This volume explores the changing place of Islam in contemporary Central Asia, understanding religion as a "societal shaper" – a roadmap for navigating quickly evolving social and cultural values. Islam can take on multiple colors and identities, from a purely transcendental faith in God to a cauldron of ideological ferment for political ideology, via diverse culture-, community-, and history-based phenomena. The volume discusses what it means to be a Muslim in today’s Central Asia by looking at both historical and sociological features, investigates the relationship between Islam, politics and the state, the changing role of Islam in terms of societal values, and the issue of female attire as a public debate.


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Being Muslim in Central Asia
Practices, Politics, and Identities

Marlene Laruelle, edited

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**Introduction**

Marlene Laruelle

This edited volume results from the Central Eurasia–Religion in International Affairs (CERIA) Initiative, hosted at The George Washington University’s Central Asia Program. The CERIA Initiative aims to promote state-of-the-art research on religion in contemporary Central Asia, understanding religion as a “societal shaper” – a roadmap for navigating quickly changing social and cultural values. Religion is not a given but a construct that appears alongside other aspects of life. It can thus take on multiple colors and identities, from a purely transcendental faith in God to a cauldron of ideological ferment for political ideology, via diverse culture-, community-, and history-based phenomena that help people situate themselves in the world and define what makes sense for them.

Since the end of the 1990s, with the Taliban’s seizure of power in Afghanistan, and even more so since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror,” the policy narrative on the role of Islam in Central Asia has been shaped by a sense of danger, with analysis of religion often seen as an offshoot of security studies. Paradoxically, the Western policy community and the Central Asian regimes share similar misperceptions of Islam. They tend, though to differing extents, to conflate Islamic practices, political Islam, and paths to violence, providing security-oriented explanations of local political and social changes. The new, post-Soviet expressions of religiosity are over-interpreted as signaling “risks of radicalization.” With every emergence of a new Islamist movement, from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan at the turn of the 21st century to al-Qaeda in the 2000s and the Islamic State in the 2010s, the global policy community has expressed concerns about the “radicalization” of Islam in Central Asia. These skewed interpretations have damaged the image of Islam, in general, and its appropriate place in the societies of Central Asia. There is, for instance, a striking contrast between the positive image of Buddhism in the revival of political activism in Tibet, thanks in large part to the media visibility of the Dalai Lama, and similar trends among Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which all tend to be always viewed negatively because Uyghur claims are associated with an Islamic identity.

However, the so-called “re-Islamization” of Central Asian societies since the collapse of the USSR has very little to do with anything political. It is, above all, an apolitical re-traditionalization marked by calls for more conservative mores and stricter gender segregation; and demands for observance of (some) Islamic rites by younger generations. This re-traditionalization aims to reconsolidate the social fabric at a
time of massive upheaval and to construct new individual identities in harmony with the times but respectful of what is understood as national belonging. The local traditions of submission to the authorities, of respect for long-standing hierarchies, of assimilating religion into the community, whether national or local, are now competing with imported models in which Islam is lived as a more universal religion, less subordinated to the national or local, more confrontational and more individualist. Other, albeit smaller, trends are also visible: in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, some of the younger generations call for a kind of Islamo-nationalist ideology; globalized networks of believers work with foreign proselytizing groups such as the Tablighi Jama’at to reach out to a new community of believers; merchant groups and small entrepreneurs instrumentalize Islam to legitimize their economic success and to develop informal networks of solidarity through Islamic charities. Growing segments of the Kyrgyz and Tajik populations invoke Islam, sometimes Shari’a, to demand more social justice, less corruption, and “compensation” from states failing to deliver basic public services and security.

The field of studying Islam—the study of other religions, i.e. Christianity, often focuses on conversion and proselytizing—has evolved dramatically since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, Western Sovietologists working on religion, heirs of Alexandre Bennigsen (1913–1988), found themselves challenged by scholars from Middle Eastern studies, who claimed that their knowledge of Islamic societies provided a better calibrated tool to approach the new Central Asia. Nonetheless, this new school faced difficulties in integrating the Soviet legacy and longer historical legacies of the Central Asian region in its analytical toolbox and indirectly reinforced the misreading that Central Asia was on the path to becoming a second Afghanistan or Pakistan. In the 2000s, a new generation of scholars emerged, with a more intimate knowledge of the Central Asian region—often specializing in only one country—and of local languages. This new generation combined its area expertise with ongoing theoretical discussions in the social sciences and humanities with greater comparative skills than before. Academic disciplines such as cultural anthropology have deepened our knowledge of Islam to the micro-level of community, family, and gender relations, offering a more complex picture in which religion is one among many elements of everyday life impacted by macro-level political and socioeconomic changes.

Thanks to this new generation of scholars, our understanding of Islam and what it means in contemporary Central Asia has dramatically evolved and increased in complexity. The question of the “revival” of Islam has been transformed by a better understanding of the intricacies of Muslim practices during Soviet times and the revelation of Islamic plural debates and theological conflicts inside the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia (SADUM). It also evolved by ending the simplistic division between “foreign
influences” coming from abroad and domestic situations on the ground: Central Asian Islam is today a largely globalized phenomenon, with multilayered interactions that blur the boundaries between “home” and “abroad” and create transnational identities in tune with the rest of the Islamic Ummah. In terms of external influences, Turkey’s preeminence in the early 1990s has been eclipsed by the Gulf countries, particularly the Emirates and even Dubai, which are seen as the embodiment of a successful Muslim modernity, and by proselytizing groups such as Tablighi Jama’at coming from the South Asia subcontinent. Like any community, Central Asian Muslims are shaped by the multiple, contradictory definitions of what is “their own,” national and traditional, and what is “other,” foreign and new, especially in relation to everything that can be labelled as “Arab.”

One driver for new research has been to conceptualize that the central issue is not how external observers typologize the way Central Asians express their “Muslimness,” but the fact that the fight to define the “right Islam” is a struggle going on inside the Muslim communities themselves. Some call for a Soviet-style Islam that would keep the public space secular and confine Islam to being merely one part of national traditions and identities; others call for Islam to be an individual practice carried out by each citizen according to their own conscience. Still others hope for a more normative Islam that prescribes individual manners and collective practices. Competing narratives, references and practices have therefore become the new normal for Central Asian societies. Some defend the Hanafi school against “intrusions” of Hanbali rituals; others debate the content of Salafism, Wahhabism, Deobandism, so-called radical Islam or unaffiliated Internet preachers; others discuss the Islamic legitimacy of pilgrims to local shrines and traditional medicine. The spectrum of Islamic practice is broad, stretching from Muslim “born-agains” to private entrepreneurs who capitalize on their “Muslimness” to justify their economic success in the name of an Islamic theology of prosperity. Across the region as a whole, several elements signal the structuring of Islam as a central reference for individual and collective identities: calls for teaching religion in the school system, rapid increases in the number of people fasting during Ramadan, and a rise in the number of people participating in zakat – giving alms to the poor and needy. References to Shari’a as religious orthodoxy, largely absent from Central Asian traditions, have become visible in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Central Asian Islamic communities are now deeply plural.

In post-Soviet Central Asia, the relationship between Islam and the state has often had a schizophrenic character: Islam has been glorified as a religion of the nation, 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 monitored, sermons in the mosques are increasingly controlled, religious education is highly restricted, and interactions with the rest of the Ummah are looked upon with suspicion. However,
the interaction between state and society emerges as much more complex than the black-and-white narrative of advocacy groups criticizing the lack of religious freedom in the region and the repressive practices of the state structures toward religion. First, a large segment of Central Asian societies supports the securitization approach to Islam that is advanced by the state, a trend reinforced by the scary story of young people “lost” to jihad in Syria. Second, the Spiritual Boards and Council for Religious Affairs play an ambiguous role in “normalizing” what to accept and what to reject in Islamic practices and discourses. Third, some political elites, especially economic elites, are attracted by a new Islamic identity inspired by Dubai, and security service officers are often very respectful of religious leaders and of their authority. All these trends confirm, if such confirmation is needed, that the state secularism inherited from the Soviet regime is progressively eroding in the face of multiple ways to display “Muslimness.” As everywhere in the world, social tensions within Muslim communities and in their interaction with non-Muslims are dominated by debates about how women dress, because the topic embodies issues of purity, morality, self-respect, and the call for a more control over a rapidly evolving society.

In the first part of the volume, we discuss what it means to be a Muslim in today’s Central Asia by looking at both historical and sociological features. In Chapter 1, Galina Yemelianova argues that, throughout history, Central Asians developed a particular form of Islam that presented a productive and fluid synergy between Islam per se, their tribal legal and customary norms, and Tengrian and Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. It is characterized by a high level of doctrinal and functional adaptability to shifting political and cultural environments, the prevalence of Sufism (mystical Islam), and oral, rather than book-based, Islamic tradition. A common Eurasian space and lengthy shared political history of Central Asians and other peoples of Muslim Eurasia account for considerable similarities in their Islamic trajectories.

In Chapter 2, Barbara Junisbai, Azamat Junisbai, and Baurzhan Zhussupov investigate the rising religiosity and orthodoxy among Central Asian Muslims, drawing on two waves of public opinion surveys conducted in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2007 and 2012. They confirm that a religious revival is underway; however, cross-national variations remain important: religious practice, as measured by daily prayer and weekly mosque attendance, is up in Kyrgyzstan, but has fallen in Kazakhstan. They attribute these differences to political context, both in terms of cross-national political variation and regional differences within each country. In Chapter 3, Yaacov Ro’i and Alon Wainer focus on Uzbekistan and Uzbek identity and its relationship to Islam by looking at some 200 interviews with Uzbek students. While almost everyone considers himself or herself a Muslim, the vast majority perceive themselves, above all, as citizens of Uzbekistan. Moreover, their Islam is not reflected primarily in Islamic practice but rather in a somewhat nebulous Islamic traditionalism. In the international arena,
young Uzbeks tend to prefer Muslim over non-Muslim peoples and communities, but not necessarily as destinations for labor migration.

The second part of the volume is devoted to Islam, politics and the state. Tim Epkenhans begins by analyzing the evolution of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the only Islamic party recognized in Central Asia (until it was banned in 2015, when the Tajik authorities abandoned the principles of the 1997 General Peace Accord, which had ended the country’s civil war). Since then, the IRPT has distinguished itself as a credible oppositional political party committed to democratic principles and with an almost imperceptible religious agenda. By shifting the IRPT’s attention to issues of democratization and socioeconomic development, its chairman, Muhiddin Kabirī, opened the IRPT to a younger electorate, although continuous defamation campaigns and government persecution have worn down the IRPT’s activists and its electorate.

Chapter 5, by Aurélie Biard, delves into the political uses of Islam in the Kyrgyzstani Fergana Valley, through case studies of the main Kyrgyzstani Uzbek theologians based in the city of Karu-Suu, who appear to be core actors in re-Islamization and propagators of Saudi-style Salafi Islam. She argues that religious debates and postures concerning the relationship to secular power are inscribed in patronage and personal clientelist networks, as well as local power struggles. She states that we are now witnessing the reactivation of a religious utopia that challenges the existing political and financial order through local rhetoric about establishing an idealized caliphate, conveying a message not only of social justice but also of economic transparency and free trade.

In Chapter 6, Alexander Wolters examines another way in which the Central Asian states have instrumentalized Islam—namely, Islamic finance. Rather a recent phenomenon in the region, it was only with the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2007 that the cooperation between the states and the Islamic Development Bank resulted in domestic initiatives to establish forms of Islamic banking. Wolters sees a correlation between the subsequent development of such initiatives and the unfolding political crises. Specifically, the Central Asian states were eager to connect to available streams of Islamic investment capital in the early stages of the financial crisis, but their commitment to further adapt declined when they entered periods of political crisis that forced them to reorder their reform priorities.

The third part of the volume explores the changing role of Islam in terms of societal and cultural values. Wendell Schwab looks at Asyl Arna, the most popular Islamic television channel and dominant Islamic media company in Kazakhstan. He examines how images on the social media pages of Asyl Arna create
a way of understanding and engaging in contemporary Islamic life. The visual culture of Asyl Arna’s
social media promotes Islam as an achievable part of a middle-class lifestyle that can provide simple rules
for a pious, economically successful life and a connection to the holy life through the Qur’an. Manja
Stephan-Emmrich follows this search by investigating Muslim self-fashioning, migration, and
(be-)longing in the Tajik–Dubai business. She analyzes how young, well-educated, and multilingual
Tajiks involved in Dubai’s various business fields create, shape, and draw on a sense of cosmopolitanism
to convert their uncertain status as “Tajik migrants” into that of economically autonomous “Muslim
businessmen.” Pointing to the mutual conditionality of longing and belonging in migrant
cosmopolitanism, she offers a nuanced picture of everyday life in Dubai that goes beyond the
“spectacularity” of the city, challenging the prevailing representation of Tajik Muslims’ engagement in
transnational Islam as a security matter only. And in Chapter 9, Rano Turaeva explores the space of
informal economies, focusing on transnational entrepreneurs between Central Asia and Russia. These
male and female entrepreneurs live mobile economic lives in which Islam plays a central role in
regulating informal economies. Islamic belonging has progressively become a stronger marker of identity
than ethnicity among Central Asian migrants in Russia, and mosque communities have grown in influence as places to socialize.

The last section of the volume investigates female attire as a public debate. Emil Nasritdinov and Nurgul
Esenamanova explore how the growing community of practicing Muslims asserts the right to be in the
city, live according to its religious ideals, and create Islamic urban spaces. Such claims do not remain
uncontested and, because religious identity has a strong visual manifestation, religious claims – especially
female attire – become the subject of strong public debate. This contestation overlaps with socially
constructed gender hierarchies—religious/secular claims over the urban space turn into men’s claims over
women, with both sides (religious and secular) claiming to know what women should wear.

Shahnoza Nozimova pursues the discussion by studying how Islamic veiling has occupied center stage in
the public debate in Tajikistan. State officials and institutions view it as alien, while proponents argue that
it is a religious obligation to be fulfilled by every pious woman, especially when outside of her home. She
demonstrates that, as women experience increased pressure to seek employment outside of the home,
there appears to be a need to construct new, socially acceptable mechanisms to conform to patriarchy and
to protect female purity and honor: hijab and (pious) Islamic identity can potentially offer both. Still
analyzing Tajikistan, Marintha Miles explores why women adopt hijab and other conservative head
coverings as they seek identity and belonging in an evolving society, in the face of an incumbent regime
that views the veiled Muslim woman as a threat to national identity.
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