on the status of Uzbek culture and language. Kazakh as the national idiom is gradually growing in importance and has begun to replace Russian as the principal language of higher
education. At the same time, Uzbekistan is not considered an alternative residential option. This case is not so much an issue of identity change—although there are undoubtedly individuals who do switch their ethnic attachment for one or the other reason—but one of adaptation. As the titular ethnie, Kazakhs do not expect others to assimilate; rather, other groups should stay separate and show their respect—for example, by learning the national language.

*Oralman*, or Kazakh ethnic repatriants, play an important role in this case study. Originating from Mongolia, China, or Uzbekistan, these had been officially invited to resettle in their “native homeland” following its independence in 1991. By now more than one million have done so, with two-thirds of them coming from Uzbekistan.31 This has changed the local ethnic configuration tremendously. Rather than serving as a potential bridge—as being fluent in both languages—the oralman form a separate category that is at odds with the established set of relationships. Despite their migration background, they tend to see themselves as belonging to the national entity in a more intimate way than they may grant the local Uzbeks who have been living here for centuries. As this is also a question of access to resources, in particular land, the response to this is easy to imagine. But also many of the local Kazakhs imagine their Uzbek neighbors as closer and more reliable than the co-ethnics from abroad, resulting in new clusters based on locality rather than genealogy, as would be the expected patterns among Kazakhs.32 When it comes to marriage, however, unions with oralman are nevertheless preferred to those with Uzbeks.

**Tajikistan**

Tajikistan occupies a special place in the ethnic configuration of Central Asia as the only remaining state with an Iranian-speaking majority and literary language. It is also infamous for a bloody civil war that shattered the early years of independence and left an enduring political legacy. As this was primarily a conflict between different regional affiliations among the Tajiks, neither Uzbeks nor other ethnic minorities were at the forefront of the fighting (if the Pamiri groups are not considered a distinct ethnicity), although they have been involved in one way or another. Uzbeks have also been affected in the longer run by the specific national or nationalist discourse that set in in the aftermath of the civil war.33

Most striking in regard to this case study is certainly the drastic decrease in numbers. According to official statistics the percentage of Uzbeks in Tajikistan dropped from 25 to merely 12 percent since the early 1990s, yet there have not been any reports about any large-scale out-migration. Part of this is undoubtedly the result of people declaring themselves to be Tajiks, the reverse
of what is going on in Uzbekistan. This is related to the fact that increasingly it became a disadvantage to be an Uzbek in Tajikistan—for example, when looking for a job. So, similar to the situation described for Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, people decide to demonstrate their loyalty to the nation-state, but in this case by giving up their ethnic identity, at least on paper.

Another reason for the apparent decline in numbers is that the government has turned several former Uzbek subgroups, such as Laqay or Qarluq, into distinct ethnic units. This happened primarily among the tribal groups in the southern part of the country, for whom also the distance with Tajiks is much greater than among the nontribal Uzbeks in the northern province of Sughd. The latter had for many decades been very powerful in politics, usually in alliance with the ruling elites in Dushanbe. Some of the tribal groups were all too happy to stress their distinctiveness from sedentary Uzbeks, a category that is usually labeled as Sart in the more northern parts of Central Asia.

The impacts on language and intermarriage have been equally mixed within the southern provinces. Uzbek and Tajik are equally spoken in public, but the role of the latter has clearly increased. Mixed marriages are quite common for some groups but avoided by others, creating a rather complex situation. But overall, assimilation tendencies have thus taken a pronounced turn toward Tajikization. This is mixed with an ideology that views Tajiks as the victims of centuries, if not millennia, of suppression and expulsion. It is thus a kind of an imagined reconversion to the original that is entailed in this process. Tajiks are, not quite correctly from a linguistic point of view, seen as the heirs of the autochthonous population of Central Asia, sometimes conceptualized as Aryans, who have been forcefully assimilated and discriminated against by succeeding waves of Turkic invaders. Interestingly, the Uzbeks seem to be the prime target in this regard, although—or because—they are closest in terms of cultural and social patterns, while, for example, the Kyrgyz in Tajikistan’s Pamir region are hardly an issue in national politics.

Afghanistan

Uzbeks in Afghanistan are concentrated in the northern provinces where they have long been a major factor in regional politics. In fact, their probably most famous member, Abdul Rashid Dostum, has been one of the leading warlords against the Taliban regime and a key political figure in Afghanistan for decades; he became a vice-president in the national government in 2014. Uzbek forces have thus been an active and relatively successful element in the violent conflicts that have shattered the country, rather than a victim, as in Kyrgyzstan, or a largely passive bystander, as in Tajikistan, although the benefits of this may have remained within Dostum’s inner circle. As part of
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the Northern Alliance, Uzbeks have sided with most of the other minorities in the region, particularly Tajiks, although this would often be a fragile relationship. As opponents of the Taliban, they have also been for a long time preferentially treated by outside forces, such as the U.S. government.  

Fieldwork among the Uzbeks in Afghanistan concentrated on the city of Mazar-I Sharif and its surrounding. This is a multilingual, polyethnic setting where Uzbeks form one of the major groups and dominate several urban neighborhoods (mahalla) and rural districts. As census data for Afghanistan is notoriously unreliable—and because the ruling Pashtu elite hesitates to conduct a survey that might throw doubts on their alleged absolute popular support—the exact number is difficult to give but probably exceeds three million, thus making them the largest Uzbek group outside of Uzbekistan.  

Uzbek identity is, as in the other case studies, strongly affected by locality, and individuals of the same regional background often find they share more with members of other ethnic groups than with Uzbeks of other provenance. But, similar to the situation in Tajikistan, this is crosscut by another divide, namely that between tribally organized Uzbeks, such as those in the northeastern regions, and the traditionally sedentary ones in the larger oases such as Mazar-I Sharif. Interestingly, the free listing conducted in Afghanistan differed greatly from other settings, in that tribal, linguistic, regional, as well as religious denominations, such as Aimaq, Farsiwan, Kabuli, or Ismaili, found their way into the ethnic repertoire. This hints at the fact that the determining aspects of Soviet nationality politics did not have that much of an impact here and the respective concept, the qaum, is still much more flexible and ambiguous than corresponding ones in other settings.  

The prominent position of Uzbeks also affects the importance of the language, which serves as a lingua franca—besides Tajik/Persian—in many of the northern regions. As in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan many people in northern Afghanistan are bilingual in these two languages, and the respective groups form regional elites versus Hazara, Turkmen, and others. In terms of intermarriage, Uzbeks and Tajiks consider each other most acceptable, and mixed families are a common phenomenon. A similar position in local and national politics has in this setting the effect that relatively little assimilation in either direction is going on. By contrast, both represent attractive options to lean to for members of other ethnic groups, although—as in other sites—this might cut through existing social networks and entails significant costs. Apart from language and, in the case of Hazara, religion, identity is, unlike the post-Soviet space, also marked by clothing and other easily recognizable external features.
The strong focus on local proximity and joint cultural patterns as the basis for identification and mutual classifications may be of different strengths in the four settings within Uzbekistan, but at the same time they form an overarching theme. It is not only that regional differences are an admitted fact. They are also constitutional for the very idea of what an Uzbek is. This, by extension, is also true for the diaspora settings. People of different provenance are expected to vary in their attitudes and behavior because they have been socialized accordingly. Consequently, Uzbekness is not a unifying theme but rather the sum of a number of different local practices and ideas. This is what I have labelled a “territorial concept of identity.”

But this stress on locality not only implies difference. It also recognizes the possibility of change and a certain permeability of boundaries. After all, a person is thus the result of their upbringing in a specific place, which at times may overshadow genealogies. When in the course of a lifetime the relevant others and points of reference change, this will also affect an individual’s own behavior and alliances. This has allowed the Uzbeks, or their prototypes of different names, to attract and easily incorporate members of other ethnic and social groups over the course of history.

It is impossible to determine how such decisions have come about in the past. But judging from contemporary data and an analysis of the benefits that be(com)ing Uzbek has provided over time, it is not too far of a stretch to presume a certain rationality behind that. It was, and in some settings still is, advantageous to be an Uzbek because it enlarges the number of potential partners for economic and social interaction. Uzbeks, or sedentary Turkic speakers, were linguistically and culturally in-between the local Iranian population and the pastoralists in the steppe region. Within contemporary Uzbekistan, the incentive to switch identities is correspondingly highest in those places where there is still a sizable number of Tajiks.

At the core of such changes is language use. The Bukhara setting shows persuasively that the temptation to switch to Uzbek is a constant feature, and once begun quickly changes the character of the respective village. The ethnographic material also clearly highlights the very conscious and strategic attitude people have in preparing their children for the future by, for example, not sending them to Tajik schools. Among the diasporas the same may happen in the opposite direction, but the overall trend seems less pronounced, with the possible exception of Tajikistan. By contrast, marriage choices are guided by very different preferences, namely geographical proximity and pre-existing kin relations, and language distinctions or career calculations play less a role in that. Depending on the respective constellation, however, mixed
marriages can quickly lead to the adoption of an Uzbek way of life among minorities.\textsuperscript{42} As with the language, the situation in the diaspora settings seems to be more stable in this regard.

Ethnic boundaries are thus not as clearly demarcated, or differently defined, as one might expect. For each setting closeness across linguistic borders may be stronger than with people of the same tongue and ethnonym somewhere else. In line with this, ideas about the transmission of identity and individual personality are equally localized and contrast with the primordial patterns we know from other settings within Central Asia and beyond. It is thus a question of becoming Uzbek throughout a person’s life, with a strong emphasis on early socialization patterns, rather than ancestry. Consequently, a gradual shift of language and cultural attitudes allows an individual to become an Uzbek also later, a process hardly thinkable in societies based on ideologies of genealogy and (patrilineal) descent, such as Kazakhs or Kyrgyz.\textsuperscript{43}

The state takes a decisive role in this—and has always done so. Assimilation processes in the past have been no less political than they are today. It is not necessarily that earlier Turkic statehoods, such as the Uzbek khanates, wanted their subjects to change language and identity. But they set the costs and benefits connected with different forms of social being. This is very much what the states of Uzbekistan as well as its neighbors do today. By defining the language of higher education and the preferred ethnicity of people in power, the incentives for people have changed and accelerated an assimilation process that has been going on for roughly one and a half millennia. It may, in the course of time, lead to a further marginalization of the Tajik language, at least outside the republic bearing its name.\textsuperscript{44}

All this has been shaken in recent years due to tremendous changes in the economic and social situation of people in Central Asia. Confronted with constantly decreasing living standards and widespread impoverishment caused by a highly exploitative production system that has replaced the Soviet-style command economy with a neofeudal one in Uzbekistan, people have started to leave the country in the millions. Similar numbers of out-migrants are reported for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with many of them being Uzbeks as well. Most of them went to Russia where a booming economy based on oil and gas extraction attracted cheap labor in the construction sector, in petty trade, and many other activities. Smaller numbers migrated to Kazakhstan or Turkey. As in neighboring Tajikistan, this was primarily a male phenomenon, which left hundreds of thousands of families without their main breadwinner at home.\textsuperscript{45}

The main destinations were the larger cities of Russia, such as Moscow or Novosibirsk. But migrants from Uzbekistan can be found from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok. They usually follow the path of kin or fellow villagers when
deciding their destination. While some have established their own businesses, most work for low wages and often in precarious conditions. Thus, for example, migrants from Central Asia built most of the facilities for the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi in 2014. Reports have it that many of them were never adequately paid and had to work under slavelike conditions. In addition to the poor economic situation the migrants also suffer from the threat of right-wing attacks, which have caused numerous casualties in recent years. In a climate of xenophobia and white supremacy the illegal or semi-legal migrants from Central Asia are easy prey to neofascist attacks, which are hardly ever prosecuted by state authorities.

But what this also meant is that millions of Uzbeks from all over Central Asia left their place of birth and thus their source of prime belonging. It would be premature to tell what this will do with the territorial model of identity described here. After all, most prefer to settle together with other members of their home community and often build new extended households in Russia. Still, this does imply a fundamental change of spatial orientation and attachment that contrasts with the patterns at home. It also contrasts with the reported unwillingness of Uzbeks to leave their villages for better-paid jobs during Soviet times. It ultimately leads to new configurations and alliances with people from different regions and backgrounds at their new places of residence.

While the term may be inaccurate to describe the phenomenon, the new migrants are sometimes also referred to as diasporas. This does certainly reflect a longing for home among many of them, although the situation can hardly be described as forced resettlement. But it does create a huge proportion of the population—estimates go as high as 20 percent for Uzbekistan and similar numbers for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—to live temporarily beyond the boundaries of their respective native state. In this they are exposed to new influences and ideas from a broad range of sources. As most of them come from a rural background, life in contemporary urban Russia is distinctively different, which is part of the attraction for many of them. Although Central Asia is obviously also part of a globalizing world, this is felt much more strongly on the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Novosibirsk. Another influence that is felt strongly is the growing importance of Islam among the younger generations of males in particular. This may partly be a response to the exclusion experienced by the “host” society and a strengthening of distinctions that link people to their homes.

At the same time, the influences the migrants are exposed to in Russia are also transported back home. People invest the money they earn into social capital at the place they come from. One aspect of this is, as in many comparable cases worldwide, the building or renovating of representative dwellings.
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When travelling though Central Asia these days, one sees new and often unfinished houses, many of them two-storied, scattered all over the place. The idea is to use those when one comes back after years of work abroad and thus also to claim one’s place in the local society. Another expenditure is the lavish life-cycle ceremonies that dominate Uzbek society and have become ever more exuberant in recent years. As the migrants play a key role in these and also contribute significantly to the expenses, the seasonal cycle has been adapted to the times of the year when many of them come back from Russia for holiday.\(^46\)

The absence of a major part of the male population has also set in motion important changes in social relations and gender roles. It has also influenced the self-understanding of those who stayed. While maybe less than that of the migrants, the identity of Uzbeks has been influenced by a steady flow of people back and forth as well as the intrusion of a new type of market and trade economy. While within Central Asia itself the local community and regional identity is still of utmost importance, the temporary absence of males and the new global influences they bring home do begin to make a difference.

NOTES

5. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
7. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
8. Ibid.
12. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
14. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
19. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
20. Ibid.
22. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
23. Ibid.
25. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
29. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
30. Research for this project is taking place within a joint project of the University of Zurich, the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies in Geneva, the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, and the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg. Funding is provided by the Swiss National Science Funds (SNSF) and the German Research Council (DFG). Research within the project is conducted by Khadija Abbasi, Indira Alibayeva, Wolfgang Holzwarth, and Baktygul Karimova. I owe the included insights to them while taking responsibility for all the interpretations offered here.
32. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
38. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
39. Ibid.
41. Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Foltz, “The Tajiks of Uzbekistan”; Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity*.
Chapter Thirteen

The Nation Narrated

Uzbekistan’s Political and Cultural Nationalism

Marlene Laruelle

The theoretical debate on the creation of nations has long been divided between two main schools: the primordialist, which sees nations as enduring entities with essentialist features; and the constructive, which sees the nation as a product of modernity. A third school, ethnosymbolism, tries to move away from this dichotomy and takes into consideration both approaches. I join this school in arguing that nations are a modern construct, yet built upon some preexisting cultural and ethnic roots that are reinterpreted in new contexts. Uzbekistan offers a case study of this multilayered construction, in which both contemporary political conditions and ancient cultural references are merged to advance a consensual and successful nationhood narrative.

Since independence, Uzbekistan’s strategy has been to promote two forms of nationalism. First, a political nationalism, expressed mostly through citizenship policy, that reflects the authoritarian nature of the Karimov regime; it sees the political order as natural and uncontroversial and the state as the ultimate representation of the nation. The second form is a cultural nationalism that gives preference to the titular ethnic group in everything symbolic. The Uzbek state ideology’s ideational premise, inspired by German romanticism, rests on the idea that each people has a “spirit” that endures across time and expresses its “core” essence under different cultural labels. The ideology of national independence as a political project is therefore closely interrelated with the sublimation of the Uzbek nation in its supposed essence, manifested through a linear historical trajectory with the independent nation-state as its evident achievement.

Under President Islam Karimov, the Uzbek regime successfully crafted a national historical metanarrative, as well as a large array of national symbols whose meaning is largely shared by the population, nicely described by
Laura Adams as the “spectacular state.” The new Uzbek statehood has been displayed through a political architecture style that could be named “dubaitimurid.” What Michael Billig defines as banal nationalism also constitutes an integral part of the Uzbek nationhood process. This is the case, for instance, for Uzbek pop music, which combines a Russian-Soviet legacy with Oriental flavors—pseudo-Arabic or Persian in style, with some borrowings from Bollywood—and offers a pantheon of modern idols and their “people” stories. This is also the case for Uzbekistan’s vibrant film industry—Uzbekkino is the only cinema production agency in Central Asia able to produce commercially viable films that attract a large domestic audience. Uzbek cuisine also became a brand that works domestically—easily celebrated with a rich symbolic background (family, community, hospitality)—and internationally—with chains of Uzbek restaurants all over Russia.

The literature of Uzbek post-Soviet nationhood is rich: masterful studies by Laura Adams and Peter Finke join older works on late Soviet Uzbekistan by William Fierman. In addition, articles by Andrew F. March, Nick Megoran, Timur Dadabaev, Shahram Akbarzadeh, Charles Kurzman, Reuel Hanks, Johan Rasanayagam, Sarah Kendzior, Nancy Rosenberger, and others examine various aspects of this nationhood process. In this chapter I focus on the intersection of the political and cultural aspects of the official Uzbek ideology of nationhood, especially how its authors have rewritten the nation’s historical trajectory.

THE IDEOLOGY OF NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE

Post-Soviet Uzbekistan rapidly and effectively built a state-sponsored discourse to replace the discredited Marxist-Leninist ideology, with the goal of preventing an “ideological vacuum.” It aimed to neutralize any external influence that could divide the country, whether Islamic, ethnonationalist, or Western liberal democratic. The Uzbek regime maintained the previous epistemological perception that ideology is not only above politics, but is also objective and neutral because it is based on uncontestable realities. The communist-era rhetoric of class struggle has been replaced by a discourse that viewed the new state as the natural culmination of the Uzbek nation’s century-old drive for independence. This consciously formulated ideology is intrinsically articulated alongside the regime’s legitimacy. In Karimov’s own words, “It is natural that the state system, its operation, and accompanying policies should above all be constructed on the basis of a concretely formulated ideology.”

In the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Karimov tried to revive the historical name of Turkestan and promoted a regional iden-
ality based on Turkic and Muslim values, which he dubbed “Turanism.” He was therefore in direct ideological competition with Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who put forward the rival concept of Eurasia, which situates Central Asia at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. However, while the notion of Turkestan as the new Central Asia, with Uzbekistan at its heart, did not resonate internationally, the Uzbek opposition had already embraced it domestically. This was the case for Muhammad Salih (b. 1949) of the Erk movement and Abdurakhim Polatov (b. 1944) of Birlik, both men belonging to a semidissident literary tradition that took form in the 1960s and 1970s and called for a more Islamo-nationalist orientation. The reference to Turkestan was rapidly replaced by a more Uzbekistan-centric narrative that posits the existence of unique national pathways to development.

This “Uzbek path” under the “wise leadership” of President Karimov took several forms. The first manifestation was Tashkent’s refusal of any shock therapy as promoted by international organizations and Western donors, and the decision to instead move slowly, gradually, toward a market economy. This resulted in the so-called Five Principles of Uzbek economics that the country has officially followed since then. The second effect was to anchor the “Uzbek path” into a longue durée perspective, as the result of centuries, even millennia, of history, and to personalize this historical trajectory of the nation-state by the president himself. Karimov’s cult of personality was less extreme than the one around Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan. Karimov was not exalted for his personal, almost supernatural, powers, but for embodying the state and the nation—for being, according to March, the “Great Uzbek Statebuilder.” In the 1990s, in particular, the urban landscape was covered by billboards with pictures of Karimov in the role of the “father of the nation” and with slogans celebrating the homeland (vatan), which he personified.

The ideology of national independence took form through a meticulous process of creating a consistent corpus of texts, some published immediately, as noted by Sarah Kendzior, others held in reserve to respond to events happening in the country. Several books, supposedly written by the president himself, promoted a vision of the uniqueness of Uzbekistan’s path: Uzbekistan: National Independence, Economic Policy and Ideology (O’zbekiston: milliy Istiqol, iqtisod, siyosat, mafkura) was published in 1993. In 2000, it was complemented by Our Highest Goal: Independence and Blossoming of the Nation, Freedom and Prosperity of the People (Ozod va obod Vatan, erkin va farovon hayot—pirovard maqsadimiz), and in 2003 by The Idea of National Independence. Main Aspects and Criteria (Milliy istiqol g’oyasi: asosiy tushuncha va tamoyillar), all works that became mandatory reading on school and university curricula. They all celebrate the nation as a fait accompli of Uzbek history. As Karimov stated, “The ideology must first reflect the
spiritual particularity and uniqueness of the sacred traditions and aspirations of our nation, formulated over many centuries and millennia."13 A long list of clichéd values is presented as comprising the “core” of the Uzbek national consciousness: respect for family, respect for elders and traditional values, friendship, peace and tolerance, openness to other civilizations, patience, hospitality, and industriousness.14

Several ideologists or court writers have shaped this grand narrative, including Karimov’s advisers Rustam Zhumaev15 and Habibullah Tadzhiev,16 as well as, more importantly, academic Ozod Sharafidinov (1929–2005), a former secretary for ideological issues of the Uzbek Communist Party. The first two men mainly advanced the discourse of the millennia-long struggle of Uzbekistan for its independence and national identity, while Sharafidinov became the official ideologist of Ma’naviyat.

As noted previously by March, Megoran, and Rasanayagam, the Uzbek state ideology has been obsessed with “alien” influences—particularly liberal values, Western consumerism, ethnonationalism, and Islamism—and hoped to provide “ideological immunity” (makhuraviy immunitet) to them. This immunization is embodied by the notion of Ma’naviyat: that is, spirituality or morality (meaning, in Islamic tradition, the acceptance of God’s word) elevated to the status of cultural flagship for the nation. Beginning in 1994, Karimov’s regime used the term Ma’naviyat on several occasions, launching a television channel and publishing house with the same name. Classes on Ma’naviyat va Ma’rifat (Spirituality and Enlightenment) were introduced to school curricula. In 2004, Ma’naviyat reached a new step in institutionalization through the creation of a Republican Center for Spiritual Propaganda (Respublika Ma’naviyat va Ma’rifat Kengashi), essentially a “Ministry of Ideology.” Among its responsibilities, the Center oversees the hiring of a vice-dean for Ma’naviyat in each higher education institution. This vice-dean supervises not only the teaching of the discipline, but also inspects the clothing worn by young men and women at the university to be sure they reflect the norms of morality and “humble” behavior.17

In 2008, Karimov published the book High Spirituality: An Invisible Force (Yuksak ma’naviyat yengilmas kuch), encapsulating the quintessence of Ma’naviyat. The volume touts high morality as an intrinsic quality of the Uzbek people, which has been under threat over centuries of external interference. It also defends state paternalism, patriotism, and respect for traditional hierarchy and elders; celebrates mahalla (neighborhood solidarity) as the Uzbek version of “civil society”; advances conservative social mores, especially male superiority;18 protects younger generations from Western values and mass culture; and integrates Islamic references into the Ma’naviyat doctrinal corpus.19
Through the structured doctrine of Ma’naviyat, the Uzbek regime positions itself as the bearer of moral authority for the whole country. Ideology has therefore been closely associated with social and cultural control. It allows for the delegitimization of the political opposition, which is accused of colluding with the enemies of the nation and of not respecting any of the principles of Uzbekness; for instance, the Andijon violence of May 2005 has been framed as being orchestrated by people who were not authentically Uzbek. It also justifies the establishment of a censorship code based on the “morality” narrative: the state agency for arts, Uzbeknavo, for instance, took away the licenses to perform of pop singers such as Lola Yuldasheva and film directors such as Zulfikar Musakov for not respecting the principles of Ma’naviyat. In the early 2000s, the official youth movement, Kamalot, based on the former Soviet Komsomol model, embraced Ma’naviyat by performing symbolic collective actions and demonstrating loyalty toward the regime.

Over a quarter of century, the Uzbek regime succeeded in building a consensus on the traditional values of so-called Uzbekness, which is said to bridge the dichotomy between positive forces that value world peace and a unique national development path for each country, and to oppose negative forces that promote “degenerate” liberal values or destructive Islamist and ethnonationalist ones. It also pioneered a narrative—one that became mainstream across the whole region in the 2010s—insisting on the need to “de-Westernize” the nation’s social and cultural values.

A STRAIGHTFORWARD NATIONHOOD PROCESS

Compared to its Central Asian neighbors, Karimov’s Uzbekistan has enjoyed a relatively straightforward nation-building process. Several structural reasons account for this fortunate situation.

Historical Continuity

The first structural factor is Uzbekistan’s rich history: since the early 1920s, when the Soviet regime constructed the first national entities, Uzbekistan has always presented itself—and has been seen by Moscow—as the heart of Central Asia. Created in 1924, the Uzbek republic took precedence over its neighbors, including all the regions populated by sedentary peoples and almost all the ancient cities of Transoxiana. Uzbek elites successfully lobbied Moscow to include Bukhara and Samarkand in the Uzbek republic over the opposition of Tajik elites. Tashkent became the obvious capital city of the region thanks to its status as capital of the Tsarist province of Turkestan;
it maintained this position until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The city hosted prestigious institutions, particularly in academia and higher education, as well as the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM). The Soviet regime also held up Uzbekistan as embodying the alliance between socialism and the Orient, and depicted it as Moscow’s window on the Middle East. Uzbekistan was home to the region’s celebrated architectural heritage, interpreted as a sign of its historical centrality and continuity. Even if the local communist elites had not actively sought independence, an independent Uzbek nation-state has been easily erected based on these Soviet and pre-Soviet preconditions.

Demographics

The second reason is demographic. The ethnic makeup of the population did not create tensions or insecurities as it did in Kazakhstan or in Kyrgyzstan. Ethnic Uzbeks comprised 71 percent of the population in the last Soviet census (1989), a figure that has reportedly increased to about 85 percent (there has not been an official census in the past two decades). The authorities have been accused of forcing citizens to self-identify as part of the titular nation in order to reinforce the country’s ethnic homogeneity, but even without coercion, Uzbekistan is without a doubt the nation-state of Uzbeks.

The only noticeable tensions have been with the Tajik-speaking segment of the population, mostly located in Bukhara and Samarkand, who were forced to “Uzbekify”: that is, to identify themselves as ethnically Uzbek in their passport and to avoid speaking Tajik in public spaces, administrative buildings, and educational institutions. Several Tajik-speaking cultural centers were closed at the turn of the twenty-first century. Officially, “Tajiks” now account for less than 5 percent of the population, but this number is not relevant, as many families in Bukhara and Samarkand are bilingual and could identify with either group. For their part, the Tajik authorities have never formalized any claim over Bukhara and Samarkand, even if the narrative that Uzbekistan “stole” the two “Tajik” cities is still widespread in Tajikistan.

Other ethnic groups are not considered to pose any risks. The Russian minority has significantly decreased, from 1.6 million to about 800,000 (again, there is no official data) and is concentrated in Tashkent and in the city of Navoiy, which hosts the country’s main extractive industries. Unlike in Kazakhstan, the Russian minority has never claimed any specific rights and has not been associated with any secessionist risks. The Karakalpak minority (about half a million people), located in the northwest part of the country, still formally holds an autonomous status, but this autonomy is almost nonexistent.
except in some very limited cultural aspects. The city of Nukus and the whole Karakalpakstan Autonomous Region are among the poorest and most remote of the country. Many Karakalpaks have emigrated to nearby Kazakhstan, which offers more economic opportunity and greater linguistic and cultural affinity.

**Citizenship and Languages Policies**

Third, Uzbekistan rapidly built and has maintained a straightforward nationality and citizenship policy. It declared Uzbek the only state language, with Russian losing any official status, and changed to the Latin alphabet as early as 1993 in order to further cut symbolic ties with the Russian past.\(^2\) This language policy has succeeded fairly well—here, too, in comparison with its neighbors. It seems that many official documents, especially those with legal and technical vocabularies, are still informally written in Russian before being translated and officially published in Uzbek. But Uzbek is without a doubt the language used in public spaces, the media, and academic institutions, with Russian increasingly marginalized. Contrary to its language policy that cut links with the Soviet past, the country’s citizenship policy has been built on its Soviet legacy: the difference between citizenship and nationality/ethnic group has been maintained in passports and administrative documents. All persons born in the republic or residing on its territory as of 1991 are considered Uzbek citizens, while people identifying as Uzbeks outside the national borders are outside the purview of Tashkent.\(^2\)

**Political Stronghold over Academia**

The ideology of national independence required the academic world to support the new ideational regime. The Academy of Sciences was, for instance, asked to publish a “popular-scientific” dictionary of independence that offers an academic legitimacy for the new vocabulary of nationalism and serves as an encyclopedia of Uzbekistan’s post-Soviet ideology.\(^3\) More importantly, the disciplines considered essential to justify the new national grand narrative—namely history, archeology, and ethnology—were placed under tight supervision.

The authorities strengthened their control over the historical narrative after 1998. That year, apparently dissatisfied with the Institute of History’s lack of output, President Karimov convened a conference with Uzbek historians, after which the Cabinet of Ministers issued a decree, “On the Improvement of the Activity of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of
Uzbekistan” (*O sovershenstvovanii deytel’nosti Institutia istorii ANRU*). The influence of political authorities on the discipline of history is affirmed in the first point of the statement: “The Cabinet of Ministers decrees that the main purpose of the activity of the Institute of History is the study of the authentic history of the Uzbek people and their state.”

Every semester, the Institute was required to organize a seminar on the history of Uzbek statehood; to collect information on the history of the Uzbek people, its governance, and its ethnogenesis; and to advance archaeological knowledge and research on local written sources (manuscripts). The decree guaranteed new financial resources to promote national history, including the creation of the journal *O’zbekiston Tarihi*.

Dilorom Alimova was appointed deputy director and then director of the Institute. A former specialist on women’s liberation in the Soviet era, Alimova shifted to the study of Muslim modernist movements of the early twentieth century, a particularly sensitive issue for the authorities (see below). Under her leadership, the institute became more dynamic: Alimova developed contacts with foreign colleagues, had researchers participate in international conferences, attempted to revive publications, and recruited specialists and PhD candidates in medieval and ancient history, disciplines that require the mastery of manuscripts. As during Soviet times, contemporary history remains the most difficult topic, as it has to be entirely subordinated to the official state narrative. Historians wishing to distance themselves from these schemes have to take refuge in more ancient history—but even that is not free of political overtones.

Archeology has become highly strategic, too, as it can confirm or deny the presence of ancient Uzbek people on their current territory and attribute to them the brilliant sedentary civilizations that developed in the famed Bactria and Sogdiana regions. Required to discover tangible physical evidence of the presence of the ancient nation on its contemporary soil, archaeology has been assigned to serve the national goals of the authorities. Ethnology also remains one of the premier sciences of Uzbek nationhood. Where historical sources are lacking, only ethnology can establish indisputable foundations for the preeminence of the Uzbek people over other national groups in their titular state and prove national ethnic continuity over time immemorial. Ethnology remains focused on studying the titular nation as well as minority ethnic groups living on national territory. Often based on solid empirical grounds, it focuses on material culture—housing, clothing, crafts, folklore, rituals, and ceremonies. Notwithstanding the discourse on disciplinary renewal and removal from Soviet-Russian perspectives, denounced as condescending, the vast majority of current ethnological work is still based on Russian sources from the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Political science and sociology, already scarce in the Soviet academic tradition, have been further marginalized. While the National University has a chair of sociology (within the philosophy faculty), other universities offer very few—if any—courses in the field. Studies of new social practices, such as internal migration, international migration, private businesses, and Islam, are considered too sensitive because they reveal the failure of the Uzbek economic model and challenge the state narrative on Islam. The authorities regard any studies even remotely related to Islam as intrinsically dangerous, because positing a theoretical “issue” would tend to make it a reality on the ground. Political science was officially banned in Uzbek universities in 2015, accused of being a “Western pseudo-science” conceptualized by external powers to interfere in domestic affairs. Some neutral topics, for instance Uzbekistan’s membership in international organizations, can be still be studied under the guise of international relations.

THE NATION’S GRAND NARRATIVE

Independent Uzbekistan rapidly constructed a grand historical narrative that insists on the nation’s ancient history and its continuity under any political structure. Historical commemorations seems endless: 660 years since the birth of Tamerlane (1996); 2,500 years since the foundation of Bukhara and Khiva (1997); and 2,500 years since the foundation of Tashkent (2009). Any political or scholarly work must comment on the unique ancient lineage of the country. As mentioned in the UNESCO history of Uzbekistan, “Uzbekistan is a country of ancient and original history, whose peoples have contributed much to world history. The territory of Uzbekistan is one of the sources of development of the original man.” Uzbekistan’s historical metanarrative can be schematically divided into three main strands.

Indigeneity: The Older the Better

The first one is to secure the indigeneity of Uzbeks as far back in history as possible, in order to deny Iran and Tajikistan the legitimacy of the Indo-European legacy, to refute the Western and Russian perceptions of Turkic peoples as nomads who moved from Eastern Siberia and Mongolia to Central Asia and the Mediterranean Basin, and to monopolize the prestigious Scythian heritage. As discussed in the previous chapter by Peter Finke, the notion of the Uzbek as a sedentary Turkic-speaker requires finding a balance between the legacy of the Iranian oases-dwellers and that of the pastoralists in the steppe. These two cultural realms compete for symbolic preeminence, both
in time (who can claim indigeneity?) and associated values (which culture is “superior”?). The sedentarity issue also forces scholars to address the mismatch between the ethnonym of Uzbeks, which emerged with the Shaybanid dynasty in the sixteenth century, and the earlier presence of a Turkic population in Transoxiana, coming from the steppe, the Dasht-i Qipchaq.

This struggle for autochthonism was not born with independence, but has its roots in the Soviet period. In the 1930s and 1940s, Soviet history crafted the notion of ethnogenesis (этногенез), defined as the emergence of a specific ethnic group over centuries and its association with a specific territory. In Tashkent in 1941, the historian and Orientalist Aleksandr Yakubovski (1886–1953) published a brochure entitled “The Question of the Ethnogenesis of the Uzbek People.” The pamphlet traces the Uzbek ethnogenesis not to the sixteenth century and the Shaybanid dynasty, but to the tenth century, with the arrival of Turkic peoples and their settlement under the Kara-Khanid dynasty. The claim for a particularly ancient Uzbek ethnogenesis continued with the main figure of Soviet Uzbek ethnology, Karim Shaniyazov (1924–2000), a disciple of Yulian Bromley, head of the ethnology section of the Institute of History of the Uzbek SSR as early as 1967.

Since independence, Shaniyazov, the only ethnologist to be a member of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, remains the main academic figure bearing the ethnogenesis discourse and the quest for nativeness. In 1998, he stated that “everyone has the right to know the ethnogenesis and ethnic history of his people” and that it is natural that these issues have attracted renewed interest after independence. Although he continues to cite Soviet scholars, Shaniyazov sought to embed in the contemporary rhetoric a rejection of the Soviet legacy and an affirmation of the sole right of Uzbeks to write their own origin narrative. He criticized scholars “from the center” (i.e. Moscow) who would have preserved the imperial Russian approach and would not have been able to develop a scholarly discourse on the ethnos valid for all peoples of the Soviet Union. Despite this denial, Shaniyazov never challenged the Soviet notion of ethnogenesis.

In his famous 1974 book, For an Ethnic History of the Uzbek People, Shaniyazov interprets ethnic reality as something stable over time that can be objectively described and explained, and he suggests that ethnology demonstrates the specificity that makes each people unique. He focused on Kipchaks, who, along with the Karluks and Oghuz, are traditionally apprehended as ethnic ancestors of the Uzbeks. The value of the Kipchaks lies in the fact that they are mentioned in Arabic sources from the eighth and ninth centuries. By cross-referencing data sources and ancient philological, etymological, and geographical information, Shaniyazov thus positions the Kipchaks as part of
what he called the “indigenous people” (korennoy narod) of South Siberia. He argued that although medieval sources indicated the arrival of the western Kipchaks on the present-day territory of Uzbekistan only in the fifteenth century, they neglected to mention the existence of eastern Kipchaks, who were present since the tenth century. For him, the “main features of the ethnic Uzbek nationality” thus go back to the tenth century.

Uzbekistan’s independence only reinforced Shaniyazov’s account and its institutional status. Even before 1991, he incorporated the idea—developed discreetly in the 1970s and now regarded as a fundamental principle in Uzbekistan—of a first substrate of Turkic people throughout the Central Asian area dating from the second millennium BCE, before the arrival of Indo-Europeans in the area. In a monograph, The Kang State and People, published in 1990 in Uzbek, Shaniyazov denied the conventional discourse of the Turkic khaganate marking the arrival of Turkic peoples in the region. According to him, the Uzbeks were born from the merger of two different roots, the historically attested waves of Turkic peoples and those already indigenous to the Central Asian territory. Central Asian populations mentioned in ancient sources, like the Scythians, are therefore retrospectively equated with the Turks; this original national “root” could not be Persian-speaking and must already have been Turkic. Shaniyazov put particular emphasis on the Kang dynasty, which arrived in the region from southern Siberia and Dzungaria in the fourth millennium BCE and founded a state in the second and first millennia BCE.

Shaniyazov’s arguments imply an ethnic stability that nothing could disrupt. The two founding elements of the ethnos remain language and territory. According to him, nomadic peoples would not be able to advance beyond the tribal stage unless they settled in place. This statement serves as a means to indirectly disparage the neighboring Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, and Turkmens by emphasizing the specifically sedentary nature of the Uzbek realm. Thus, the territorial continuity between Karluks, Kara-Khanids, and Uzbeks would reveal the early nature of Uzbek ethnogenesis compared to peoples such as the Oghuz, who had not ceased changing territory, giving rise to the Seljuks, the Ottomans, and then the Turkmens. This desire to anchor in history the existence of a sedentary Turkieness virtually ignores the presence of Persian-speaking populations, only briefly mentioned and stripped of their indigenous status. Shaniyazov also tried to justify why the Uzbek nation failed to impose its ethnonym but would have already existed without it: ethnic consciousness would have preceded not only the state but the ethnonym as well.

and regarded by the local scholarly community as a classic reference work. In an introduction dedicated to President Karimov, the late author stresses the need to return to national roots in order to build the future of the new state; by not fairly assessing the significance of the past, one would take the risk of debasing Uzbek culture and underestimating its age. The book includes an outline of the historical discourse that Shaniyazov developed throughout his career and seeks to put forward a final summary of the discussion of the history of the nation. According to him, one of the peculiarities of the Uzbek ethnogenesis is its immutability. The Uzbek nation’s ancient roots would date from the second millennium BCE; the Scythians would be proto-Turkic populations and not Iranian ones, and the prestigious status of being their heirs would thus go to the Uzbeks and not to the Tajiks; and the nation’s “consciousness” would have been maintained over centuries, even if the Uzbek ethnonym arrived late on the stage of history.

The struggle to capture the prestigious ancestry of the Scythians accelerated in the 2000s, with virulent online competition between Uzbek and Tajik scholars, as well as experts on other Turkic-speaking nations. Tajikistan has been reclaiming its Indo-European legacy under the label of Aryan and even proclaimed 2006 the “Year of Aryan Civilization.” As noted by Victor Shni-relman, Sakae and Massagetae are presented as Uzbek ancestors in history textbooks. In Uzbek publications and Internet discussions, Uzbek scholars such as Academician Ahmadali Askarov, an archeologist by training, criticized Tajik historiography and insisted on the Aryan legacy of Uzbekistan, stating that the famous Andronov culture was already Turkified. As declared boldly by Shamsiddin Kamoliddin, one of the leading figures of the Uzbek Institute of History, “Proto-Turks were the first inhabitants of this region and constituted a part of its ancient pre-Indo-European population.”

Reclaiming the Classic Transoxiana Heritage

A second direction for Uzbekistan’s metanarrative is to take over the more classical heritage of sedentary Transoxiana (Ma wara an-nahr in the Islamic tradition) and to demonstrate the Uzbek nation’s preeminence among Central Asian peoples. Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan professed itself the direct heir of Central Asia’s “Golden Age” (oltin asr) between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries, and appropriated all the philosophers, scientists, writers, and Islamic thinkers who lived on the territory of present-day Uzbekistan. All are celebrated with eponymous metro stations in Tashkent, and their images appear on banknotes.

The iconic embodiment of this Golden Age is Tamerlane (Amir Timur, 1336–1405), who ruled over the region from 1370 to 1405. His image re-
placed the Lenin statue on Tashkent’s main square as early as 1992, and Karimov directly identified with him. This choice is quite paradoxical: Tamerlane was Mongol in origin (but not from Ghenghis-Khanid blood) and struggled to be recognized as a legitimate leader in parts of the Islamic world. Nonetheless, he offered useful symbols for the Karimov regime: He was born in the heart of Transoxiana, in Shakhrisabz near Samarkand, and therefore “belongs,” territorially speaking, to Uzbekistan. He ruled over a large part of Eurasia and Asia, as far as India (the founder of the Mughal Empire, Babur, was a Chaghatay Turk nobleman hailing from Andijon), a sign of Uzbekistan’s grandiose view of the influence of the country (the Timurid museum in Tashkent displays a scale model of the Taj Mahal as part of the Uzbek cultural heritage). He represents the political authority of the khan and paternalistic ruler Karimov aspired to be (all other contenders to such a status are literary figures). Finally, he acted as a patron of the arts; the artistic and architectural achievements realized under his rule and that of his heirs stoke Uzbekistan’s aspiration to be at the forefront of world culture.

The Soviet regime had an ambivalent view of Tamerlane, depending on the period and the scholars commenting. Some denounced him as representative of the Golden Horde’s culture, embodied by Asian cruelty and repression. Others celebrated his military achievements and centralized power, rehabilitated the era’s architectural legacy, and highlighted the role of his grandson Ulugh Bek (1394–1449), the founder of modern astronomy. In the 1970s and 1980s, Tamerlane as an individual was not integrated into the official pantheon, but the Timurid dynasty was seen as a period of high cultural achievements. Post-Soviet Uzbekistan had relatively little to add to confirm his personal status as father of the Uzbek state.56

Other figures were added to the nation’s pantheon,57 especially the fifteenth-century literary icon, Alisher Navoiy (1441–1501), also known as Nizām-al-Din ʿAlisher Herawī. Navoiy is the greatest poet and prose-writer in classical Chaghatay, the Turkic language that served as a lingua franca in Central Asia, with a strong infusion of Arabic and Persian words. The basis of Navoiy’s legitimacy is different from that of Tamerlane: it is not territorial, as he was born in Herat, today’s Afghanistan, but due to the authority of Chaghatay, a precursor of the modern Uzbek language (a combination of Karakhanid and Khorezmian). Here, too, the independent Uzbek state did not craft this new hero from scratch; Navoiy was already celebrated in the 1920s by Soviet authors as “announcing” the Uzbek language and culture.

If Tamerlane, Ulug-Bek, and Alisher Navoiy comprise the first tier of national heroes, another group ranks just below them. It includes scientists such as al-Fergani (800/805–870), one of the most famous astronomers of his time; al-Khorezm (d. 850), a mathematician, astronomer, and geographer during
the Abbasid Caliphate; al-Beruni (973–1048), a scholar and polymath from Khwarezm; and Ibn Sina [Avicenna] (980–1037), an Islamic neo-Platonic philosopher, famous for his works on medicine. To this scientific lineage should be added two key figures in Islamic culture who epitomize the influence of Bukhara at that time: Imam al-Bukhari (801–870), who authored the hadith collection known as *Sahih al-Bukhari*, regarded by Sunni Muslims as one of the most authentic hadith collections; and Bahaudin Naqshband (1318–1389), the founder of the main Sufi Order, the Naqshbandiya, and a revered mystical poet. His restored shrine was celebrated by Karimov with great pomp in 1993 as a symbol of the nation’s reconnection with its Islamic past, and the main street in Bukhara, formerly named for Lenin, was named after him.58

There are some glaring omissions in this Uzbek pantheon. For example, what of the Shaybanid dynasty and its founder Muhammad Shaybani (1451–1510), who occupies a relatively minor position in today’s metanarrative? Indeed, the Shaybanids arrived too late in the nation’s history to be considered “founding fathers,” and they have been shut out of the competition for antiquity that drives Uzbek historiography. Moreover, they are too explicitly linked to the Golden Horde, competed with the Timurids, and are known for their schism with those who would become the Kazakhs: all these elements made them unsuitable to the nativist claim of the Uzbek grand narrative. The later periods of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, too, are largely whitewashed: they show Uzbek khanates and a Bukhara Emirate no more at the center of continental empires and the cultural vanguard of the Persian-Turkic world, but as backward provinces, progressively marginalized from new trade routes and becoming the peripheries of new empires.

Uzbekistan’s symbolic takeover of the whole classic Transoxiana-Turkestanian Golden Age has not avoided creating tensions with neighboring republics, obviously with Tajikistan—scholars from both republics have been fighting over the Scythian/Aryan legacy—but also with the other Turkic republics, whose leaders want their legitimate share of the same cultural Turkestani tree, forcing Kyrgyz and Kazakh historiography to sometimes define themselves against Uzbekness as Central Asia’s main benchmark.

A Difficult Balance: Russian and Soviet Domination

The third discursive direction is the most complicated, as it deals with the most recent past of Russian colonization and Soviet experience. This is the only part of the Uzbek metanarrative that has dramatically evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union, for the obvious reason of justifying the nation’s independence.59 In tune with Tashkent’s geopolitical stance of refusing any
regional alliance under Russian leadership, and an early policy of moving away from the Russian-Soviet cultural legacy, the historiographical narrative on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a negative one. The whole period from the early nineteenth century—that is, even before the Uzbek Khanates and the Bukhara Emirate became Tsarist protectorates—to independence in 1991 is labeled an era of “Russian imperial domination.” As noted by Sergey Abashin, this anticolonial discourse more or less reproduces all the anticolonial truisms elaborated by Marxist historiography in the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{60} History textbooks spread this narrative; it is also illustrated in the Museum of Political Repressions, established by Karimov in 2001 and opened a year later in a Tashkent neighborhood where many graves from Stalin’s purges were exhumed.

However, while Uzbekistan associates the Soviet regime with Russian and Tsarist domination, it is challenged to find a balanced narrative that would both embrace the modernization efforts that were part of the Soviet experience and still highly valued by the regime—mass literacy, urbanization, and industrialization—and critique its repressive aspects. It also faces difficulties in defining the role that Uzbek elites played in the Soviet system and naming national heroes who could be celebrated for their fight against this alleged Russian colonialism. Indeed, the dilemma of the Uzbek grand narrative is that those who were repressed by the Soviet regime represent a counternarrative that is not in tune with modern Uzbekistan’s ideological principles.

The popular revolts against the Tsarist regime (Andijon in 1898 and the regional uprising in 1916) and then that of the Basmachi against the Soviet regime in the early 1920s are troublesome due to their open references to Islamic values, sometimes to Sharia. For a regime obsessed with Islamism and whose authoritarianism is legitimated by the struggle against religious fundamentalism, all references to Islam as an ideology of national liberation cannot be publicly stated.\textsuperscript{61} Consequently, the Basmachi movement, presented in the 1990s as a movement of national liberation, was downgraded to being a simple “armed movement” (\textit{vooruzhennoe dvizhenie}) in order to avoid having Islam be too openly associated with the notion of national liberation. A relatively similar pattern was observed with the Jadids—the national-communists of the 1920s and 1930s who sought to reconcile socialism and nationalism and were then liquidated by Stalin—as well as their heirs. Academic historiography does not deny them: Dilorom Alimova, the long-time director of the Institute of History, wrote a positive book on Jadidism in 2000,\textsuperscript{62} and its main figures, such as Abdurrauf Fitrat (1886–1938), are revered by many Uzbek intellectuals; however, they are absent from the state-sponsored pantheon offered for public consumption. Indeed, Jadids arouse suspicion on account of their clearly Pan-Turkic commitments. Their calls for all Central Asian
peoples to unite displeased and alarmed an Uzbek state protective of its own sovereignty and hardly inclined to regional integration.

Moreover, as in the majority of the post-Soviet republics, it is easier to denounce the victims of the Soviet regime than to identify their tormenters, as the latter would involve finger-pointing at Soviet Uzbek elites. Nonetheless, the official narrative tries to avoid being too negative toward Russians and remains cautious in remembering that Russian leaders and intellectuals based in Uzbekistan, as well as Russian peasants and merchants, were also victims of Stalin’s mass repressions. Yet there has been no discourse about identifying local executioners, much less lustration. The Uzbek elites of today are unquestionably the heirs of the Soviet elites, and this continuity is problematic for the regime’s metanarrative. That is why the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras seldom appear in Uzbek official historiography and museum studies, with the single, but important, exception of First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party Sharaf Rashidov, who reigned over the republic for more than two decades, from 1959 to 1983. Rashidov is regarded as a national hero who defended the interests of his people against Moscow, which partly contradicts the narrative of the Soviet Union as obvious colonial domination.

IMPLICIT, AMBIVALENT, AND FORTHCOMING CHALLENGES

As with every origin story, Uzbekistan’s elites have obscured some inconvenient elements in order to create the impression of linear development and avoid too visible paradoxes. Many implicit and ambivalent moments and aspects have been discreetly put to the side. The relationship to the Soviet past—officially denounced as colonial, although many citizens display strong Soviet nostalgia— is one of these unpleasant contradictions. The place of Tajiks in Uzbek society, the intimate relationship between the two nations more broadly, and the existence of a shared identity, is another aspect that remains undiscussed, because it does not correspond to the strict national “boundary project” required by the nation-state.

In the national historiography, the arrival of Islam is one of these silenced moments, because a national religion cannot arrive through foreign influence and Arab conquest, especially in a regime keen to denounce any foreign interference. Claiming the Aryan past of the Scythian empires seems problematic, too, as it reproduces a colonial frame coming from nineteenth-century Europe about Asia as a cradle of Aryaness. The role of other Central Asian nations in building a Transoxiani and Turkestani culture also belongs to these ambivalences: Uzbek nationhood does not seem ready to share a common
pantheon of cultural heroes, and therefore continues to inspire resentment in its neighbors, who feel deprived of part of their history.

Like any other country in the world, Uzbekistan can live with a nationhood narrative full of ambivalences and unspoken elements. However, two challenges will need to be addressed in the future, and these challenges have the potential to dramatically reshape the nation’s metanarrative.

The first is the articulation of Islam with national identity. The current narrative is, in a sense, schizophrenic: Islam has been glorified as a national religion in all official speeches, local pilgrimage sites have been valorized, and the great national figures linked to Sufism have been celebrated, but at the same time religious practices have been strictly monitored, sermons in the mosques are controlled, religious education is highly restricted, and interactions with the rest of the *Ummah* are looked upon with suspicion. 64 “Uzbekness” is intimately articulated with “Muslimness” (*Musulmonchilik*), but the latter is acceptable only when “Uzbekified”—that is, when seen as national tradition, a cultural and folkloric heritage, and an architectural legacy. The space left for Islam in terms of practices and norms for behaviors and attitudes, much less invoking Islam to legitimize political claims, is heavily restricted. 65 As nicely phrased by Charles Kurzman, Islam has been “politically neutered” 66 by the Karimov regime. This contradictory policy will likely become increasingly challenging to maintain, as Islamic practices are rising among the younger generations, which see it as part of their individual and collective identity. The state secularism inherited from the Soviet regime is progressively eroding in the face of multiple ways to display “Muslimness,” and the Uzbek official narrative will have to take these deep societal evolutions into account.

The second critical element is the role of labor migration, the existence of which has been virulently denied by Uzbek authorities so far. Karimov’s declaration that migrants are “lazy” and that only the most disgraced go to Russia to work 67 exemplified this negative connotation and denial of the socioeconomic reality that pushes several million citizens to look for work abroad. Migration has become a rite of passage for many young men and their family in all rural regions of Uzbekistan, structuring individual identities as well as collective mechanisms of solidarity and economic strategies. 68 Migration seems also to change the relationship to Islam, as many young migrants are introduced to Islamic practices during their time abroad, and once back home they feel even more constricted by the repressive atmosphere surrounding Islam. Such an identity-shaper will have to be, in one way or another, integrated into the nation’s narrative. It will mean, however, recognizing how difficult it is to find work in a demographically vibrant society with a glut of young people arriving on the job market every year (more than 50 percent
of the population is less than twenty-five years old). It will also push for a narrative that would be less isolationist and more able to celebrate Uzbek citizens as living in close interaction with some other regions of the world, and Uzbekistan as connected to its diaspora’s abroad.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, I see Uzbekistan as a textbook case of the ethnosymbolist approach to nationhood, which merges the constructed character of the nation—intrinsically articulated to current situation and regime legitimacy—with a self-conscious “invention of traditions” based on ancient cultural and ethnic “cores.” Many aspects of today’s Uzbek nationhood were already identifiable in the claims of Jadids or Uzbek national-communists of the 1920s—the centrality of Uzbekistan, its status as a benchmark of Turkestani identity, its continuity with the Transoxiana legacy, its blend of sedentary and post-nomad, Turkic and Persian, features. These attributes were systematized during the Soviet decades by the vast work of local academia, which used ethnogenesis as a driving conceptual engine for crystallizing the nation’s main reference periods. While one can plainly identify political junctures in the construction of the nation, the set of references to draw from has been well-established for a long time and has its own inherent logic.

In Soviet times as in contemporary Uzbekistan, the nation’s grand narrative has aimed at anchoring the titular ethnic group on its territory, at dissociating the national “consciousness” from the existence of an ethnonym, and at demonstrating the nation’s continuity since ancient times. Soviet academic and political authorities thus contributed to the birth of a local patriotism or “republicanism” that quickly, from the 1940s on, acquired the (potential) attributes of the nation-state. While that term was obviously not used at the time, because it was deemed bourgeois and did not fit the Soviet logic of unification, the arsenal of scholarly arguments supporting the nation-state was nonetheless perfected. In many aspects, today’s Uzbek nationhood owes a lot to the Soviet narrative and has interiorized several colonial clichés—such as the superiority of sedentary over nomadic populations, and the prestige of referring to an Aryan past.

This longue durée of the nation’s grand narrative does not preclude the existence of changes and evolutions, both abrupt and slow. The death of the “father of the nation” in 2016 reopened windows of opportunities for the Uzbek regime to evolve and reformulate its relationship with society. The new president, Shavkat Mirzoyev, has always been an insider, as he was prime minister for more than a decade. Yet he has made several noticeable changes. He, for instance, criticizes the Ma’naviyat va Ma’rifat as a “jingo patrio-
tism" (ura urachilik)⁶⁹ that is not efficient at a time when greater economic efficiency should be the driving ideology of the country. It would be naïve to hope for the democratization of the country, but the disappearance of the “father of the nation” may push for adjusting the nationhood narrative to new realities, in order to keep it relevant and shared by the population.

NOTES

10. The “Five Principles” are: (1) Economics has priority over politics; (2) The state is the main reformer; (3) All reform must occur under the rule of law; (4) The state underlines the importance of strong social protection; and (5) The transformation to a market economy must be thought out and gradual. See Martin C. Spechler, *The Political Economy of Reform in Central Asia: Uzbekistan under Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2008); Rafael Sattarov, “Is the Uzbek Development Model a path towards true modernization?” CABAR, November 25, 2016, http://cabar.asia/en/rafael-sattarov-is-the-uzbek-development-model-a-path-towards-true-modernization/.
20. Megoran, “Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation.”
24. See ongoing research by Riccardo Mario Cucciolla on the Uzbek “cotton scandal” in the 1980s.


37. Peter Finke, Variations on Uzbek Identity.

38. The Uzbek dynasty established itself in Transoxiana in the early sixteenth century under the leadership of Shaybani Khan (1451–1510). Its leaders originally belonged to a nomadic population from the eastern territory of the Golden Horde, taking its name from Uzbek Khan, who reigned from 1312 to 1342.


43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 32.

45. Ibid., 10.


47. Ibid., 32.


49. Ibid., 9.

50. Ibid., 40.


59. Rakhimov, “Post-Soviet Transformations.”


64. Khalid, *Islam after Communism*.


66. Kurzman, “Uzbekistan, the Invention of Nationalism in an Invented Nation.”


68. More in Laruelle, ed., *Migration and Social Upheaval as the Face of Globalization in Central Asia*.

69. See the “leak” from the president’s speech at https://www.ozodlik.org/a/28401784.html.
In order to clarify and exemplify women’s role in social change in Uzbekistan, specifically the Fergana Valley, I utilize Susan Gal’s feminist analysis of a semiotics of private/public distinction. I apply Gal’s theory to the materials collected in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2011 through a variety of ethnographic methods, including personal life histories, interviews, observing and participating in ceremonial activities and daily lives of thirty local women religious leaders and teachers (otinlar or otins).

Individual experiences in and of domestic space, such as one’s home, vary. A home can feel like a fortress that protects, a castle that imprisons, a sanctuary, or a dangerous place. A home is also a constitutive and transformative place where different knowledges are imparted and received, such as cooking, sewing, and how to be a gendered individual and a better human by being a good Muslim. One’s home is also a social place—“a product of social relations”—where meropriyatiy (social events) are planned and celebrated, including religious ceremonies and life-cycle events, and where food, presents, and ideas are exchanged and shared among individuals who can, but do not have to be related by marriage or descent. My ethnographic materials were collected mainly during such social activities. In this chapter, I demonstrate the role of local women in social change by focusing on material practices and interpersonal interactions that take place in individual homes in Uzbekistan. An analysis of these practices and interactions helps to question the often-commonsensical associations among location, politics, and gender, and demonstrates women’s roles in creating social change.

Following Bruce Grant and other scholars (e.g., Abashin and Liu), I too question a persistent purchase of the public/private distinction—often linked to other distinctions such as official/nonofficial, male/female, and orthodox/unorthodox—in some academic analyses of post-Soviet and postsocialist
space. The existing research shows that naturalizing such distinctions fails to capture the empirical complexity of human behavior, since boundaries between such distinctions like public/private are not well-defined. These boundaries are also dynamic and complex and can be mediated by a third, such as “semi-public.” In this chapter, I add to these latter analyses and argue that public/private distinction should not be treated as a naturalized assignation, which determines human behavior by connecting space, gender, and religion. Neither does this distinction describe any one domain corresponding to places, practices, or gender. Rather, following Gal, if treated as a communicative phenomenon, which has “a complex and systematic logic that explains its usage,” this distinction helps to understand social dynamics and individuals’ roles in social change.

I agree with Gal that “the historical creation of a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ is not dependent on the use of these and even parallel lexical terms,” but can include linguistic resources “such as ‘here’ and ‘there,’ as well as changes in gesture, posture” and so on. In other words, in the paragraphs below, I do not argue for or explain in detail this distinction’s local linguistic use. I also do not need to establish linguistic cognates of the English “public” and “private” in the Uzbek language, although one might argue that tashqari/ichkari (inner/outer) parts of the house (uy) or mehmohnona/yotoqhona (guest or living room/bedroom) could exemplify such distinction. Rather, I demonstrate how by utilizing public/private distinction as communicative—not limited to any one space or gender—we can better understand religious practice and its relations to and with the sovereign in Uzbekistan.

The analytical utility of such approach lies in explaining how and why some practices and behaviors that actors themselves may perceive as private and apolitical events can be interpreted as subversive political activity, as exemplified by the lives of women religious teachers and leaders, or otinlar (-lar is a plural ending of a word otin) in Uzbekistan.

In addition to this theoretical contribution, this chapter has a political agenda. It adds to the body of scholarly work in, on, and about Central Asia that accounts for the importance of women in creating social change. Experientially and empirically we all know that human ability to make choices and decisions and pursue one’s interests (often against odds) are not limited to men, families, elites, social movements, or representatives of the government. We also know that an individual’s role in social change is not limited to any one particular sphere, such as the public. Further, in this chapter I do not assume (Uzbekistani) women’s subordination to the strictures of their families, societies, and/or countries, but treat them as fundamental and essential entities that create the social. Instead of focusing on the problems these women face (though there are many), I emphasize solutions they create.
These women are individuals, whose lives have social effects, and should be theorized as such.

**RELIGION, SOCIAL CONTROL, AND SPACE**

Among regional governments, the Uzbek one is particularly notorious for the way it treats political opposition. Thousands of people have been imprisoned on trumped-up, politically motivated charges; including journalists, human rights activists, and pious Muslims.\(^{14}\) Since the late 1990s, local Muslims have often been charged with alleged religious extremism and terrorism.\(^{15}\) This reflects a Soviet legacy of state control over religious sensibilities, as well as increasing regional securitization, whereby the Uzbek National Security Service is envisioned and ensured through a set of punitive and preventive measures, which come with an ideological justification of physical violence and/or military force.\(^{16}\)

While the general public, religious leadership, and local and national elites continue debating what it means to be a good Muslim or Christian or a good person, Uzbek government officials continue both celebrating Islam as a pillar of national identity and deriding it as a source of political opposition and a potential threat to political stability in the country.\(^{17}\) Similar to the Soviets, for more than two decades, the post-Soviet postsocialist Uzbek government has been struggling to establish and maintain social control of religious discourses and practices by deploying both negative and positive sanctions. Negative sanctions include systematic intimidations by law enforcement agents as well as allegations of religious extremism and terrorism, and the subsequent imprisonment of individuals whose acts of identity, such as participation in a protest and criticism of the existing regime, serve to challenge the government’s legitimacy. Positive sanctions are exemplified by rewarding with administrative positions those who advocate for and perform “safe” religious identities in ways that support the government’s status quo.\(^{18}\)

Religious life in Uzbekistan is also juristically regulated. The 1998 Law of Freedom of Consciousness and Religious Organizations sets, among other things, a religious dress code and establishes registration requirements for religious organizations and certification of religious leaders and teachers. The law also prohibits the “private teaching of religious principles.”\(^{19}\) As a result, this law becomes an actionable source of strategic social control of individual Muslims and other religious organizations or congregants.\(^{20}\) By creating and funding religious administrative institutions, such as the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, the government can monitor the substance of religious knowledge produced and shared at educational centers, such as registered
madrassas, and disseminated on such occasions as Jumma Namoz (Friday communal prayers). Yet, the existing research also shows that political activism and unsanctioned religious instruction and practices continue to challenge the government’s claim to legitimacy and its status quo in mosques, private homes, online, and on the streets. Local individuals continue to negotiate—by resisting, co-opting, and/or complying with—the government agents’ techniques of social control.

Local spaces such as mosques and public events such as Friday communal prayers are more susceptible to social control by the government’s agents, including police officers, agents of the National Security Service (SNB), or informants working for these law-enforcement agencies. For instance, McGlinchey notes that in Uzbekistan, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, some local imams and congregants, individuals, and families ignored or successfully resisted government intimidation and “false charges of Islamic extremism,” while others had to face long prison terms. Private events behind the closed doors of individual homes posit a challenge to the government’s agents, since, as political actors, those who attend or organize these events are often invisible. Fear that subversive activities take place in domestic spaces bolsters the Uzbek government agents’ attempts to monitor and control such social events.

This fear is not new. The Russian Imperial and the Soviet governments were equally concerned about what happened behind the closed doors of individual homes during social events. For instance, in the early twentieth century, in their field-reports, agents of the Imperial Russian Security Service clearly stated their fear that those who lead public life in private spaces, such as during a gap (club, talk, a social gathering) or prayer meetings, are “plotting a great conspiracy.” Later, the Soviet government’s representatives, both its “indigenous” and “European” cadres, likewise experienced and exhibited a great anxiety about public life in private spaces. During the 1920s and 1930s, many public spaces previously occupied by religious institutions, including mosques and sacred sites, were destroyed or appropriated for other social and economic needs. However, the daily life of local individuals in domestic spaces obscured the substance and degree of social change it generated, thus limiting the government agents’ ability to exercise more effective social control. Khalid’s recent work provides examples of Communist organizers’ fear of local resistance to social change in the early Soviet period (1920–1930s) as a result of different visions of modernity between the Party and society as well as among the Party members themselves.

In contemporary Uzbekistan, despite draconian measures of social control, the government’s concern over public life in private spaces has not subsided and is not completely unfounded. For example, some clandestine activities of
Islamic social movements, such as Hizbut-Tahrir (the Party of Liberation), an ideological opponent to the Karimov’s (1991–2016) regime, did take place in domestic spaces. Frequent searches at and surveillance of religious activists’ homes and local mosques manifested the government’s anxiety over the potential for religious discourse and practice to undermine the regime’s legitimacy. Since many social events held in individual homes continue to be somewhat out of the government agents’ reach, and while representatives of the still autocratic post-Karimov’s Uzbek government and its large judiciary system leave no other space for political dissent in the country, the regime’s fear of public life in private spaces continues to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The government’s sanctions and techniques of social control remain variegated, but not always successful. Their persistence, however, points to the importance of investigating individuals’ public life in such private spaces in a finer detail.

The Uzbek government (or anyone) often interprets domestic space and social events taking place there as subversive political activity, while the actors themselves may perceive these events to be private and apolitical. In order to understand how and why this happens, I deploy Gal’s treatment of public/private distinction as a fractal difference. This way public/private distinction does not describe any one domain corresponding to places and practices, but refers to a repeating communicative pattern displayed at every scale. To borrow Levi-Strauss’s words, such application of a public/private distinction is “good to think” about local religious practice, its social significance, and its relations to and with the sovereign. Below, I apply this distinction to social activities organized and attended by women in domestic spaces in Uzbekistan.

**OTINLAR AND SOCIAL CONTROL**

Several scholars have written about *otinlar (or otins or otinchalar).* The women I have met during the ethnographic research by and large have no institutionalized religious education and do not hold an official administrative position such as the office of the imam. These women are often taught by other *otinlar* and/or other local religious practitioners in domestic spaces and supplement this education with self-education. By routinely facilitating daily life in their communities in the privacy of individual homes, *otinlar* continue effecting change in themselves and others, despite the Uzbek government’s attempts to control individual religiosities. These women lead public life in private spaces by either providing (often unsanctioned) religious instruction (as a teacher, *ustoz*) or by officiating at various ceremonial occasions (as *otinlar* or *otinchalar*). In addition, some of them can perform healing rituals or provide advice on mundane matters to individual community members.
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The word *otin* is often translated as a “teacher.” This translation, however, does not capture the kind of knowledge these women possess and share with others and, as a result, obscures *otinlar*’s role vis-à-vis their local communities. These women’s communal significance exceeds social roles ascribed to and/or assumed by them. Many *otinlar* are local leaders committed to changing themselves, their families, and local residents into better human beings; they do so intentionally and purposefully. As leaders, these women may not organize or head street protests or run for government office (although since my last visit this might have changed). Rather, by effecting incremental changes in themselves and others while engaging in the mundane and ceremonial affairs in their communities, these women help maintain the existing social order and/or challenge it.

For instance, in 2003, accompanied by a local *otin*, Jahon, I witnessed a street protest in a city in the Valley; protestors were demanding gas and electricity and amnesty for political prisoners.31 When I asked whether a bad government should be changed or tolerated, Jahon replied,

> If you are good, your rulers will be good. If you are bad, your rulers will be bad. Our rulers have houses and cars, and our people do not. I’m not going to advise that the rulers be punished. I would advise that we’d be punished. We deserve what we get. If we [emphasis added] were good, our rulers would be good. Everything starts with a person, with a family. If I am good and my husband is good, then my children and family are good. . . . But you need to work on becoming good.

To Jahon, then, the state was like a family. In order to have a good leader and order in the family, each member had to be good, and behave morally, with correct intentions toward others. In her view, a societal transformation started with an individual one. This statement was Jahon’s personal opinion—she did not see it as referencing a political project. Yet, geared toward societal change and pertaining to “the realm of human affairs, stressing the action, *praxis*, needed to establish and sustain it,” this statement had a political nature.32 While Jahon affirmed a primacy of “the who” (or in her words “you”)—“the who” that a self can become—a change in “the who” was directed toward achieving a plurality as “we.” This “we” started with her learning how to be a “good” Muslim and attending to the needs of her family and community. It is this involvement with and within the “we” that generates a strong interest in *otinlar*’s activities on behalf of local law enforcement agencies.

The Uzbek government uses several techniques to control religious leaders like *otinlar*. One of them is, what I call, “an ideological character assassination,” by branding events these women preside over as sites of conspicuous
consumption and dissemination of “non-traditional,” “alien,” or “foreign” forms of Islam. Another technique is mahalla (neighborhood) committees’ efforts to monitor such activities and report to the National Security Service (SNB). Representatives of local police departments also require religious leaders, registered or unregistered with the state, to sign written commitments to not teach minors. In 2003, two otinlar suspected that police informants were attending public gatherings in individual homes. Since 2008, the government has deployed three more techniques: (1) a required certification of otinlar by traveling ulama (male religious leaders who have received an institutionalized religious instruction and certification) through “exams,” which some otinlar locally called “competitions”; (2) the creation of administrative positions for women religious leaders both at the city and regional level, as a hokymyat (city) and viloyat (region) otin; and (3) an introduction of courses about Islam at local city halls (hokymyats). The efficacy of these techniques is yet to be assessed by researchers; I come back to some of these techniques later in the chapter.

In 2011, not only government representatives but also three local otinlar saw these techniques of social control as positive developments. According to these women, these techniques were used to ensure the practice of “correct” Islam, guaranteed security, and helped to maintain an ordered and predictable state. The same year, twelve Uzbekistani citizens used Tajikistan’s civil war (in the 1990s) and Kyrgyzstan’s putsches and violence (in 2010) as examples of the states that did not work; they were neither ordered nor predictable and did not ensure individual security. A predictable daily life came at a cost, including sometimes providing information to the SNB agents about the contents of teaching and exchanges of information taking place in individual homes during life-cycle ceremonies and other social events that (could have) instigated discussions of global and local politics. By promising a safe state and engaging in the politics of fear—which Zizek argues, is the most effective form of current biopolitics—the Uzbek government representatives justified the need to know about public life taking place in domestic spaces. Yet, these techniques of social control continue to be, by and large, unsuccessful, since the unsanctioned religious instruction and discussions of politics at home have not ceased.

LEADING PUBLIC LIFE IN PRIVATE SPACES

The religious instruction offered by some otinlar mainly takes places in individual homes. For example, “Tursun-oi” has been engaged in learning about Islam and teaching others, including children, since the late 1990s. During
our meetings in 2011, she often talked about the abundance of her Islamic knowledge, “What should I do with this knowledge. . . . I have to share it with others. . . . I want to learn more so that they can take it from me. What else could I do with this knowledge? Take it to the grave? No. Come, share my knowledge, take it in bags, full bags!” This sharing of knowledge—the packaging of it in full bags by those seeking religious instruction—took place at Tursun-oi’s home, which was secluded from the street by windowless walls and a large wooden gate with elaborate carvings. Her house’s architectural focus on the family’s internal social life was not unusual in the Fergana Valley and facilitated public life in private spaces. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Tursun-oi taught in a room previously occupied by her mother. During our first meeting in 2011, she was happy to report that a recent renovation had added a new room with a separate entrance to one side of the house. She called this bright room with three large windows opening out to the front inner yard her novaya shkola (new school) and, on occasion, qorexona, the place where individuals learn how to recite the Quran. The room smelled of fresh paint and was at least twenty-five by fifteen feet large. A long low table and colorful cotton floor mats (tushaks) around it marked the center of the room. This is where the lessons (dars) took place.

In Uzbekistan, customary practices, opposition from and reluctance by local religious leaders, and a lack of designated physical space for women, inform an ideological connection between mosques as male and homes as female spaces for religious observance and socialization. Domestic space continues to be the center of local women’s religious and social life and political participation, and it is as significant as its counterpart, the mosque. In these spaces otinlar can provide religious instruction, healing, share advice on matters pertaining to local families daily lives, and officiate at ceremonies gatherings among (mainly) women. Such social events (meropriyatiya) are not limited to supplications and blessings, but also include various conversations about personal, familial, communal, and larger sociopolitical problems and issues; some of these discussions lead to political protests. Individual homes, often defined and understood as private nonpolitical spaces for familial activities and (often) homosocial customary and ceremonial occasions, become safer places for information exchange than the streets and/or mosques, often understood as public and, therefore, political spaces. These safer places are not easily accessible to the secular and religious authorities, such as representatives of a local police department or the imam’s office, although, with the introduction of institutionalized positions for otinlar on city and regional levels, this might be changing.

A cartography of private as personal and public as political “is a result and not an explanation of the ideological processes we observe and use.”
Gal argues that a commonsensical association of domestic space with lack of politics is informed by the nineteenth century doctrine of “separate spheres.” This doctrine assumes that “social life is organized around contrasting and incompatible moral principles” associated with either public or private, whereby community and politics would be linked to the public, while individual, family, and personal self-interest—to the private. According to Gal, this assumption breeds an anxiety of contamination, since familial ties could weaken the fairness of politics, or sentiments could undermine one’s rationality. This Eurocentric doctrine made its way into Central Asians’ daily life through Russia’s peculiar colonial and imperial efforts, whereby Russia’s “external imperial difference” created a need to borrow and replicate ideological developments of European modernity and utilize them vis-à-vis its internal colonies. The Soviet efforts to modernize Central Asia also materialized this doctrine through the attempts to bring women into what was considered to be a public sphere of socialist economics and politics. This ideological trajectory continues to affect daily lives of Uzbekistanis through the government agents’ work on ensuring that private religiosities stay personal and not political and belong only to designated spaces, like mosques or private homes. From the government’s standpoint, these religiosities should not contaminate the post-Socialist public sphere—a sphere of political activity. The country’s judiciary is endowed with responsibility to ensure that such contamination does not take place and/or is swiftly curtailed.

Empirical and feminist research shows that contrary to the doctrine of “separate spheres,” such dichotomies as political/personal, rational/emotional, and public/private, are entangled in complex ways. Our personal experiences, choices, and actions are situated and contextual and, therefore, informed by the political views and actions of others. These experiences, in turn, inform our political views and actions toward ourselves and others. For example, Sadyrbek demonstrates how in Kyrgyzstan matters often considered to be private, such as spousal abuse, become public and political issues; yet, the existing structural, social, and cultural mores preclude a just resolution of such cases. Murzakulova shows how a personal search for social justice in Kyrgyzstan leads to public political mobilization, while, according to McGlinchey, personal religious beliefs inform “Islamic charity,” social activism, and public work of individual Muslims. Thus, instead of duplicating a commonsensical association of public with political and private with personal, I follow Gal’s suggestion to treat a public/private distinction as a communicative phenomenon, which has “a complex and systematic logic that explains its usage.” It is this logic that I turn to now.
Private versus Public

Gal contends that private and public are not particular places, domains, spheres of activities, types of interaction, or distinctive institutions and practices, but instead mutually informative communicative cultural categories that are always relative; a part of their referential meaning depends on an interactional context of their usage. The public/private distinction is also fractal and nested.\(^{48}\) It refers to complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales, and whatever the local content of the dichotomy, the public/private distinction can be produced repeatedly (or replicated) by projecting it onto a broader or a narrower context and into different social objects and interactions. Hence, as a discursive phenomenon, the private/public distinction “can be used to characterize, categorize, organize, and contrast” any kind of space, institution, group, activities, interactions, and relations.\(^{49}\) For example, in Uzbekistan, the street is considered to be a public space and the house—a private one. Separated at the threshold—at the gate (eshik)—these are “two spaces charged with different sets of social expectations about who belongs and how to conduct oneself”; the actors’ social relations not only “play out” these expectations, but also are “constituted” by such spaces.\(^{50}\) Liu shows particularly well the intricacies and differences of individuals embodying these spaces and the associated expectations.\(^{51}\)

One can also distinguish between private and public parts within the house, such as the bedroom (yotoqhona) and the living or guest (mehmohona) room. In the case of Tursun-oi’s “new school,” a room where she met with her students would be considered public, while her bedroom would be considered private. At yet another scale of this fractal distinction, through indexical gestures, such as whispering, one can have a private discussion during a public event in a public part of a house. For instance, at Tursun-oi’s, the students can discuss personal matters during the lesson.\(^{52}\) Then, they can rejoin a Quranic recitation or a discussion of a particular verse’s historical context, thus eliminating this particular iteration of the private/public distinction. Therefore, depending on participants’ perspectives, private in public and public in private can be situational and can be fleeting or lasting.\(^{53}\)

An otinlar’s public life in private spaces is not exceptional or novel, and it needs not be subversive.\(^{54}\) At best, it is surprising, since fractal subdivisions of the public/private distinction can be hard to notice for both the participants and the observer. Yet these subdivisions are oddly familiar to all of us. Just like us, the public life these women lead inside individual homes is situational, fractal, and indexical; it is not bonded onto individuals or places, but linked to the occasion and can be grasped through signs.\(^{55}\) Let me provide examples of some of these signs.
On one chilly Tuesday in January 2003, Jahon, an otin mentioned above, and I walked up the stairs of a panel block apartment building in Hovliguzar. We entered an apartment on the third floor, where, in a tiny hallway, several women greeted us and offered water for a hand-washing ceremony, in which water was poured over our hands three times before we dried them with a towel. Then, we took off our shoes and walked into the living room with a lavish dasturkhon (meal) set on the table in the middle of it. After greeting the other women already gathered around the dasturkhon to participate in a propitiatory ritual Bibi Mushkil Kusho (the Lady Solver of Difficulties), we took our places. On our way to this event, Jahon had told me that the ritual was expected to ensure the hostess’s husband and her friends would have successful trips to Russia—“to open up” seasonal migrants’ “road.” Before the ceremony commenced, the hostesses asked Jahon to lead another propitiatory ritual aimed at receiving blessings from another female mediator, Bibi Seshambe (the Lady Tuesday) for the elderly women who gathered in an adjacent room, her children’s bedroom. While Jahon was gone, we discussed my reasons for visiting Uzbekistan and my personal history, including my growing up in the Caucasus (a region in the south of Russia), their careers—some of them worked a local kindergarten, others were seasonal migrants to Russia—and Uzbekistan’s and local economic development. After finishing the Bibi Seshambe ritual, Jahon returned to the living room and sat at the head of the table. The Bibi Mushkil Kusho ceremony then began.

In this example, we can observe that both rituals were public events; these social gatherings took place in an individual’s home, a private space. More specifically, they took place in the hostess’s living room and her children’s bedroom. On this occasion, the children’s bedroom was transformed into another mehmonhona (living room or guest room), a public part of the private space. During this public event, the women in attendance discussed private matters, such as my personal history, and public matters, such as the insufficient salaries of local teachers and their hopes for economic prosperity, when Uzbekistanis would no longer have to engage in seasonal migrant work in Russia. They discussed these matters publicly and privately. By lowering their voice and moving closer to each other they (could have) made comments about my story or their personal issues; these comments were aimed at their interlocutors, not at all participants in this event. Amid these discussions, upon settling in a seat at the head of the table, a respected place signaling one’s sociospiritual importance, Jahon, a private individual, became an otin, a public figure, who then officiated at this public event taking place in a public part of private space. Hence, at this event, private affairs and public matters, spaces, and institutions, were intertwined in complex ways; an index, such as an individual’s gesture, level of one’s voice, and body language...
and/or its location, created a different, new contrast set. From this perspective, on this occasion, private/public were not separate domains with associated beliefs and practices, but cultural communicative categories. There was no contamination, or blurring of boundaries, or a continuum between private and public. Rather, the repeated re-creation of these categories, and their embedding into one another, was a nested process, even if the event participants would have probably erased this nested process in a post-effect articulation.

According to Gal, since public and private dichotomy is linked to other dichotomies, we can apply similar fractal analyses to such categories as political and personal. Let me briefly exemplify the workings on this distinction, which is also situational, fractal, and indexical, and its nested recursions that are often ignored by the participants. Even though Jahon’s statement about “good” or “bad” government, mentioned in the beginning on the chapter, was addressed to me but aimed at social change—at the “we”—if I were to ask her to classify this statement in terms of public/private and political/personal, she would have probably chosen “private” and “personal.” Hence, even though the actors themselves do not see their conversations and behaviors as political, they are and can be read as such by others. I do not mean that these conversations and behaviors are necessarily oppositional to the existing Uzbek government; they can but do not have to be. The meaning of “political” is not limited to resistance. Private opinions voiced during public events in private spaces can, in fact, reiterate public messages produced by the government’s representatives, while the government’s agents can suspect any large social gathering of breeding political dissent.58

Political versus Personal

“We do not talk about siyosat (politics),” Tursun-oi reminded me during a lesson at her home in 2003. “We talk about din (religion) va (and) hayot (life),” she added. The ideological connection among home, women, and private life are symbolically overdetermined in Central Asia (as elsewhere). These categories are firmly linked in popular and official imagination and academic productions. As a result, politics (siyosat) and social transformations are associated with public and men, and often portrayed as taking place at such locations as mosques and/or streets. It continues to be so, despite the Soviet government’s persistent attempts to discursively link women and public. I argue, however, that politics are not a function of any one location or gender. A conversation with another local otn, Bibi Gul’, exemplifies that din va hayot (religion and life) and siyosat (politics) do not belong to any one sphere such as public or private.
Bibi Gul’ received knowledge about Islam from her mother—a local katta (famous) otin—at home. In the 1990s, she attended classes at a local Culture Center, an important social and educational institution in the Soviet Union and (post-Soviet) Uzbekistan. This Center offered two-year elementary instruction in Arabic, which, as Bibi Gul’ claimed, helped her to recite the Quran “correctly” and “understand some of its parts [better than others].” Since she was not registered as a religious teacher and leader with government institutions, such as the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, local police department, or the city hall (hokymiat), Bibi Gul’ felt that by attending these classes she, in a way, legitimized her activities.

During our last meeting in August 2011 at her house, Bibi Gul’ told me that she was aware that teaching about Islam without the government’s permission was prohibited; nonetheless, she continued doing it. She said she knew that the SNB agents were aware of her role as a ceremonial leader and religious instructor in her mahalla, and, sometimes, beyond. Then she smiled and added, “They [the agents of the National Security Service] keep an eye [on me]. In their notes they keep me [by keeping a record of her activities]. They know me. The government allows me. They have my photo.” Bibi Gul’ chuckled, “They keep everyone who reads the Quran on a black list.” She finished this statement by warning that, since I had visited her, I would also be put on the black list. I smiled in return.

If we take the political/personal distinction as a communicative phenomenon, then Bibi Gul’s and my smiles and chuckles were indexes that established a nested set of distinctions. In our personal encounter, we switched from a mere statement of fact—that she has provided religious instruction—to a political commentary about the existing techniques of social control exercised by the government’s agents. These techniques included keeping a record of one’s public life in private spaces, such as Bibi Gul’s teaching Islam or officiating at ceremonial events in domestic space. I take indexes such as individual smiles and chuckles to manifest and signal individual ability to understand, interpret, and evaluate the sociopolitical context and existing social control, and, as political gestures, to criticize these. Thus, this private conversation between Bibi Gul’ and me had both implicit and explicit evaluations of the Uzbek state as politically repressive, where freedoms of religion and expression had clear limits and consequences. Bibi Gul’s activities have infringed on these limits, and as a result she was put on the “black list.” As she joked, I, by association, would be on this list as well.

This was not just a thematic shift in our conversation; we were not moving from topic to topic. Rather, this particular exchange was one of the iterations of a situational political/personal distinction signaled by the participants through body language—by smiles and chuckles. In 2011, in Uzbekistan,
laughing at the existing sociopolitical context was much safer than making a declarative statement about the government’s oppression and/or protesting on the street; a joke, by definition, was not to be taken seriously. Consider this, during our meeting Bibi Gul’s made a personal joke about such serious and public matters as social control and political oppression; then her joke became public through this chapter and was interpreted as a political commentary by the researcher. This situational fleeting recursive political/personal distinction re-created at this part of the conversation between Bibi Gul’ and me was an example of its complex entangled iterations, whereby the meaning of this distinction depended on the interactional context, including space, physical bodies, and individual motivations.

Women may have different motivations behind holding public events in individual homes—be that achieving personal power or status, satisfying one’s financial need, or acting on a feeling of personal responsibility. These events have social effects and can have personal risks. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, according to the government’s representatives, to organize a lesson about Islam’s history in a private space without the government’s authorization was (and to my knowledge continues to be) a political act that can result in arrest, detention, and other forms of persecution by the government’s agents. In this context, **otinlar** have to be creative and find solutions. For example, by 2011, Tursun-oi redefined her teaching about Islam at home as tutorship, which at the time was not prohibited. Just like a tutor of mathematics or chemistry, she was sharing her expert knowledge on the subject with others. Other **otinlar** had to be creative as well. The same year, from a conversation with Jahon, I found out that another local **otin**, who was neither certified nor registered with the state, continued teaching neighborhood children about Islam at her home; the students stopped in on their way home from school at her house. According to Jahon,

They come with books, and they leave with the same books [so no one would be suspicious]. . . . We [knowledgeable Muslims] are not supposed to leave anyone without knowledge. Her students are, maybe, in the sixth, third, and fourth grades. Who knows, maybe they will be famous **qoralar** [reciters of the Qur’an] one day. They come [to study with this **otin**] with their shoulders uncovered, wearing **lyamochki** [tank tops], just like they go to school. She [this **otin**] does not tell anyone. She is afraid of **proverka** [an investigation of her activities by a local SNB office].

Private sartorial practices of the students have political significance as well. In a context where government representatives operate under the assumption that religious instruction unsanctioned by the state fosters political opposi-
tion, one’s personal dress code, such as a long-sleeved shirt or a scarf covering one’s hair, neck, and shoulders, can be read as a sign of oppositional politics. To be creative in such context may require negotiating and sometimes compromising one’s personal moral standards by delinking these from a set of sartorial practices that otherwise would be considered immodest.

While some otinlar continue teaching and officiating at ceremonial events held (often) in homes, the government representatives continue developing new strategies of social control of public life in private spaces. One such strategy includes an effort to co-opt private religious instruction and practice by institutionalizing these. Since 2008, in an effort to establish coherence among existing theological interpretations and divergent practices, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan has established exams or competitions for otinlar in different parts of the country, where the best among the participants can become a hokimyat (city, city hall) or vyloyat (regional, a part of the regional government) otinlar. As the placeholders of these relatively new administrative positions, otinlar would become public figures and not just private individuals leading public life in private spaces. Further, being in charge of women’s issues and their religious observances would require reporting on these to the local government. In 2011, in a private conversation, one hokimyat otin, at the time a public figure, said,

People teach less at home. The state [in general] has more, but in a mahalla . . . less. The government does not trust [those who teach at home]. I do not trust these teachers either and reprimand them [italics for emphasis]. They may [have knowledge but] not know how to give [it]. I love some of these women, but I reprimand [them]. Our hokimyat now has special kursi [courses] for otinlar. Qorehona [home school] is a secret. There are many. The hokimyat knows, and the SNB knows. But the government cannot close all of them. They trust [you], if you go the right way. They check, and they trust [she smiled].

Institutionalizing public life in private spaces is one of the strategies deployed by the Uzbek government to ensure dissemination of “a politically correct and correctly political” religious knowledge “at the service of a Republic.”60 If an otin takes the hokimyat’s “special” courses about Islam and, as a result, is certified, she would no longer be breaking laws by providing private religious instruction or officiating at social events taking place in domestic spaces. Such publically recognized certification would allow her to conduct lessons (but not teach minors) and, at the same time, would enable better control of her public life in private spaces by the government’s agents. The results of these efforts, however, are yet to be thoroughly researched and analyzed.
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CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how despite—and because of—the Uzbekistani government’s social control, women religious teachers and leaders, otinlar, continue effecting change in themselves and others by leading public life in private spaces. As private individuals, they are social actors actively engaged in shaping their communities. To prove this point, I have used my ethnographic research and Susan Gal’s theory of fractal and indexical dichotomies. Theorizing the public/private distinction as a nested communicative phenomenon demonstrates that social change is not limited to a particular space or a particular gender and can happen anywhere and happens everywhere. One’s personal opinions about daily life (hayot) and religion (din) (can) include political (siyosat) commentaries or can be interpreted as such by others, and one’s political views are often deeply personal.61 Historically, in autocracies such as Uzbekistan, sociopolitical changes are thought of, articulated, planned, and enacted during social gatherings in private arenas, such as domestic space. For instance, in the Soviet Union these changes were conceived of and materialized in private spaces, such as an apartment, more precisely, in its kitchen, which was a public part of the private space provided often by the Soviet government itself! Since many social activities taking place at homes are out of the immediate reach of government agents, and as long as representatives of the existing autocratic government and its large judiciary system leave no other space for a political dissent in the country, this sovereign’s fear of public life in private spaces will continue to be a self-fulfilling prophecy just like in the Soviet Union.

NOTES

2. Mahabat Sadyrbek, “‘There Is No State in This Country!’ Legal and Social Treatment of Marital Rape in Kyrgyzstan,” in Gender in Modern Central Asia, ed. Thomas Kruessmann (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2015), 105–24.

7. For an example of a recent use of this distinction, see Sergei Poliakov, Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992); Alma Sultangaliyeva, “Women and Religion in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: A View from Within,” in Gender in Modern Central Asia, ed. Thomas Kruessmann (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2015), 139–61.


11. Ibid., 81.


15. There are diverse ways of how people feel to be Muslim, and how they articulate and embody this feeling.


21. On the Uzbek state’s control of foreign religious education, see Abramson, *Foreign Religious Education*.


30. For example, Fathi offers a taxonomy of local *otinlar* as “traditional” (educated at homeschools) and “not traditional” (educated at madrassa) using the source of education as a measuring stick. I found such taxonomy less useful, since there is a range of opinions what exactly constitutes “tradition” in Uzbekistan. See Habiba Fathi, “Otines: The Unknown Women Clerics of Central Asian Islam,” *Central Asian Survey* 16, no. 1 (1997): 27–43; O. V. Gorshunova, *Uzbekskaya zhenshchina: sotsial’nyy status, sem’ya, religiya (po materialam Ferganskoy Doliny)* (Moscow: Institut etnologii i antropologii RAN, 2006); Peshkova, “Teaching Islam at a Home School,” 80–94.

31. In this chapter, personal names and names of places are pseudonyms. To protect the confidentiality of the research participants, the dates of the interviews have been omitted.


38. For a description of the built structures in the region see Liu, *Under Solomon’s Throne*, chapter 5.

39. An Uzbek private house in a mahalla (neighborhood) often consists of multiple structures positioned around a courtyard (hovli), which has inner and outer parts. See Liu, *Under Solomon’s Throne*, chapter 5, for a thorough discussion of behavioral expectations in, within, and between domestic spaces and their role in reproducing Uzbek cultural practices in Kyrgyzstan.


42. Ibid., 78.


44. Here I refer to both the “indigenous” and “Europeanized” cadre. See Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*.


47. Gal, “A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction,” 78.

48. In mathematics, a fractal difference refers to a repeating pattern displayed at every scale.
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49. Gal, “A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction,” 82.
50. Liu, Under Solomon’s Throne, 135.
51. Ibid., 132.
52. For a sample lesson, see Peshkova, “Teaching Islam at a Home School,” 80–94.
54. For historical and geographic examples of Muslim women’s leadership see Peshkova, “Muslim Women Leaders in the Ferghana Valley,” 5–24.
55. For more on fractal and indexical, see Gal, “A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction,” 81, 86.
56. This ritual is named after a popular female saint, a mediator between the human and divine worlds who solves problems and bestows blessings on her devotees. In one version of the legend, as an example of her power, Bibi Mushkil Kusho helps an elderly poor man, Chol, to deal with his daily troubles.
57. The legend about this saint, similar to Cinderella’s fairy godmother, features an older woman who helps to ensure a young woman’s happiness.
58. See the quote from Miklashevsky (n24) about the field reports filed by the Imperial Russian Security Service’s agents at the brink of the twentieth century earlier this chapter.
59. By conducting independent research about public life in private spaces—by interviewing individuals in their homes about their religious sensibilities and practices and participating in social events there—the gestures that accompanied my research could be and were read as political actions by the government agents.
Chapter Fifteen

Gender and Changing Women’s Roles in Uzbekistan

From Soviet Workers to Post-Soviet Entrepreneurs

Rano Turaeva

Like all Soviet Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan underwent great political, economic, and social transformations following its independence in 1991. Economic crises touched most of the local economies. As a result, millions of Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks went to Russia to find jobs and even the current economic crisis in Russia did not stop migrants from leaving the region to work in Russia, accelerating the globalization of Central Asian societies. Globalization has been changing and influencing cultures, traditional structures, social norms, and beliefs all over the world. The accelerated speed of shared information, objects, ideas, and humans has led to increased mobility and significant change in each corner of the world today. Uzbekistan was also affected by these processes of globalization, mobility, and change, opening up new opportunities for the population.

Religious tenets, restricted gender roles, and traditional behaviors and attitudes did not prevent Uzbek female entrepreneurs from seizing the opportunities created by opening borders, increased mobility, and globalization. Economic hardships provided incentives for creativity and innovation among economic entrepreneurs. Both men and women became mobile entrepreneurs to “find money,” as they explain. Four female Turkmen entrepreneurs who work together shuttling between Tashauz, Turkmenistan, and Dubai described the situation using a very negative tone: “Пул тапиш гыйин болип талди, 3арсон саргardon 3olda 3atinlaram erklaram, arklalka orida 3atinla Dubaida.” [It became difficult to find money/to earn money because people became mobile and are on the move, both men and women, men are in Russia and women are in Dubai].

Women have always been innovative entrepreneurs who readily adapt to any new environment. This process emerged almost with the changing roles
of women in Central Asia in general. Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, small-scale traders and other entrepreneurs were mainly women. The economic hardships of the post-Soviet period fell particularly harshly on women, leading to changing norms, kinship structures, and local governance systems such as mahalla committees in Uzbekistan.

This chapter focuses on the so-called kichkina or prostoy odamla, which can be translated as “small” or “simple” people, who are contrasted with katta odam (“big people”), meaning people with greater financial or other capital in Uzbek society. Based on interviews and fieldwork, I offer several case studies of women entrepreneurs and women’s economic networks, describing the status and institutional setup of the given cases. I begin by presenting the women and their economic activities followed by an overview of the changing gender norms in Uzbekistan in both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods to contextualize the women diachronically and then to trace process of gender and development in Uzbekistan.

AN INTRODUCTION TO FEMALE “NETWORKED BUSINESS”

Before I introduce the cases of successful female entrepreneurs in the networking business, I need to define “networked business” (setevoy biznes in Russian). Setevoy biznes came to Uzbekistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a by-product of a market economy. Setevoy biznes provided an opportunity to earn money quickly and easily by bringing people into the network and gaining from the expanding network. The products of this business are both tangible goods and the informal networks of traders that they accumulate in the process of networking and selling. The material products of such businesses are cosmetics and pharmaceutical health products. The network functions according to the following principle. A prospective trader is formally introduced to a dealer in the network and instructed in how to sell the products effectively and how to recruit more people into the business, which functions basically as a pyramid scheme. The well-performing agent can gain access to the incentive system, which can include various incentives, such as material goods and travel vouchers. If an agent expands his or her network with agents who themselves recruit clients to further expand networks and sell products, a percentage of all profits should trickle upward to their own pockets. Therefore, the earliest members of this business model receive the most income, a principle known as “first come, best served.”

The female entrepreneurs that I met throughout my field research in Uzbekistan were young women between twenty and fifty years of age and involved in the setevoy biznes. These female entrepreneurs typically engage
in these activities as a sideline, in addition to their main occupation such as teachers, doctors, university lecturers, and nurses. The process could be compared to American women in the 1950s and 1960s who sold Avon and Tupperware products.³

Most of these women are well-educated and have wide social networks that they can utilize. To my surprise, I also met a young male mullah (thirty-two years old in 2006) who was very active in the setevoy biznes of health products. He explained to me that “it is a profitable job” and that he had “even bought a car”—attractive incentives to join his network. As far as I understood, he sells food supplements to his friends and acquaintances. He did not stop working as a mullah, as he can sell his products on the side, since his position in the central mosque as the second main mullah is also a lucrative one. This mullah lives in a small town in where I met two female entrepreneurs, including “Gozal.”

**Gozal**

Gozal is a successful urologist who has a full-time position in one of the region’s biggest clinics. She works only day shifts, and she has a special agreement with her boss to not work nights. She is forty-five (in 2006) and has two children—a daughter and a son. Her husband is from a very respected family in the region and also has a medical degree, but he is an unemployed drug addict. Therefore, Gozal is essentially a single mother; she has a husband on paper to protect her reputation as a mother of two children and a medical doctor in the neighborhood. However, her reputation is still compromised by having a drug-addicted husband since this creates gossip that she might be having lovers. She is good looking and dresses very well but “too modern” (*dim sovremenny*), wearing tight clothes and shorter skirts whereas women her age typically gain weight and wear longer dresses and even headscarves. I will return this point later.

Gozal enjoys her network of medical doctors and often socializes with colleagues from her clinic. Since she is the sole breadwinner in the family, neither her husband nor his respected family dares to criticize Gozal; instead, they show respect for her shoudering the whole family burden alone. Gozal lives in a very small (by local standards) house, located in the backyard of a house owned by a sister of her husband, which she would lose were she to divorce her husband.

Gozal started her medical career during Soviet times after graduating from the Tashkent medical school and interning in Moscow. She was born in a small village in a rural area in the early 1960s and went to rural school. She has one sister and two brothers; her sister is in Tashkent (a nurse) while the
brothers live in her natal village and take care of their elderly parents. Gozal 
made late, by Uzbek standards, and therefore married as the second wife 
(the first wife divorced her husband later) to a man who already had two 
dughters. Gozal makes her living from informal payments and private medi- 
cal services that she manages to perform within the clinic where she works. 
She says she could not survive only on her meager state salary, which became 
almost nonexistent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She has to keep 
her job in the clinic not for the salary, but for the prestige, reputation, social 
status, and contacts with the “rich clients,” as she calls them. Gozal’s clients 
are those patients who can afford to make additional payments for all kinds of 
extra services and her extra attention. One might immediately think that she 
is a corrupt doctor who takes bribes, but I would rather describe Gozal as a 
woman who struggles, deals, copes, and innovatively gains from all the limits 
and opportunities in her reach. She manages her situation very well thanks to 
her active professional life but also through active networking.

Gozal began her entrepreneurial activities after the Soviet Union collapsed 
and things became “really difficult economically.” In the late 1990s, she be- 
gan selling health products in the setevoy bizness. She said she initially joined 
the business network to receive discounts on the products for her personal 
use. It was only after her own positive experience with the products that she 
started to sell them and began to benefit from the expanding network. Her 
clients are not only her friends, relatives, and acquaintances, but also her 
patients. She says people trust her more with health products because she is a 
physician, but she also expressed some shame for capitalizing on her profes- 
sional reputation. Her opinions still reflect Soviet ideals about certain things 
such as responsibilities at work and at home and social relations. She would 
emphasize this by saying that her understanding of life is based on Soviet 
schools and ideologies. For instance, her obvious feeling of shame about sell- 
ing can be traced to the negative views of small-scale traders and spekulyanty.

During the Soviet era Gozal, like many citizens, turned to small traders 
(spekulyant) for certain difficult-to-find products. Working as a spekulyant, 
in the Soviet sense was not something to be proud of and had a rather nega- 
tive connotation. Today, this label would be given to any female small-scale 
trader, which is considered a different occupation from the small-scale traders 
who sell alongside the streets who are called semichkachi (sunflower-seed 
seller). Semichkachi are the women who have very small, low tables where 
they peddle sunflower seeds, chewing gum, small sweets, cigarettes, nas 
(powdered leaves of psychotropic plants), and sometimes small toys. They 
gather along busy roads where drivers can stop and buy a cigarette. These 
women were tolerated during the Soviet era, but they also were much less 
visible. Instead of working on the roadside, they tended to use home-based
sales or perhaps in the local market or other public gathering spots. These *semichkachi* women are still to be seen everywhere on bigger roads all over Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan.

However, the *setevoy bisnes*, according to Gozal, is “something different than *spekulatsia*” that “health products are not available in the market and rather require special knowledge.” She wanted to sell me some of the products, but I found them too expensive (US$20 per bottle of pills). She told me the story of how she came to be involved in the business. She had a female patient (most of her patients are female) who showed her the various food supplements she was taking and asked her opinion as a medical doctor. Gozal examined the product and was convinced that it might be a good way of supplementing her regular diet “which is not always necessarily healthy.” The patient praised the product enough to convince Gozal to join her distribution network and explained how she “makes big money easily without too much effort.” Her patient gave her a catalogue and explained how to start making money by recruiting more people to buy and sell the products. Gozal was convinced that in this business model one does not necessarily have to sell the products but can also earn from recruiting others into one’s network and earn from their sales. Gozal said that she had been part of the business for about five years and made considerable profits. As a seller, she also received a considerable discount on products she bought for her personal use.

Besides vitamins and other supplements that come from China, there are also cosmetic products from such brands as Oriflame (now replaced by Faberlik) and Mary Kay. The main supply offices for both brands are located in Moscow. Local distributors in Tashkent, and other regional centers and towns in Uzbekistan, sell products using their own networks. Other younger female entrepreneurs I met during my field research, and some that I have known longer, work as distributors for Oriflame and Mary Kay. These women are hairdressers, primary school teachers, doctors, university teachers, nurses, state bureaucrats, and police clerks. They are part of the cash-pooling networks called *chyorniy kassa* (black cashier desk) where they gather once a month and pool a certain amount of cash that one woman will receive in the number of months equal to the number of members of the group. For instance, if I join a *chyorniy kassa* network of twelve women with a US$50 contribution, I will receive US$600 once a year. The women’s networks I knew of required a US$150–US$200 contribution each month; women who could not afford their scheduled contribution had to leave the group. These *chyorniy kassa* meetings are also prime opportunities for distributors to sell their products. Cash rotation networks are not new and are a source of livelihoods in many other countries.4


During my field research in 2005–2006, I joined several *chyorniy kassa* networks myself and played with US$150 cash each month (I was exceptionally exempted from cash contributions; instead, I contributed to the party costs) with a group of women for eight months. The events took place at the homes of the women in the group. The groups were closed and no new members were allowed until the end of eight months, although they made an exception for me. Most of the women in Uzbekistan care about their appearance, and the clients of *setevoy biznes* took care of their skin “better than others.” It was interesting to observe the functioning of the *setevoy biznes* live during *chyorniy kassa* events. The distributors would start talking about how a friend’s skin became so dry and she had exactly the right cream for the problem, and so on. Consumers trust distributors of name-brand cosmetic and skin care products because they have “at least not fake Chinese rubbish.” This kind of business was a win–win proposition, as distributors earned some cash, while clients were glad to have regular access to “good quality” products for affordable prices.

**Mehribon**

Mehribon was thirty-five years old in 2015. She is also a single mother of one daughter who had some medical issues. The daughter turned seventeen in 2016 and graduated from school. Mehribon lives in her parent’s house after divorcing her husband, the accepted arrangement for a “proper divorced woman” in rural Uzbekistan. She has two brothers and a sister; the sister and one brother live the capital city, and she visits them very frequently. Her youngest brother lives with his family in their parent’s house and takes care of them. Mehribon is one of the most successful mobile female entrepreneurs I know. Her contacts and networks cover most of the small town where she lives, the capital city, even parts of Europe and the United States. She is involved in various economic activities. After her divorce, she earned an economics degree at Tashkent University, but upon graduation she did not find a well-paying job, so she decided to do something else. First, she worked for the biggest tourist agency in Uzbekistan, then she opened her own travel agency offering a different menu of trips. That endeavor was successful, and she reinvested most of her earnings back into the agency.

At the same time, Mehribon is actively involved in the *setevoy biznes*, which brings her more than US$500 per month. Often she makes use of her wide networks to broker deals where she also earns a commission. Her income exceeds the local average. However, she also has considerable expenses such as travel (to Tashkent, Turkey, the United States, Europe), her daughter’s medical care, and helping her parents through house renovations, cash
contributions, funding life-cycle events, and expensive presents. The latter investments grant her a degree of independence from her family members who seldom ask where she goes when she travels or is out in the evening. She maintains a very low profile when she is at her parent’s place by staying in the house and taking care of her daughter. She also invests in her wardrobe and grooming, which helps to create a positive image of herself among her neighbors, colleagues, friends, and others. Her prosperous and professional appearance help justify her mobile and “modern” life, pre-empting gossip, criticism, and social pressure.

Mehribon struggles with various dilemmas in an Uzbek context. She is not young anymore, according to Uzbek standards, and her daughter will reach marrying age very soon. While she managed to become financially independent and is able to pay her own bills and even help out her family, she did not remarry in order to comply with local standards of being a good woman. She has been trying her best to find a good partner who would let her continue her business transactions and, the most important requirement for an ideal partner in her opinion, would be willing to accept her daughter. The latter is an unusual requirement in the Uzbek context since any woman who remarries and who had children from a previous marriage typically leaves the children either with her parents or with the ex-husband. Generally, Uzbek husbands choose their wives, not the other way around. This generalization is based on the attitudes of the men and their families who choose the women and also from the right to go to a girl’s family to ask for her hand. There are no cases that I know of in which a girl’s family goes to the boy’s family and asks for his hand.7

Mehribon’s daughter stayed with her, although she stays with her grandparents during Mehribon’s frequent absences. When the time comes, it will be difficult to marry off a fatherless girl with medical issues. Although Mehribon makes a good living by local standards, she did not manage to buy herself a flat or build a house, therefore she has to share her adult life with her parents and her brother’s family. In the long run, she is expected to leave the parents’ house (ideally to remarry) as her brother will practically own the house. Mehribon continues to work hard to earn enough money to be able to create a good future for her daughter and make her an independent woman who can financially support herself in the home Mehribon hopes to create for her where they can live together.

Both women I presented in this part of the chapter are fighters in the sense that they successfully navigate between modernity and tradition alone, first for their children and then for their own future. Both women are caught in the web of constraints, complexities, and barriers created by economic crises, political instability, patriarchal traditional structures gaining more power,
and time pressure. Both women suffer and benefit from the novel conditions of accelerated globalization, state failure, modernity and tradition, changing gender roles, and capitalism-driven values where money overrides everything else. Both women became more and more innovative to reap financial gains from their economic activities, which are diversified and adapted according to the changing situations and conditions. In order to understand the complexities of the situation of both women, I will trace the processes of gender change in two important periods: Soviet and post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

**GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGES: DEBATING SOVIET MODERNITY/sovremennost’**

Uzbekistan is a Muslim-majority country with a secular state and experienced more than seventy years of Soviet rule. The system during the Soviet era had direct implications for social life since it promoted modernity (sovremennost’). I will avoid here entering the debate on modernity and post-modernity in the sense we know from scholarly debate in the West. The term I refer to here is sovremennost, a kind of modernity promoted by Russians/Soviets during the Soviet Union. This kind of Soviet modernity referred to being educated, loyal to the Soviet state and ideals, gender equality, and actively fighting against traditionalism in terms of life-cycle events, clothing, and lifestyle. I will come to this point in a more detailed manner in a moment. First, I will describe how the Soviet understanding of sovremennost was achieved in detail.

The most important factor to the liberation from the traditional power structures of patronage and kinship was building a strong welfare system on which citizens could rely to pursue independent lives. This does not mean that the welfare system fully replaces the traditional loyalties and status system within kinship and patronage systems. The major achievements of welfare policies during early Soviet rule was the empowerment of women, both in the family and in society, through introducing family and child welfare policies, together with educational training and other programs. Especially in Central Asia, the largest advancements were made by unveiling women, educating them, and training them to enter the labor market. These policies were meant to constitute a decisive break with the old system of family relations and to create a “Soviet family.” However, as Kandiyoti argues, emancipatory movements do not always positively affect the rights of women in various Muslim societies.

The two parallel developments of urbanization and industrialization, which were implemented throughout the Soviet Union, affected the family patterns and lifestyles of most Soviet citizens. These processes were coupled with the simultaneous development of infrastructure—roads, gas pipelines, as well
as *elektrifikatsiya vsej strany*\textsuperscript{11} (electrification of the whole country) that reached remote rural areas. Another major policy implemented within the framework of social welfare system was the Soviet social security system (*gosudarstvennoe sotsial'noe strakhovanie*). Trade unions provided benefits for those who were in the labor force, including working pensioners and those temporarily disabled by illness or forced to pause because of pregnancy and maternity. They also supported those who were disabled due to work injuries. Membership in trade unions was compulsory, and the membership fee was 1 percent of salary. Trade unions provided paid sick leave, annual visits to sanatoriums, and cultural and social organizations for leisure time. Besides, trade unions had funds for holidays, organized holiday and travels (*putyovki*), children’s summer camps, various kinds of awards, and often assigned housing.\textsuperscript{12}

The large-scale reforms introduced by the Soviet government, particularly the programs for the empowerment of women, launched a significant change in gender relations and the earliest understanding of gender equality in Uzbekistan.\textsuperscript{13} This of course does not mean that the Soviet efforts to achieve gender equality were successful, but it is important to note that what the Soviets did, at least, was to take most women out of their homes, unveil them from *parandji*, educate them, and gave them jobs. The process was difficult, prolonged, and not without victims. These efforts started to produce results only after World War II and developed positively in the opinion of women who enjoyed the freedom of working and learning only in the 1950s and 1960s. Those women who were born in the early 1950s were encouraged to continue their education, and a considerable number earned advanced degrees. Women who lived in small villages could travel to the larger towns and capital cities throughout the Soviet Union to study in the higher education system. One of my older respondents was born in a very small village of Turkmenistan and her classmates were also from very small rural places in Uzbekistan; together they enrolled in the various institutes in the capital city of Tashkent. After graduation, the state system of assigning jobs to new graduates dispersed them according to the Soviet system of state quotas (*raspredelenie*) all over the Soviet Union, which further interfered with traditional family structures and values in Central Asia. The above change was a great leap from *parandji* to female students not only in Uzbekistan but also for the whole Central Asia.

After seventy years of women’s liberation under the Soviet regime, the post-Soviet period of independent Uzbekistan was seen by many women as a step backward. During my fieldwork and later I heard many comparisons such as

The Soviets took us out from Middle ages (*kamenniy vek* or “stone age”) where we drove on donkey carriages and could not leave the four walls of dark houses
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built from mud. The Soviets unveiled us and took us out to schools, gave us cars, roads, houses with lights and heating, provided with secure jobs and holidays. And now we are back in Middle Age to our donkey carriages, put the scarves on and sit at dark and cold homes hungry.

This step backward, in the women’s view, has direct implications for changing gender roles, and gender perception within local communities. One would expect that this turn backward (arqaga qaytdik) would automatically lead to a return to patriarchal rule and male domination in the everyday lives of women. It is obviously more complicated than that. When one asks about who is now a decision-maker and whether men are now the only decision-makers, the answers would not be a simple “yes.” Post-Soviet economic hardships have been felt by both women and men. As to the authority and decision-making power, I was told that “now money decides who is the boss and what needs to be done.” This, in a way, implies equal chances for both men and women to become a decision-maker or to at least economically participate on equal terms not only within the private sphere of family life but also publicly. These opportunities or hardships forced and/or provided incentives to become more innovative economically and to take the initiative to earn money.14

Discursively, one can also trace two strands of comparisons of Soviet modernity to post-Soviet traditionalism within the local critique of the former from the point of view of the latter. The comments addressed mainly to female entrepreneurs or generally “modern” young or older women that range from softly negative “too modern and not Uzbek” (dim sovremenniy, ozbekchamas), “too russified” (orislaship getgan), “wearing too short” (kap kalta giyadi), “wearing male trousers” (ishtanda yuradi), “cut hair” (sochi kesik), “self-autonomous” (ozi bilan ozi), “in the streets” (kochada), “too self-confident” (ozinnan getgan), to derogative pul jillisi (money mad), oysiz elsiz (without home without motherland), bashsiz (without head) to many others.

There is a paradox within this local critique of the modernity, mainly addressed to women. I heard no such comments addressed to men who wear, for instance, short trousers that are not always seen positively by elderly persons. On the one hand, people criticize those who became “too modern” or “too russified”; on the other hand, they enthusiastically welcome higher education, which is described as a good quality for both men and women such as oqigan (educated) in any context if it is about evaluating a person, choosing a partner, or within status system. The simple example is when a family chooses an oqigan (educated) bride in order to save money on her future education and after marriage not letting her out of the house to work or investing in the education of the young uneducated bride and after graduation keeping her busy at home. One hears even that this paradox is
recognized by women themselves, who ask, “Why did they let me study and then don’t let me work?”

These perceived negative attributes of modernity are linked to the culture of Russians (russlashgan/russianized), who are now seen as foreign and alien. On the other hand, this modernity is successfully accommodated by both people who are critical of this modernity and those who actively enjoy it (for instance, the women presented here). One would expect that the younger generation and simply those who enjoy the benefits of modernity (in this case modern clothing, nontraditional way of life, gender equality), would bring up their children based on that modernity in terms of clothing, gender roles, and lifestyle. Paradoxically, however, these “modern” parents try hard to achieve a lifestyle for their children that is contrary to their living principles, namely, making their children obey traditional rules, value systems, to adopt conservative views on the life choice (including the choice of life partner and profession) as well as living up to other important divisions such as status system, gender roles.

Below, I will briefly discuss the literature that looks into economic development and gender in the region. Women entrepreneurship is not a novel development in Uzbekistan or Central Asia in general. However, there is not much written on female entrepreneurship in Central Asia, although this field is dominated by women, not men. There is by now a large collection of studies on the feminization of labor in Central Asia and around the world.15 Uzbek female entrepreneurs are probably the most adept at navigating between modernity and tradition, able to gain from both sides of contradictory value systems. The parallel existence and occasional interaction between the two systems (tradition and modernity) in the context of Muslim societies has been discussed in some insightful studies focusing on women in Central Asia.16 Akiner makes a similar argument, namely that women navigate between modernity and tradition in Uzbekistan.17 Fathi writes about religious teachers and healers in Uzbekistan and presents otinoyas and their role in religious education of women in Uzbekistan.18 Werner looked into small-scale trade in rural Kazakhstan and skillfully shows the change in the role and status of women traders who became breadwinners as a result of their economic activities, including travel.19 Kandiyoti traces the “feminization of unskilled agricultural labor” in Uzbekistan.20 There are also a few works on the participation of rural women and changing gender roles in the agricultural labor.21

The predominance of women in the marketplace was not new in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, although the number of women involved in trade and other economic activities drastically increased when teachers and other educated women had to leave their state jobs to earn “real money.” Peshkova cites an otinchcha (female religious educator) in the Fergana Valley who stated that
many of the religious educators (otichalar) “turned religious knowledge into business” by accepting payment for their participation in religious events, either cash or material objects. 

Female entrepreneurship in Uzbekistan can be traced back to the late Soviet period. Throughout the Soviet era, the state strictly prohibited informal economic activities such as small-scale trade. Therefore, these activities were viewed negatively, and small-scale traders were described as “speculators” (spekulyant), a term with shady connotations. In the late Soviet period, during perestroika, it became very popular to go to Poland and bring back items to sell; that is when the spekulyant transformed into biznesmen. The former label was used more for women, while biznesmen was initially reserved for men. Not until the post-Soviet era were both men and women described as biznesmen. This positive change in the meaning of the word “entrepreneurship from Soviet to post-Soviet times most benefitted people involved in informal economic activities, particularly women.

Until now, there have been few works that systematically studied the agency of women in Central Asia, and the available literature significantly underestimates the agency and role of women in marriage, life-cycle events, family economics, family planning, and other activities within kinship networks and local communities such as neighborhoods and mahallas. However, it is difficult to understand the situation of women. One should contextualize those barriers, opportunity systems, and agency when analyzing the position of women in Uzbekistan. The important question here is to ask what are the benefits and disadvantages of changing gender roles in the late post-Soviet times, where more and more women take up leading roles in the economic lives of families? The pros mentioned by most of the female respondents are improved social lives, independence either from parents or from husbands’ families, more agency, and space to make decisions. The disadvantages are less and less time for children, time pressure (combining work with household duties), difficulties in family relationships, and social pressures.

This can also be seen from both case studies I presented in this chapter. Both women benefit from their ever-increasing social networks, gaining social contacts that can be used for benefit and happiness. More contacts also mean more social events also requiring social exchanges that at times can become a real burden. For both women, it was very important to gain financial independence from their parents. Now the parents no longer completely control the freedom of their entrepreneur–daughters since these parents benefit from her economic activities. Financial independence from an absent husband and his respectable family is also important in order to justify frequent absences and delegating housework and childcare to the husband, as in the case of Gozal. The social pressure of the communities and neighbor-
hoods where female entrepreneurs reside is not to be underestimated, since elderly and unemployed neighbors continuously monitor and discuss their movements, social contacts, clothing, and absence from home. Both women were more or less successful in avoiding those constraints and continue with their activities, even gaining a degree of respect and status within their social networks, community, and extended family.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter explores the lives of two female entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan. I showed that gender changes and gender roles are undergoing great transformation. I argued that economic hardships, globalization, and increased mobility have created challenges for female members of Muslim-dominated, post-Soviet societies; but they have also created opportunities to innovate and negotiate between modernity and tradition. In the two examples from Uzbekistan, I traced gender change from Soviet to post-Soviet periods using the example of female entrepreneurship to show the complexities of this process. I argued that it is not as black-and-white as it is often depicted by women themselves who remember the “good old times” of the Soviet era as a time of liberation and the golden age of “real communism” (at least by those who studied and worked at the time), and the post-Soviet years as the time with black colors described in terms of “turning backward.”

There have been two important shifts involving gender relations and the situation of women in Central Asia. During Soviet rule, the shift was marked with the unveiling and education of women. Women described the post-Soviet period in terms of retraditionalization or turning backward. This perception of reversing modernization is an important remark to be analyzed critically. In my opinion, the shift in the post-Soviet period was marked by the creation of another image of women, this time as fighters and family leaders surviving despite economic difficulties. Although it sounds idealistic and biased, this image is recognized by men and promoted by women in many different contexts of their daily lives.

Economic challenges and the failed state social security system granted more power to traditional local authorities and institutions, which also affected gender roles and the general situation of women in Uzbekistan. Considering the massive out-migration from Uzbekistan, which left behind mainly the younger and older generations, there is a particular sociological and demographic change that also took place in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where a large number of the working-age population moved to Russia, leaving their children in the care of their own parents.23
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Long-distance relationships have become the new normal, where family matters, finances, divorces, deals, parent-children communication, virtual participation in the life-cycle events, organization of family events from distance, building houses, selling property, family disputes, and more are conducted via long-distance communication. These novel conditions complicate simplistic views on gender roles, gender change, and the position of women in transitional societies. The latter developments, in terms of accelerated mobility, out-migration, a multinational economy, and transnational social relations have been the turning point in the transformation of gender roles and related systems such as religion and family structures.

Besides these changes, there have been also an important continuity of empowering women in Muslim Soviet Central Asia from the Soviet period to the present day. This process of empowerment during the Soviet era is qualitatively different from today’s process of women’s increasing prominence in social and economic lives. From the feminization of labor to the feminization of entrepreneurship in Central Asia is an important economic achievement from the gender perspective, and it is a crucial development that has the potential to further reconsider gender roles and the crystallization of new images of women in Central Asia.

While there is a large body of literature on the feminization of labor in general, little has been done on female entrepreneurship, particularly female entrepreneurship in Central Asia. This gap still needs to be filled with qualitative studies and basic ethnographic research. The topics that could cover this field would be changing family structures, geographies of mobile female entrepreneurs, social norms and religion, economic analysis of female economic activities, and their contribution to the local economies of households, childcare, and generations, among many others.

NOTES

1. Interviews with a group of women entrepreneurs from Tashauz, Turkmenistan, were conducted in Urgench, Uzbekistan, in 2008 and 2012.

2. In the Uzbek context, the market economy exists in parallel to the command economy and has its own functioning principles that do not necessarily follow traditional neoliberal principles.


5. It is difficult to find good skin-care products and cosmetics. Local markets do not stock them; bazaars leave them exposed to sunlight, and many stores sell products
past their sell-by date. People also suspect that the products coming from China are cheap and counterfeit.


7. For more on Uzbek marriage customs, see Rano Turaeva, Migration and Identity: The Uzbek Experience (New York: Routledge, 2016).


9. Literacy rates rose from 3 percent to 99 percent in a short period of time.


11. The phrase is taken from a famous Soviet poster. I remember seeing it throughout Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

12. In order to obtain an accommodation, one had to queue for it. The waiting period could take from a few years to many. Good connections in the upper level of state government could help to a person to move up in the queue, which just made the wait longer for ordinary people.


19. Werner, “Feminizing the New Silk Road.”


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Acronyms

ANF—Al-Nusra Front
BOMCA—Border Management in Central Asia
CIS—Commonwealth of Independent States
CPSU—Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSTO—Collective Security Treaty Organization
FMS [Federal’naya migratsionnaya sluzhba]—Federal Migration Service
(Russian Federation)
GKNB—National Security Service of Kyrgyzstan
GKRCr—State Radio Frequency Committee
HT—Hizb ut-Tahrir
IJU—Islamic Jihad Union
IMU—Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
ISESCO—Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
ISIS—Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
JMWA—Jaysh Muhajireen Wal Ansar
KIB—I mam al-Bukhoriy Brigade
MBU—Muslim Board of Uzbekistan
MTS—Mobile Telecom Systems
NTD—National Territorial Delimitation
NWFP—North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan
OCCRP—Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
OSCE—Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SADUM—Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan
SCO—Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SNB [Milliy Xavfsizlik Xizmati, MXX]—National Security Service of Uzbekistan
UN—United Nations
Acronyms

UNESCO—United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US—United States
USSR—Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UzASI—Uzbek Agency of Communications and Information
VEO—Violent Extremist Organization
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