Research Paper

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# The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics

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# Summary

Central Asia is generally considered to have a widespread and increasing problem with 'Muslim radicalization' and yet there is little or no evidence of significant levels of Islamic extremism and political violence in the region. This erroneous framing of Islam, particularly political Islam, by security analysts of Central Asia distorts the issue in important ways. This paper identifies six widely-held misconceptions as part of a myth of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization in Central Asia. Using survey data and examples from fieldwork, it shows that 'radicalization' of this kind is not borne out by the evidence. It argues that:

- *There is an international security discourse of Post-Soviet Muslim radicalization in Central Asia*. The accounts of many international security analysts, while explicitly critical of the repression of moderate Islam by Central Asian governments, assume that isolated incidences of violent extremism are part of a process of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization. As part of this myth, such violence is assumed to be related to non-violent forms of political Islam and societal trends towards greater public expression of piety.

- *There is little evidence to support the idea of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization*. In particular, the threat of violent extremism is both of a lower magnitude than that identified in the myth and different in form. It is isolated, localized and inhibited by secularization as much as it is driven by radicalization.

- *The myth of radicalization is important as it is politically influential*. It supplies a common but fallacious set of reference points. It is these reference points which may provide the basis for common threat perceptions, collaboration in counter-radicalization initiatives and international security assistance in the region. In that the myth acts as a legitimating device for the militant secularism of weak regimes, it may be a greater problem than violent extremism itself.

## Introduction[1]

Analysts of political Islam in the West are frequently caught between the accusation of 'Islamophobia' and the risk of denying the reality of violence committed 'in the name of Allah'. In this paper, we take a step back from this unhelpful framing to consider the validity of underlying claims made about the threat of political Islam in Central Asia. The paper considers the validity of claims commonly made about the impact of Islamic revival and 'radicalization' on security in post-Soviet Central Asia, and argues that claims about general Muslim radicalization constitute a myth which is fostered by security analysts and commentators with little basis in fact.[2] It takes issue with the attempt to link particular examples of violent extremism with non-violent political Islam as part of a trend of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization.[3] It does so by identifying and interrogating six claims about radicalization which are taken as axiomatic in the media and policy communities of Western and Eastern states. These claims are widely shared across national and international security discourse about Central Asian Islam.

These claims are that:

- There is a post-Soviet Islamic revival;
- To Islamicize is to radicalize;
- Authoritarianism and poverty cause radicalization;
- Underground Muslim groups are radical;
- Radical Muslim groups are globally networked; and
- Political Islam opposes the secular state.

This paper argues that a relatively small number of Muslim individuals and groups committing violent acts in Central Asia in the name of Islam do not constitute a broader trend, nor does it establish a causal relationship. Moreover, unjustified generalizations emanating from this small number of incidents distract attention from, on the one hand, the general story of the survival and mutation of Soviet-era secularism and, on the other, a better understanding of the nature of violent extremism, rare and exceptional though it is. In particular, the complex relationship between secularism, Islam and the state must be better understood in order to achieve a plausible

1 Some of the research and writing for this paper was conducted by John Heathershaw as part of the Economic and Social Research Council project (ES/J013056/1), Rising Powers and Conflict Management in Central Asia, and by David Montgomery as part of an International Research and Exchanges Board, Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program Fellowship. Research assistance was provided by Catherine Owen, Elima Karalaeva and Farhod Yuldashev. Comments on earlier drafts were generously offered by Adeeb Khalid, Johan Rasanayagam and David Lewis.

2 The study of religion and security presents a terminological conundrum. 'Radicalism', 'militancy' and 'jihadism' are often used casually and without definition. Here we use the problematic terms 'Islamicization', 'radicalization' and associated ones in so far as they are present in practical discourse of Western and Central Asian security professionals. 'Islamicization' is therefore denoted as the general process leading towards greater public piety in a person or society. Religious 'radicalization' is defined as the general process of moving from relative apathy to political mobilization against secular government and society.

3 The authors use the terms 'political Islam', 'violent extremism' and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) as their own categories of analysis. Political Islam here denotes all political expressions of Islam from state clerical bodies (Muftiates, committees of religious affairs) to political movements that are non-Islamist, to Islamist groups. Any of these may be violent or non-violent. Where groups hold political views that are irreconcilable with the modern state, in principle, and practise violence to achieve their ends, they are denoted 'violent extremist'.

understanding of political Islam in Central Asia. In fact, secularism is a powerful force in the post-Soviet Muslim world that has multiple and contradictory effects. It limits radicalism but also generates overblown fears about Islam. The secularism of post-Soviet societies serves as a foil for a small number of militant groups but also reduces the appeal of those groups to wider society.

The paper therefore challenges the portrayal of Islam and political Islam (including 'Islamicization' and 'radicalization') in Central Asia in secular security discourse and Western and Central Asian policy analysis. These contentious terms are used and defined here as they are used and defined in the secular security discourses on the region so as to explore the discourses within their own terms. By 'discourses' we refer to both generic narratives about Islam in the Central Asian republics that appear in analysis (of radicalization, insurgency and protest) and particular accounts of events (such as the putsch in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and the violence in Rasht, Tajikistan, in 2010–11).

To consider the veracity of specific claims about the scale of violent extremism or who is responsible for a particular incident requires detailed case-by-case studies beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, it considers the claims made about the nature of 'radicalization' in Central Asia on the basis of these events, i.e. what a given event reveals, what trends are inferred, what general aspects are assumed. We establish these claims via a qualitative analysis of all references to 'Islam', 'radicalization' and associated terms in all International Crisis Group (ICG) reports on Central Asia across the five-year period 2009-13.[4]

The paper demonstrates that each of the six claims is present to some degree in the ICG's discourse about Islam in Central Asia. Where possible within the confines of a short paper, we show that these claims are also found in the wider international security discourse and political debate within the region. We then assess each claim in terms of how far it is borne out by the experience of Muslim social and political life in Central Asia as observed in recent academic research by our colleagues and ourselves. We draw on findings from the author's fieldwork and an original survey in Kyrgyzstan[5] as well as recent academic work by others on Islam in Central Asia. The paper demonstrates that while the six claims are made consistently in secular security discourse (with one exception) they are not justified in practice. Therefore the idea that there is a general phenomenon of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization in Central Asia is best regarded as a myth. The few radical groups that exist and violent events that occur are better understood on a case-by case basis and not as part of a supposed general trend of radicalization. But myths are not incidental: they have consequences for myth-makers and mythologized alike.

4 The International Crisis Group was chosen as the most prominent and respected global think-tank working on international and Central Asian affairs. It was selected, according to recognized selection criteria for an exemplary single case study, on the basis that it is most unlikely to offer misrepresentative analysis. In short, ICG, as a well-resourced, long-standing and respected organization is far less likely to offer misrepresentative analysis than a weaker and less recognized institution. If the myth is found in ICG writing, it follows that it is even more likely to be found elsewhere. Examples from other publications are included for illustrative purposes to demonstrate that the myth is widely held, and often expressed in cruder terns.

5 Unless otherwise indicated, survey data used in this paper come from a 2005 survey on religious and cultural practice conducted by Montgomery in Osh and Naryn Oblasts of Kyrgyzstan. Osh Oblast is generally characterized as religious and with an Uzbek influence, whereas Naryn Oblast is generally referred to as the most traditionally Kyrgyz region of the country. The survey contained over 180 questions and elicited 829 complete responses. Over 97 per cent of the 829 respondents self-identified as Muslims, and for the purposes of this paper the total values are analysed along ethnic as well as regional lines, where 'North' implies Naryn Oblast and 'South' implies Osh Oblast. The North–South distinction is kept because it is the common way of referring to the differences within the country. See David W. Montgomery, *The Transmission of Religious and Cultural Knowledge and Potentiality in Practice: An Anthropology of Social Navigation in the Kyrgyz Republic* (Religious Studies, Boston University, 2007).

## Claim 1: The post-Soviet Islamic revival

Many social scientists of the 20th century were convinced that religion was diminishing as a social force across the world as modernization and secularization gradually spread.[6] Therefore, it made sense to see the apparent upsurge in political Islam at the opening up of the Soviet Union in the late-1980s as exemplary of a reawakening and part of the Muslim world's putative bucking of this Western trend. Indeed, political parties such as the all-Union Islamic Revival Party, formed in Moscow in 1987, look like prima facie evidence of this rebirth. Reflecting this view, the ICG has argued that 'many have responded to 70 years of atheism by embracing religion. [For example], in reaction to the collapse of the Soviet state and its communist ideology, women have turned increasingly to Islam as an easily accessible, socially approved route for self-identification.'[7] Analysts of political Islam have linked the vast increase in the number of mosques across the region, the formation of movements such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the outbreaks of armed conflicts involving apparently Islamist movements in Tajikistan and Chechnya since the break-up of the Soviet Union as evidence that *perestroika* (restructuring) has spawned the resurgence of Islam. In short, it is argued that there is a post-Soviet Islamic revival demonstrated by the gradual 'Islamicization' of Central Asia – understood as an increase in both personal piety and public displays of Islam.

The level of Islamic activity by the predominantly Muslim Central Asian population has certainly shown signs of increase since 1991 owing to increased opportunities for the expression of faith after the end of the powerful and partially atheistic Soviet state. Such indicators include the oft-mentioned building of new mosques, greater mosque attendance, the rise of Islamic study groups and the increase in Islamic-style dress. Our survey confirmed that these observable aspects are reflected in increasing observance of the pillars of Islam. For example, 43 per cent of respondents claimed to pray more than they did prior to independence.[8] It is typical to assume that these social changes are laden with significant political implications. National governments in Central Asia frequently articulate these fears.

Yet the idea of revival is misleading for it suggests that Islam was previously dead or at least passive as a social force. In fact, Islam never went away during the Soviet era and was already in resurgence in the late Soviet period. Indeed, the reshaping of Islam in the Soviet Union's constituent republics after the Second World War remains a far more valid reference point for contemporary religious life in the region than any process of 'returning' to the past.[9] The Soviet system imposed a number of restrictions on religious practice, altered forms of religious learning and increasingly privatized

6 The original statement of the secularization thesis is now considered faulty, especially in the light of Berger's 1999 recantation of his foundational formulation of the thesis thirty years earlier – see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Anchor Books, 1967); Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1999). Not all agreed with Berger's reassessment of his secularization theory. See Steve Bruce, 'The Curious Case of the Unnecessary Recantation: Berger and Secularization', in Paul Heelas, David Martin and Linda Woodhead (eds), *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, pp. 87–100 (Routledge, 2001).
7 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, Report No. 1763 (September 2009), pp. i, 2.
8 Montgomery survey data, 2005.
9 An increasing number of ethnographers of Islam demonstrate that contemporary religious change is heavily influenced by the Soviet past. See Irene Hilgers, *Why Do Uzbeks Have to be Muslims? Exploring Religiosity in the Ferghana Valley* (Lit Verlag, 2009); Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, *Religion is Not So Strong Here': Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism* (Lit Verlag, 2008); Maria Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (Routledge, 2007); Montgomery (2007); Johan Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Julie McBrien, 'The Fruit of Devotion: Islam and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan', PhD dissertation, Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg. 2008; 'Hèléne Thibault, 'The Secular and the Religious in Tajikistan: Contested Political Spaces', *Studies in Religion*, 42 (2): 173–89 (2014).

Islam. Where religion remained in the public sphere, it became described as 'tradition' but it did not disappear. To be Muslim was to be national and secular, in so far as the power of the secular state to regulate religion was assumed. This may seem odd or even oxymoronic, but should not be if one looks more closely at the emergence of distinct varieties of secularism across the Muslim world from Turkey to Indonesia.

More importantly, one should look closely at the history of Soviet Islam. Recent studies focus on how the Soviet state began to co-opt, rather than eradicate, Islam after the initial suppression of almost all public expression of it in the 1920s and 1930s.[10] Since at least the 1950s, there were increased opportunities for religious practice, which were formally institutionalized in the late 1980s with the advent of *glasnost* (openness). Informal religious circles continued throughout this time and were tolerated and sometimes enabled by the authorities. For example, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which was formally established as a branch of the all-Union Islamic Revival Party in 1990, charts its origins to 1973. Rather than forming a parallel and clandestine movement, its members and leaders often also took roles in the new mosques and state religious authorities. Jamaat-e Tabligh began to work in Central Asia from the 1960s, via student exchange programmes with India, although it only began to expand after 1991; today their influence is such that in 2010 a Tablighi leader was appointed mufti of Bishkek's grand mosque.[11] Thus, the portrayal of Islamic revival as a perestroika-era and then post-Soviet phenomenon which was parallel to and competing with 'official' Islam is more a reflection of the preconceptions of analysts than an accurate depiction of historical record. While public religious life has pluralized and diversified since the late 1980s there is a great deal of continuity from late Soviet to post-Soviet Islam.[12]

## Claim 2: To Islamicize is to radicalize

Following on from the idea of a post-Soviet religious revival, it has become commonplace to connect 'Islamicization', which is touted as evidence of it, to a process denoted as 'radicalization'. The general claim is that a more observant Muslim population is more likely to support radicalization and even terrorism. In *Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South* (2012), the ICG quotes a local man saying that his fellow Uzbeks 'turned in on themselves [and] to Allah'. From this quote the inference is made that such Islamicization leads to radicalization. The very next sentence states: 'One sign of this turn inwards is the growth of interest in more strictly observant, and sometimes radical, Islam.'[13] Another report on Tajikistan links the fact that 'outward signs of observant Islam are growing perceptibly and rapidly' to Muslims who abandon their careers and refuse to listen to 'un-Islamic' music.[14] An op-ed by ICG's Central Asia director Deidre Tynan similarly claims that the violent extremist organizations IMU and East Turkistan Independence Movement may find 'an

10 Adeeb Khalid, 'A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 35(4); 573–98 (2003); Chris Hann and Mathijs Pelkmans, 'Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State and (Post)Socialism', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61 (9): 1517–41 (2009).
11 Bayram Balci, 'The Rise of the Jama'at al Tabligh in Kyrgyzstan: The Revival of Islamic Ties between the Indian Subcontinent and Central Asia?', *Central Asian Survey*, 31(1): 2012, pp. 63–4, 65.
12 Adeeb Khalid's *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 2007) provides a succinct introduction to these processes.
13 ICG, *Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South*, Report No. 222 (March 2012), p. 12.
14 ICG, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, Report No. 205 (May 2011), p. 16.

audience, skeptical but willing to listen to anyone who claims they can do things differently'.[15] In these rather broad statements, the ICG presents 'radicalization' as visible in Central Asia in terms of increasing support for alternative and political forms of Islamic faith, and declining support for the secular state.

The tendency of ICG reports to equate Islamicization with radicalization is founded on a further conflation: that of political Islam, Islamism and radical Islam.[16] In a 2009 briefing, ICG makes this clear: 'The term Islamist in this report is used to refer to political activists with an agenda of applying Islamic law, through peaceful democratic means, through missionary work, through non-violent advocacy or through violent jihad.'[17] A similar catch-all definition is used by Seifert in his account of the 'Islamic Factor' in the Euro-Asian region.[18] Such a broad definition of what makes an 'Islamist' may easily lead to the representation of all proponents of political Islam as Islamist, radical and anti-state. Such sweeping categorizations create rather odd bedfellows. For example, the term would apply to both the former IMU leader Tahir Yuldashev and the former presidential candidate in Kyrgyzstan, Tursunbai Bakir Uluu. Indeed, if 'Islamist' was replaced with 'Christian fundamentalist', 'Islamic' with 'Christian' and 'jihad' with 'crusade', a similarly broad definition of political Christianity would be broad enough to tie the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) to the American Republican Party's religious conservatives. Yet while the LRA and IMU may be accurately described as opposed to the secular state, Bakir Uluu and the Republican Party are not.

It is important not to misrepresent ICG claims here. The relationship between societal Islamicization and political radicalization is not presented deterministically (and, in one report, it is clearly stated that the former may take place without the latter[19]). It is also stated that the authoritarian states' persecution of Muslims foments radicalization (see claim 3). For example, the 2009 report *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison* notes that

> The security agencies' failure to differentiate between non-violent religious movements and those openly committed to the armed struggle will deepen the divide between the observant Muslim population and central governments – a particularly dangerous development at a time when the risk of armed Islamic insurgency is growing.[20]

Nevertheless, there is an assumed yet unproven relationship between Islamicization and radicalization in ICG reports. Other security analysts make the same assumption more starkly as they uncritically report Central Asian government's counter-radicalization initiatives. One Kazakh woman, the US Department of Defense-funded website Central Asia Online airily informs its readers, 'was poised on the crossroads between secular life and radicalism. Timely psychological assistance and advice [from a Kazakh NGO, sanctioned by the country's Committee for Religious Affairs] steered her away from the road to extremism'.[21] Such reporting muddies the waters. It may

15 Deidre Tynan, 'Will Beijing Step up in Central Asia?', originally published on CNN, 14 March 2013, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/tynan-will-beijing-step-up-in-central-asia.aspx.
16 ICG, *Kyrgyzstan: W*idening Ethnic Divisions in the South, pp. 3, 17; ICG, Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats, p. 16; ICG, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, Briefing No. 97 (December 2009), p. 2.
17 ICG, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, p. 3, fn 18.
18 Arne C. Seifert, 'The Islamic Factor and the OSCE Stabilization Strategy in its Euro-Asian Area', Hamburg: Centre for OSCE Research, Working Paper No. 4, 2011, pp. 2, 4.
19 ICG, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, pp. ii, 26.
20 ICG, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, p. 1.
21 Alexander Bogatik, 'Kazakh NGOs help officials prevent extremism', Central Asia Online, 15 October 2014, http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2014/10/15/feature-01

actually be the case that secularizing societies are more likely to experience the growth of radical Islam at their margins (as occurs in the secularized societies of Europe), yet this relationship is not considered in such analysis.

Despite the lack of evidence for the putative relationship between Islamicization and radicalization, it is also affirmed in elite discourse in Central Asia. Throughout the region, governments have sought to associate all political opposition with increasing Islamic radicalization, reflected in general signs of Islamicization. They suppose that Western governments, and the populations they represent, are willing to accept that unregulated Islam is a danger and a harbinger of terrorism like that seen in neighbouring Afghanistan. Over the last 20 years, Uzbekistan's regime has utilized such language to justify cracking down on political opponents, as seen for example in the treatment of the local business and political organizations (the so-called *Akromiya*) in Andijon prior to and following the 2005 uprising and massacre.[22] Other Central Asian states have followed suit, claiming that Muslims who challenge the government are 'radical' in their views and thus pose a threat to society. In defining radicalism in this way they effectively label all opposition extremist and potentially violent. This is functional for their claim to popular legitimacy and in their relations with foreign governments and their security agencies.

However, inherent in the assumption that to Islamize is to radicalize is a misunderstanding of the relationship between religion and politics in Central Asia. An essentially antagonistic relationship is supposed and is deemed all the more acute in the case of Islam. This underlying Islamophobia seems odd in that it belies what is publicly professed and what is found in the evidence from Central Asian Muslims. While increasing expression of Muslim piety is a general trend, 'radicalization' is difficult or impossible to assess. We find no basis to link increased observance of religious ritual to critical attitudes toward the state. Only about six per cent of respondents to our survey reported an increase in their prayer frequency during a political crisis. Of those who claim religion influences their behaviour 'a lot', 30 per cent either never pray or pray only on special occasions or during times of crises.[23] There is no clear evidence that increased observance of Islam is consistent with increased engagement in political opposition.

## Claim 3: Authoritarianism and poverty cause radicalization

It has become routine to assume that the combination of authoritarianism and poverty cause radicalization.[24] This claim is prevalent throughout ICG reporting. The 2011 report *Central Asia: Decay and Decline* noted that Central Asian governments 'should realize that tolerating the status quo will bring about the very problems they fear most – further impoverishment and instability, radicalization and latent state collapse'.[25] The 'disappearance of basic services',[26] 'poor living conditions, corruption and abuse of office',[27] 'economic crisis and rigged elections',[28] 'declining

22 See Nick Megoran, 'Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation: Islam Karimov's Accounts of the Events of 13 May 2005', *Central Asian Survey*, 27 (1): 15–31 (2008).
23 Montgomery survey data, 2005.
24 V. Zhavoronkova, "Experts: Poor Political Systems in Central Asia May Lead to Extremism." Trend News. 18 February 2010, at: en.trend.az/news/politics/foreign/1641159.html
25 ICG, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline*, Report No. 201 (2011), p. 36.
26 Ibid., p. i.
27 ICG, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, p. 13.
28 ICG, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, p. ii.

demand for labour migrants',[29] 'woeful social and economic conditions',[30] and 'a venal and corrupt political elite' are all cited as causes of radicalization in ICG reports.[31] The conflation of political and economic underdevelopment in these reports reflects a deep-seated modernization thinking which is routine in Western secular security discourse and particularly evident in ICG reports. From this very narrow optic, it is underdevelopment which causes both high levels of religiosity and religious violence. Even Central Asia's one emerging economy is subject to this analysis. The report *Kazakhstan: Waiting for Change* puts it bluntly,

> While there are many different theories as to who is behind the [terrorist] attacks [that Kazakhstan suffered in 2011] and the kind of ideology and agenda they follow, the expert and political community in Kazakhstan is almost unanimous about the main reason for the existence and spread of religious radicalisation: the grim socio-economic situation in the regions, especially the west.[32]

This claim in the myth of post-Soviet radicalization is apparently commonsensical and is consistent with the kind of political analysis offered by many journalists and policy commentators. It is particularly powerful because it is widely shared between the elites of Western states, regional powers and Central Asian republics (all of whom have experienced long-term and large-scale secular modernization themselves). Non-governmental voices in the least repressive parts of Central Asia are quick to make similar claims. For example, the Kyrgyz analyst Kanybek Osmaniliev refutes the claim that recent acts of political violence in Kyrgyzstan could be considered 'religious terrorism' but speculates about the increased influence of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) in the country as a reaction to the authoritarian nature of the government.[33] Such an analysis is consistent with the international secularist security discourse about Islam in Central Asia.

Once again, however, there is little or no evidence to support this claim. There are no reliable data on the magnitude of support across the region for banned transnational groups – violent or non-violent – that hold extremist political views. However, such groups clearly have some support in Kazakhstan (by far the wealthiest Central Asian republic) and in Kyrgyzstan (one of the poorest). These are also the two 'most democratic' according to respected indices. Yet Turkmenistan, with the most authoritarian government in the region, has not seen acts of violent extremism. Uzbekistan is also highly authoritarian but has successfully suppressed and/or ejected most of the groups that have emerged on its territory. In Tajikistan, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) that were minor players during the civil war declined following its conclusion in the late 1990s.[34] The Tajik experience suggests that there is an obvious relationship between political instability and the manifestation of violent extremism, including, though by no means primarily, Islamic extremism. But this is to make a statement that borders on tautology. Where there is conflict, Islam – as a

29 ICG, *Central Asia: Migrants and the Economic Crisis*, Asia Report No. 183 (January 2010), p. 14.
30 ICG, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, p. 1.
31 Tynan (2013).
32 ICG, *Kazakhstan: Waiting for Change*, Report No. 250 (September 2013), p. 19.
33 Niyazova, Makhinur (2011), 'Kanybek Osmonaliev: V Kyrgyzstane religiya dlya silovikh struktur – tolko povod opravdat svoi deistviya, [Kanybek Osmonaliev: In Kyrgyzstan, law enforcement agencies use religion as an excuse to justify their actions] Information Agency 24.kg, 19 January. At http://www.24kg.org/community/90951-kanybek-osmonaliev-v-kyrgyzstane-religiya-dlya.html, accessed: 10 May 2011.
34 VEOs were marginal to the war itself. The military wing of the IRPT cannot be considered a VEO as its political views were not essentially anti-state (or in favour of a Caliphate or some other source of order) but, at most, sought a change of constitution. The IMU is a VEO but was a secondary player in a particular region (the Rasht valley) during the later stages of the war. It is possible that the groups of some Tajik independent commanders – such as that of 'Mullo Abdullo' - might be categorized as VEOs in that they professed extremist views and used violence.

major social force – will find itself drawn into that mix as one of several sources of contention and conciliation.[35]

All this is not to diminish the importance of poverty, authoritarian government and attendant political instability in the region's plight. It is merely to say that there is no evidence to support the idea that radicalization is more likely to occur in authoritarian states and among poor populations. Furthermore there is growing evidence suggesting that a small number of individuals and small groups are drawn to violent extremism from within democratic and prosperous Western societies. However, scholars of radicalization are able to offer few convincing and valid explanations for why (and where) this radicalization takes place.

## Claim 4: Underground Muslim groups are radical

It is axiomatic to assume that underground Muslim groups are radical. There are many self-styled Muslim groups that have been outlawed in Central Asia and therefore find themselves existing underground. Western security analysts often make a distinction between those with an independently verified record of violence and those without. The ICG often criticizes Central Asian governments for outlawing the non-violent ones on the basis of spurious links to violent events. Its depiction of HT as 'clandestine' but avowedly peaceful is a case in point.[36] However, while Western analysts may make a distinction between violent and non-violent underground groups, they portray all of them as radical. For example, the 2009 report *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan* notes that that country's government 'relies disproportionately on security measures in dealing with Islamic radicalism, threatens to stimulate rather than undermine the appeal of HT and has potential to generate a popular backlash.'[37] Here, HT is depicted as radical and its appeal is said to increase because of its status as a repressed, underground group.

Assessing this widely held belief is difficult. Given that these groups are underground and almost always illegal, any claims made about them are hard to verify or refute empirically. A genuinely radical group should surely offer a radical departure from the status quo in its ideology *and* demonstrate the organizational capacity to bring about such an alternative. However, there is evidence suggesting that across most of the former Soviet Union, Jamaat-e Tabligh, a self-consciously apolitical missionary organization which is banned across most of the region, and HT remain isolated and highly localized social forces.[38] There is, moreover, no evidence to suggest that these groups have the ability to mobilize protesters against the state beyond a specific locality and time. It would be an unsubstantiated assumption to suggest that a majority of HT members hold extremist political views that are more or less consistent with the group's official position on the establishment of a new caliphate. Equally, it would be wrong to assume that, simply because it exists underground and contains members who are conspiratorial and anti-Semitic, an organization

35 McGlinchey goes as far as stating that Islam is epiphenomenal as a source of mobilization against the state in Uzbekistan. Eric McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), p. 134.
36 ICG, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, p. 3.
37 ICG, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, p. iii.
38 Maria Louw, 'Pursuing "Muslimness": Shrines as Sites for Moralities in the Making in Post-Soviet Bukhara', *Central Asian Survey*, 25 (3): 319–39 (2006); Julie McBrien, 'Listening to the Wedding Speaker: Discussing Religion and Culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, 25 (3): 341–57 (2006); Edward Snajdr, 'Gender, Power, and the Performance of Justice: Muslim Women's Responses to Domestic Violence in Kazakhstan', *American Ethnologist*, 32 (2): 294–311 (2005). Jamaat-e Tabligh in Kyrgyzstan has become successful and influential because it is not banned and has successfully presented itself to the authorities as a non-political organization. See Balci (2012).

is therefore extremist or 'radical'. Such members may simply be deluded xenophobes and ignorant racists rather than forming a consistently and vehemently Islamist political force. Historically, in the formation of Western democracies, 'radical' was often used as a label for those leading the charge of liberalism or socialism. Quite what counts as radical today is not clear. In Central Asia, it is merely applied to any group that is an enemy of the current political regime.

There are countless examples of this. The 2005 Andijon massacre in Uzbekistan, according to the official government position, which was restated by some influential international observers, was the result of radical Muslims wanting to overthrow the state.[39] In Tajikistan, the truce in the civil war resulted in the IRPT becoming the region's only legal Islamic political party, but one that has been consistently labelled as a threat. This is a claim buttressed by Western analysts arguing it is the thin end of the wedge that leads to increasingly radical, militant and violent groups.[40] Such claims suffer from a failure to disaggregate, both between highly diverse Muslim groups and within the IRPT. On the one hand, the IRPT's leadership has been specifically and self-consciously 'moderate' in the years since its decriminalization. On the other hand, its members include many figures with specifically Islamist (or 'radical') agendas, highly conservative preferences and conspiratorial political thinking, as well as some with backgrounds as civil war leaders and fighters.[41] In this context, labels such as 'moderate' and 'radical' are not helpful. Nor are assumptions about the relationship between the IRPT and other Islamist groups. The IRPT has been increasingly targeted since the death in 2006 of its founding chairman, Said Abdullo Nuri, a co-signatory of the peace accords with President Emomoli Rahmon.[42] Its accommodating current chairman, Muhiddin Kabiri, has remained in place, however, and has not shifted the party's agenda. It is unclear whether the Tajik government's increasing repression of the IRPT since 2006 has led to a demonstrable increase in support for the banned Islamic groups that have or have had some support in Tajikistan (notably HT, Jamaat-e Tabligh, Jamaat Ansarullah and the IMU). Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that the IRPT's period of being underground made it more or less extremist.

## Claim 5: Radical Muslim groups are globally networked

The fear underlying the pervasive assumption that Muslim groups are globally networked is that linked organizations are more difficult to contain than disparate local groups. The analysis here rests on the place of purportedly Central Asian radical groups in the global jihad and as enemies in the so-called Global War on Terror. It is often cited that at least 32 persons from the former Soviet Union were among the nearly 800 captured by US forces and bounty-hunters and sent to Guantánamo Bay during the first four years of the War on Terror. This is perhaps the most common point of reference for those who claim the post-Soviet world has been incorporated into global

39 Shirin Akiner, *Violence in Andijon, 13 May 2005: An independent Assessment*, Silk Road Studies Program, Washington, DC, 2005.
40 Ben West, 'Islamist Militancy Gathers Momentum in Tajikistan', *Asian Affairs* XIV (12) (October 2010), http://asianaffairs.in/october2010/afghanistan.html.
41 Tim Epkenhans, 'Defining Normative Islam: Some Remarks on Contemporary Islamic Thought in Tajikistan – Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda's Sharia and Society', *Central Asian Survey*, 30 (1): 81–96 (2011).
42 Sophie Roche and John Heathershaw, 'Islam and Political Violence in Tajikistan: An Ethnographic Perspective on the Causes and Consequences on the 2010 Armed Conflict in the Kamarob Gorge', Ethnopolitics Paper No. 8, Exeter Centre for Ethnopolitical Studies, March 2011.

jihadist networks.[43] The IMU – a major fighting force allied to the Taliban – is presented as the exemplary case of the global networking of Central Asian Muslim groups. One 2010 ICG report speculates that 'the IMU seems to have become a trans-regional force, composed of Tajik, Kyrgyz, Tatar and Kazakh, as well as Chechens and other fighters from the Caucasus.'[44] In a 2012 report the IGC speculated that 'the true number of post-June [2010] recruits [to military training with the IMU] is almost certainly a fraction of the official figure'.[45] Elsewhere links are made with China, and the IMU is said to have undergone 'internationalisation'.[46]

Given the impossibility of field research with VEOs, and therefore the lack of primary evidence for such claims, it is often the content of websites that is used as evidence. The 2011 report *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats* remarks:

> Communications have undergone a fundamental change with the growth of the internet. Links between Islamic militants in Central Asia, Afghanistan and the former Soviet Union are no longer linear. Traditional lines of command and communication are supplemented by an informal web of contacts at multiple levels across the internet. Such channels of information provide important role models for the new generation of fighters and almost certainly serve as a recruiting tool. It is no longer exceptional to find a Tajik supporter of the IMU paying tribute to the Russian-Buryat guerrilla propagandist Said Buryatsky, killed in Ingushetia in March 2010; or a Dagestani guerrilla website publishing a paean to the international mujahidin operating along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border; or the Caucasus Emirate publishing an appeal from 'Mujahidin of Tajikistan' paying tribute to Mullo Abdullo and calling for attacks on police and government officials.[47]

However, the authorship and representativeness of such websites is also difficult, if not impossible, to establish. Too often, security analysts who are desperate for information cite such sources uncritically. This is convenient. The assumption of the global networking of VEOs is so widespread as to provide a language through which all observers, from liberal Western academics to authoritarian Central Asian governments, have common reference points. It is easy for those who feel threatened by political Islam to link 'radical' Central Asian groups to Al-Qaeda or label them as Wahhabis, assuming that in essence the groups are connected. In such framings a village mechanic HT member in Kyrgyzstan is, in some unspecified way, linked to a high-level Al-Qaeda member in Yemen.

What little evidence we have on Central Asian VEOs tells a more complex story, however. Rather than being globally networked, a better interpretation is that they are in fact external to Central Asia. In particular, the IMU has ceased to be a Central Asian group in anything other than name, not being active in the region since the beginning of the War on Terror in 2001. Similarly, none of the Central Asian citizens imprisoned in Guantánamo were captured in their home countries, but rather in Pakistan and Afghanistan where they were fighting. For supposedly globally networked groups with a presence in Central Asia, the story is different: a tale of localization as much as globalization. For example, HT is a transnational movement with a worldwide headquarters in the

43 Among the 759 people listed by the US Department of Defense in 2006, four were from Kazakhstan, nine from Russia, twelve from Tajikistan and six from Uzbekistan, by citizenship, Almost all of these have now been released and many were determined never to have been enemy combatants. List of Individuals Detained by the Department of Defense at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba from January 2002 through May 15, 2006, http://www.defense.gov/news/May2006/d20060515%20List.pdf.
44 ICG, *The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan*, Report, No. 193 (August 2010), p. 23.
45 ICG, *Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South*, p. 3.
46 ICG, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, pp. 10, 12.
47 Ibid., p. 10.

United Kingdom, but research suggests that many of its members in Central Asia are unaware of its international connections.[48] Nor are they necessarily aware that some of their literature is anti-Semitic.[49] They do see themselves as part of a larger movement, which gives them a sense of significance and legitimacy, but they know very little about the ideological nuances of the organization, and their concerns are decidedly local.[50]

In the prominent contemporary case where Central Asian Muslims are found in significant numbers fighting overseas in the name of Islam, a very particular story emerges. Christian Bleuer notes that few Central Asians have fought in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2001 while a much larger number have joined fighters from other Muslim-majority regions and Europe for Islamic State (IS) in the more distant Iraq and Syria since 2012. This fact belies crude spill-over arguments where apparent cultural similarities, geographical proximity and anecdotal evidence of linkages are presented as sufficient evidence for a threat to the Central Asian republics from Afghanistan and/or the Middle East by both Western and regional experts.[51] Bleuer argues that most Central Asian recruits have arrived through Russia and/or Turkey, a far more amenable route for them than crossing the Amu Darya into neighbouring Afghanistan.[52] Nevertheless, estimates suggest that by proportion of population Central Asian Muslims are under-represented in the fighting forces of IS compared with their comrades from Europe.[53]

While Central Asian Muslim fighters are found in increasing numbers with IS, the region remains an infertile ground for international ideological and political linkages to emerge. If Muslims in the region were aware of the global currents of political Islam they would be familiar with Said Qutb, whose writings influenced Osama bin Laden, Ayman Zawihiri, Anwar al-Awlaki and al-Qaeda.[54] Yet the level of awareness of such theologians is tiny in Central Asia (with just 2 per cent recognizing Qutb's name in our survey). In reality, the international Islamic scholars with whom most Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are familiar are Muhammad al-Bukhari and Ibn Sina (25 per cent and 42 per cent, respectively), who are known not for their role in the development of Islam but for their place in regional history.[55] This is further evidence of the secularity of Central Asia that treats Islam as a fount of culture, history, social mores and moral behaviour. The Muslim societies of Central Asia remain very unreceptive to transnational VEOs and fearful of their expansion into the region from the Middle East and South Asia.

48 Montgomery, field data 2004–5, 2006, 2012.
49 Pamphlets collected in Kyrgyzstan reflect, as do statements by Hizb ut-Tahrir in the early 2000s, such anti-Semitism.
50 Montgomery, field data 2004–5, 2006, 2012.
51 Independent Conflict Research and Analysis, 'Comment: changes in militancy in Afghanistan's neighbourhood', August 2014, unpublished; see also RFE/RL, 'In Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Rumors of Instability Abound as Fears of IS Grow', 21 October 2014, http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-kyrgystan-islamic-state-instability/26649000.html.
52 Christian Bleuer, 'To Syria, not Afghanistan: Central Asian jihadis 'neglect' their neighbour', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 8 October 2014, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/to-syria-not-afghanistan-central-asian-jihadis-neglect-their-neighbour/.
53 Conservative estimates of the number of European Muslim fighters in Iraq and Syria, per million of the popular of the country of origin, are far higher than those for Central Asian states. In August 2014, The Economist reports 400 from the UK and 800 from Belgium, while the RFE/RL estimate for the whole of Central Asia is 400. Lemon suggests this is a low estimate and the true number is likely to be 'over 500'. Nevertheless, the European Muslim population is significantly smaller than in Central Asia where the majority of persons identify themselves as Muslim. Therefore the proportion of European Muslims fighting with IS is far greater than the number of Central Asians. See: 'It ain't half hot here, mum: Why and how Westerners go to fight in Syria and Iraq', *The Economist*, 30 August 2014; Edward Lemon, 'Assessing the Threat of Returning Foreign Fighters from Central Asia', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 18 September 2014, http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/assessing-threat-returning-foreign-fighters-central-asia/
54 The association of Qutb with the threat of Al-Qaeda obfuscates Qutb's contribution to modern Islamism. See John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2010).
55 Montgomery survey data, 2005. The familiarity many have with al-Bukhari is as collector of hadiths (Sahih Bukhari) and with Ibn Sina is for his books on medicine that could be purchased (and were commonly referenced by local healers) at least as recently as 2012.

## Claim 6: Political Islam opposes the secular state

The final claim in the myth seems so obvious to most secularists *and* Islamists that it goes without saying in much political discourse and policy analysis on both sides of this self-imposed divide. It is common to view Central Asia in terms of secular, Soviet-trained leaderships facing the challenge of an increasingly religious and politically active population. The ICG notes in a 2009 report that 'radicalization [...] would make keeping Kyrgyzstan a secular state more challenging'.[56] The use of the term radicalization to incorporate a wide variety of groups and behaviour sustains the view that all political Islam is anti-secular. This is implied by a later IGC report on Kyrgyzstan where it is argued that 'the further alienation of Islamic groups in Kyrgyzstan – where the last secular governments have done massive harm to the ideals of liberal tolerance and ethics – would be the beginning of a tragedy for the country'.[57]

Framed this way the 'Islamic factor' is a forced which is juxtaposed to the secular and in need of accommodation.[58] Even some dispassionate academic articles adopt a clear boundary between the secular and religious in order to make such arguments about the compatibility of some expressions of Islam to democracy.[59] Secularists and some representatives of political Islam in Central Asia make similar assumptions. Even legal and avowedly apolitical but non-state Muslim organizations in Central Asia, such as Jamaat-e Tabligh in Kygryzstan or the Ismaili bodies of Tajikistan, are routinely regarded with extreme suspicion by the avowedly secular governments of the region.[60] In Tajikistan, the Islamic-secular dialogue has become more hostile, more infrequent and less productive since 2000 as state representatives – such as Suhrob Sharipov, now a member of parliament – have argued strongly for assertive secularism along the lines of the 'Turkic-language countries'.[61] In Kyrgyzstan, debates about marriage and a proposal to have prayer breaks in parliamentary business have pitted secularists, such as civil society leader Dinara Oshurakhunova, against advocates of a more prominent role for Islam in public life, such as the parliamentary deputy Tursunbai Bakir Uluu.[62] In such debates it is easy to assume that, in the public square, political Islam opposes the secular state.

However, the putative religious-secular divide is constructed, often by secular governments themselves, rather than real. Such divisive policies and public debates distract from the wider reality of a post-Soviet Muslim population that adheres to secular principles and the privatization of religious faith. Our survey found that 62 per cent of those who claim that religion influences their behaviour a lot believe that religion should concern itself only with the spiritual. Meanwhile 51 per cent of the same group also believes that state law should be a reflection of religious law.[63] How

56 ICG, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, p. 26; see also p. 17.
57 ICG, *Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses*, Briefing No. 102 (April 2010), p. 15.
58 Seifert, 'The Islamic Factor and the OSCE Stabilization Strategy in its Euro-Asian Area', p. 3.
59 Kathleen Collins and Erica Owen, 'Islamic Religiosity and Regime Preference: Explaining Support for Democracy and Political Islam in Central Asia and he Caucasus', *Political Research Quarterly*, 2012, 65(3), pp. 49––515
60 Bayram Balci (2012); Zamira Dildorbekova, 'Dynamics of Islam and Democracy in Tajikistan', PhD Thesis, University of Exeter 2014.
61 Avesta, 'Reiting kommunistov v Tajikistane stoit vyishe Islamistov – Glava TsIK',[Head of the Central Electoral Commission: 'In Tajikistan, communists enjoy higher ratings than Islamists'] 13 January 2011, http://www.avesta.tj/index.php?newsid=7040, accessed 17 May 2011.
62 Tolgonai Osmongazieva,, '"Svetskaya" beseda deputata i pravozashinika', [An informal discussion between an MP and a human rights activist] Information Agency 24.kg, 14 January 2011, http://www.24kg.org/parlament/101721-v-parlamente-kyrgyzstana-proizoshla-ocherednaya.html, accessed 1 May 2011; Bengard, Anastasiya, 'Pochemu v Kyrgyzstane otdelniye politiki rukovodstvuyutsya normami shariata, zhelaya podmenit imi grazhdanskie akti?', [Why are some politicians in Kyrgyzstan guided by sharia norms and wish to replace civil codes with them?] Information Agency 24.kg, 18 January 2011, http://www.24kg.org/community/99663-v-gorode-karakole-issyk-kulskoj-oblasti.html, accessed 10 May 2011.
63 Montgomery survey data, 2005

should we make sense of these apparently contradictory findings? This can only be done by recognizing that the secular and Islamic (including political Islam) are not mutually exclusive. In particular, the results do not show that 51 per cent of Central Asian Muslims support Shari'a – something that has no significant public support across the vast majority of the former Soviet region. Instead these results may be better understood in terms of the state being seen to act immorally and its reform being framed in terms of religion as the source of moral authority. As the results may also be understood in terms of a religiously shaped form of secularism, variations of which are seen across the world including in the United Kingdom.

These complex mixtures of Islam and secularism are commonplace in post-Soviet Eurasia and reflected in mainstream political discourses across the region. There is little evidence for popular discontent with the secularity of the state in Central Asia. Our survey data show that overall fewer than one in five disagree with the claim that religion should only concern itself with the spiritual. The IRPT has consistently refused to develop a theocratic policy platform, proposing instead a statist model of economic development. In Kyrgyzstan, despite the activity of HT and the political instability since 2005, there has been little to no Islamist mobilization, and where this occurs there may be particular reasons found in the breakdown of relations between Muslim leaders and local government.[64] Some public figures – Kadyir Malikov, head of the Religion, Law and Politics Centre in Bishkek, for example – have responded to debates such as that between Oshurakhunova and Bakir Uluu by warning of the danger of setting religious values against the secular.[65] Such sober voices are clear that the supposed choice between Islamic revival and militantly secularist security policy is a false one in a region where religion remains primarily a personal and social phenomenon tied to a group's ethnic identity, rather than a driver of political mobilization.

## Conclusion

There is very little evidence to support the idea of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization in Central Asia. There is even less evidence to substantiate the fear that there is a significant presence of Islamic VEOs in the region. From 2001-2013, there were three attacks that have apparently been claimed by such groups, with a total of 11 deaths. In that period just 0.1 per cent of global terrorist attacks took place in Central Asia – a region with around one per cent of the world's population.[66] Of the 51 organizations currently on the US State Department's Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations list, only two have any kind of link to the post-Soviet Central Asian republics.[67] Even the links of these two – the IMU and its splinter group, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) – are, at best, dormant in the region as they have no record of even failed attacks north of the Amu Darya since 2009. These organizations are better understood as groups whose aims and prospects are external, i.e. found in

64 Alisher Khamidov, 'The Lessons of the "Nookat Events": Central Government, Local Officials and Religious Protests in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, 32 (2): 148–60 (2013).
65 Karimov, Daniyar, 'Kadyr Malikov: Otsustviye politicheskoi gibkosti so storoni nekotorikh deputatov parlamenta Kyrgyzstana mozhet nanesti vred obshinye musulman vsei strani [Kadyr Malikov: Lack of political flexibility on the part of some Kyrgyz MPs may harm the Muslim community all over the country], Information Agency 24.kg, 3 May 2011, http://www.24kg.org/community/99663-v-gorode-karakole-issyk-kulskoj-oblasti.html, accessed 17 May 2011.
66 Global Terrorism Database (2012). http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd, The three attacks claimed by VEOs are the July 2004 Tashkent bombings claimed by the IMU, the May 2009 Andijon and Khanabad attacks claimed by the IJU, and the October 2011 Atyrau attacks claimed by Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate). Each of these claims, however, has been disputed for its authenticity by some observers including, in the latter case, the ICG (2013). See also Craig Murray, Murder in Samarkand, London: Mainstream, 2006.
67 List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, US Department of State, accessed 4 November 2013, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm.

the context of the politics of Afghanistan and Pakistan.[68] This is an important distinction between the Central Asian republics and another Muslim region of the former Soviet Union, the North Caucasus, where Islamic VEOs are a regional problem which exists on a much greater scale.[69]

If there is little evidence of a problem of both violent and non-violent radical Islam in Central Asia, why is the purported threat such a popular refrain in Western and regional security discourse alike? The reasons for this are clearly deep-seated as the myth is repeated despite the caveats born of sober analysis and a sensible reluctance to casually apportion menace to 'radical Islam'. Overall, the ICG provides a more cautious and considered account of 'radicalization' than can be found in much of what passes for security analysis and, in one report, appears to deny the second claim we have identified in the myth.[70] There are also a number of independent academic Central Asian security specialists, such as Noah Tucker and Christian Bleuer (both cited above), who directly challenge some of the claims of the myth with their sober analysis.

However, these exceptions to the six claims examined in this paper are overshadowed by a general trend of adhering to and perpetuating the myth of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization in Central Asia. It is all too commonplace to assume that the widespread radicalization and the problem of Islamic VEOs which are identified in parts of the Caucasus, the Middle East and South Asia can also be found in Central Asia.[71] This danger of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization is repeated *ad nauseam* by the region's governments, which fear their political opponents and seek foreign security assistance for their regime's security. Such fears are even commonplace in the independent press in Kyrgyzstan, the most open society in the region.[72] In that the myth acts as a legitimating device for the militant secularism of weak regimes, it may be a greater problem than violent extremism itself.

That the myth survives reflects not Islamophobia *per se* but the underlying hold of a crude form of secularism on modern political thinking, among both Westerners and Central Asians. 'Secularism', as Hurd argues, 'is one of the most important organizing principles of modern politics that shapes the international politics of security as much as it cultivates shifts in social attitudes'.[73] It thus deserves to be interrogated in those parts of the world (including Central Asia) that have been exposed to both top-down campaigns and bottom-up movements of secularization. These campaigns and movements, and the reorganization of Islam as wholly subordinate to the modern state, still loom large over Central Asia. Once one sees through the myth of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization, it is possible to see that there is nothing essential to former Soviet Central Asia that generates religious radicalization.

This paper is a call for the disaggregation of what is often conflated, and careful, evidence-based analysis of what is often assumed. The increase in public displays of piety across of much of Central

68 Noah Tucker, Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Uzbekistan: A Risk Assessment, Washington, DC: USAID, 2013.
69 The [US] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) reports 39 terrorist incidents in Central Asia compared with 1,405 in the rest of the post-Soviet Newly Independent States (primarily in the North Caucasus) from 2001 to 2011. North America was reported to have had 267 incidents and Western Europe 1,364. Global Terrorism Database (2012).
70 *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan* warns Central Asian states to distinguish between HT's activities and 'traditional attributes of Islam', noting that 'radicalisation can be easily confused with visual signs (e.g., headscarves) of a much more benign return to Islam'. ICG, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, pp. ii, 26.
71 Adeeb Khalid, Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
72 In 2010/11, 24 per cent of articles about Islam which were surveyed addressed concerns about foreign influences over national Islamic development. Fourteen out of 41 articles addressing international Islamic education on the website of the Kyrgyz information agency 24.kg included discussions of danger and security. Primary research conducted for this project.
73 Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 23.

Asia has a variety of causes; it will not necessarily lead to support for political Islam. This should not surprise us; there remain many Muslim-majority states in which political Islam is not a significant force. The survival of secular political thinking among the elite and wider public is an important legacy of Soviet modernization; it will not necessarily cause the kind of conflict between secularists and Islamists that has been seen in some but not all parts of the Muslim world. Moreover, Muslim piety and secular political thinking can easily exist within the same person, as our survey shows. The evidence available, from the low number of attacks by VEOs to lack of popularity for anti-secular political views, suggests that Central Asia remains a region characterized more by the secularization of Islam than by the 'radicalization' which analysts associate with Islamic revival. Manifestations of extremism in Central Asia remain thankfully exceptional and must be treated as such by analysts of security.

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