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The New Face of Political Islam in Central Asia: The Rise of Islamo-democrats

Dr Emmanuel Karagiannis

Political Islam in Central Asia is currently undergoing a transitional phase. Radical groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir no longer monopolize the Islamist scene. There is now a new generation of Islamist leaders in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan that advocate a public role for Islam without seeking regime change. They can be called Islamo-democrats because they participate in elections and recognize the constitutional process. The article will examine and compare the biography, political career and beliefs of three representatives of this political trend: Tursunbai Bakir Uulu, Bekbolat Tleukhan, and Mohiddin Kabiri. It will claim that the emergence of Islamo-democrats is partly the result of developments in Turkey, especially the rise to power of the AKP. Two factors account for the Turkish influence in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan: the successful diffusion of ideological norms and the importance that governments attach to maintaining good relations with Turkey.

Central Asia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Islam, democracy

Introduction

Political Islam in Central Asia has long been synonymous with clandestine groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir. It has been viewed and treated as a revolutionary force seeking the overthrow of the existing order. Therefore, Central Asian governments have taken political, legal, and security

measures to counter the threat perceived to be coming from these Islamists.¹ However, political Islam in the region is a much larger movement which now includes a new component, the Islamo-democrats.

The term *political Islam* describes a transnational social movement that seeks to mobilize Muslims into political activities. It is a diverse and non-hierarchical collectivity of different actors who share some ideas and perceptions. The term *Islamism* refers to the ideology and practices of parties, groups and prominent individuals that claim that Islam is applicable to every aspect of life. It is a fluid and unsystematic set of beliefs that is open to change and adaptation in accordance to local conditions.

The article will argue that there is a new generation of Islamist leaders in Central Asia that ought to be studied. Tursunbai Bakir Uulu in Kyrgyzstan, Bekbolat Tleukhan in Kazakhstan, and Mohiddin Kabiri in Tajikistan share a modest Islamist agenda, while they publicly pronounce their commitment to the existing political order. As it will be found, their democraticness does not necessarily mean acceptance of liberal values (e.g. gender equality). It is rather defined as participation in elections and recognition of the constitutional process.

For the purpose of analysis, the article will examine and compare the biography, political career and beliefs of the three politicians. Furthermore, it will claim that this new variant of political Islam is the result of larger developments in the Middle East, namely the political and ideological power of the AKP in Turkey. This research will be partly based on interviews conducted with Kabiri (2005, 2012) and Bakir Uulu (2011). Since it was not possible to arrange an interview with Tleukhan,

¹ See, for example, Mariya Y Omelicheva. 2007, "Combating Terrorism in Central Asia: Explaining Differences in States' Responses to Terror", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19: 3 (July): 369-393.

the author used YouTube videos of him as a source of information about his beliefs. Additionally, the article will rely on speeches, statements and media interviews of the three politicians.

The early political Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia

Although Soviet Central Asia had remained relatively isolated from the rest of the Muslim world since the 1920s, the region was exposed to Islamism. Martha Brill Olcott has documented the existence of clandestine Salafi study groups in the Ferghana Valley during the 1970s and 1980s.² Moreover, despite Soviet efforts to prevent a spillover effect on Central Asia, the resistance of the Mujahedin in Afghanistan served as an example for some local Islamists.³

Following the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, a wave of Islamic activism was unleashed in the newly established Central Asian republics. Hundreds of mosques were built or restored; copies of the Quran and other Islamic literature were brought in from abroad; and foreign imams came to preach their version of Islam.⁴ Initially, the former communist political elites did not oppose the growing religiosity of the population because it was seen as a means to foster patriotism. Yet, there was a political element that either they choose to ignore or oversee.

² See Martha Brill Olcott. 2007. "Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia", Carnegie Papers 77 (January), At <http://carnegieendowment.org/2007/01/17/roots-of-radical-islam-in-central-asia>, accessed November 1, 2015.

³ Jiayi Zhou. 2012. "The Muslim Battalions: Soviet Central Asians in the Soviet Afghan War", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 25: 3 (September): 325.

⁴ On the Islamic revival in Central Asia see Abdujabar Abduvakhitov. 1993. "Islamic Revivalism in Uzbekistan". In Dale F. Eickelman, ed., *Russia's Muslim Frontiers: New Directions in Cross-Cultural Analysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Ludmila Polonskaya and Alexei Malashenko. 1994. *Islam in Central Asia*. Reading: Ithaca Press; Adeeb Khalid. 2007. *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Tajikistan was the first Central Asian republic to experience an Islamist-led insurgency. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) was founded in November 1991 with the implicit aim of establishing an Islamic republic. In response to government repression, the IRPT together with the other parties formed the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) in 1993. Then the opposition forces moved to Afghanistan and begun launching hit-and-run attacks against pro-government militias. In June 1997, finally, the UTO and the Tajik government agreed a cessation of hostilities.⁵

Following the end of the Tajik civil war, the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir became the leading Islamist groups in the region. The two groups have followed very different paths: the IMU is a jihadi group that was established in Afghanistan by Uzbek Islamists to overthrow their country's regime but is now located in Pakistan's tribal areas, whereas Hizb ut-Tahrir is a international organization that has managed to spread its message across Central Asia with the help of grassroots propaganda.

Yet, both of them have failed to transform themselves into massive movements capable of establishing an Islamic state in Central Asia. As a result of a security crackdown, thousands of their members currently serve long sentences in prisons and their activities have clearly decreased in Central Asia. While Hizb ut-Tahrir has remained active in most of Central Asia, the declining numbers of arrests possibly indicate that the group is not expanding anymore. The IMU has not staged any attacks on Central Asian soil since September 2010, when it was involved in an attack against a Tajik army convoy.⁶ Moreover, the IMU has gone through a process

⁵ On the Tajik civil war see Suchandana Chatterjee. 2002. *Society and Politics in Tajikistan in the Aftermath of the Civil War*. London: Greenwich Millennium Press.

⁶ "Tajik Officials Say Former Rebel Involved in Deadly Attack on Army", RFE/RL, September 23, 2010, At http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Officials_Say_Former_Rebel_Involved_In_Deathly_Attack_On_Army/2166586.html, accessed October 10, 2015.

of ideological transformation in recent years as a result of its migration to Pakistan; consequently, it has become less Uzbek-oriented and has opted for a local jihad.

There is an extensive literature on political Islam in Central Asia during and after the Soviet period. A number of Western scholars have already discussed and analyzed the factors that contributed to the emergence of these Islamist groups in the region.⁷ The ‘old’ IRPT, the IMU, and Hizb ut-Tahrir represent the first generation of post-Soviet Central Asian Islamists who have aimed at a radical change by utilizing either political violence or grassroots propaganda. It is the early political Islam that has rebelled unsuccessfully against the state and now sees its influence diminishing.

The emergence of the Islamo-democrats

Since the mid 2000s, political Islam in Central Asia has been evolved into a more diverse movement. New actors have emerged who seek to promote the Islamization of societies by compromise rather than conflict. The second generation of Islamists has attempted to dissociate itself from those who use violence or propaganda as a means to political change. The article will now turn to three prominent representatives of the new political Islam in Central Asia.

Tursunbai Bakir Uulu

⁷ See Mehrdad Haghayeghi. 1995. *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*. New York: St. Martin's Press; Martha Brill Olcott. 1995. "Islam and Fundamentalism in Independent Central Asia". In Yaacov Ro'i (ed.), *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*. London: Frank Cass; Ahmed Rashid. 2000. *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*. London: Penguin; Olivier Roy. 2000. *The Foreign Policy of the Central Asian Islamic Renaissance Party*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations; Yaacov Ro'i. 2001. *Islam in the CIS: A Threat to Stability?* London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs; Richard Weitz. 2004. "Storm Clouds over Central Asia: Revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan?". *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27: 6 (November-December): 505-530; Vitaly V. Naumkin. 2005. *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.

Tursunbai Bakir Uulu is a Kyrgyz politician known for his Islamist tendencies. He was born in March 1958 in the southern Kyrgyz town of Kara-Suu which is one of the most religious places in the country. He is a historian who graduated from the Kyrgyz National University in 1984. He received a postgraduate degree from the Kiev State University in 1990 and he taught for several years at the Osh Pedagogical Institute in southern Kyrgyzstan.

He first entered the Kyrgyz parliament in February 1995 as member of the Erkin Kyrgyzstan Progressive and Democratic Party, a small nationalist party of intellectuals. In the summer of 1999, he negotiated the release of Japanese hostages held by members of the IMU.⁸ In February 2000, he was re-elected MP but two years later became the country's first ombudsman. Bakir Uulu held the post of ombudsman until 2008. He then served as Kyrgyz ambassador to Malaysia from April 2009 to September 2010. He ran unsuccessfully as a presidential candidate in 2000, 2005, and 2011. In the October 2011 presidential elections, Bakir Uulu received 15,000 votes, which represented only 0.84 percent of the vote.⁹ He is a frequent user of Twitter and his videos have been posted on YouTube.

As ombudsman, Bakir Uulu paid attention to the protection of Kyrgyz living abroad, called for the improvement of conditions in the country's prisons, advocated minority rights, and fought government corruption.¹⁰ According to WikiLeaks, US diplomats viewed Bakir Uulu as a "serious, publicly devout former Ombudsman...in

⁸ Bruce Pannier, "Kyrgyzstan: Outspoken Ombudsman Possesses Unique Regional Voice", RFE/RL, July 22, 2004, At <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1053984.html>, accessed October 3, 2015.

⁹ Centralnaja izbiratel'naja komissija, Predvaritelnye rezultaty, At <http://www.shailoo.gov.kg/Itogi/>, accessed August 4, 2015.

¹⁰ Personal communication with Tursunbai Bakir Uulu, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, August 2011.

which capacity he worked constructively with the Embassy on human rights issues”.¹¹ Yet, Bakir Uulu has been an outspoken critic of the US government. For instance, he has opposed the establishment of US airbase in Manas and has criticized Washington for its conduct in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Bakir Uulu has been active in defending Muslim rights and pride in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere. In August 2006, the Kyrgyz politician cancelled his visit to the United States as a protest to President Bush’s use of the term “Islamic fascists”.¹² While he was ombudsman, Bakir Uulu openly questioned the Kyrgyz government’s decision to ban Hizb ut-Tahrir as an extremist group. In his view, Hizb ut-Tahrir has not actually broken the law, since other parties (e.g. the Party of Communists of Kyrgyzstan) would like to change fundamentally the society as well.¹³ As a result, Bakir Uulu has called for the legalization of the group. In return, Hizb ut-Tahrir supported him during the July 2005 presidential elections since he promised to rule by the Quran and sharia. Nonetheless, he received only 3.9 percent of the votes.¹⁴

In November 2008, Bakir Uulu together with businessman Nurlan Motuev established the Union of Kyrgyz Muslims (*Sojuz Musulman Kyrgyzstana* – hereafter UKM) in order to provide “constructive opposition to the government”.¹⁵ The UKM was established to function as a de facto party because the Kyrgyz constitution forbids religious parties. In the words of Bakir Uulu, the UKM “represented a moderate Islam

¹¹ “Union of Kyrgyz Muslims –Islamic Awakening or Stalking Horse?”, February 26, 2009, At <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/02/09BISHKEK169.html#>, accessed August 6, 2015.

¹² “Kyrgyz Official Spurns U.S. over ‘Islamic Fascists’ Remark”, August 16, 2006, At <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1070615.html>, accessed August 13, 2015.

¹³ “Kyrgyzstan’s Ombudsman Rejects Persecution of Hizb ut-Tahrir”, *RFE/RL Newslines*, March 3, 2003, At <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142866.html>, accessed August 16, 2015.

¹⁴ Elmurad Zhusupaliyev, “Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan: We Are Being Harassed for Active Participation in the Presidential Election”, *Ferghana.ru News Agency*, August 10, 2005.

¹⁵ “Union of Kyrgyz Muslims –Islamic Awakening or Stalking Horse?”, op.cit.

and is opposed to radicals”.¹⁶ The UKM called for “economic development consistent with the canons of Islam, for strengthening the fight against corruption, and for making public life more moral”.¹⁷ In 2009, Motuev had a row with Bakir Uulu and created his own group, the Union of True Muslims of Kyrgyzstan.

Moreover, Bakir Uulu has frequently questioned the pro-Western orientation of the Kyrgyz foreign policy. During his 2005 presidential campaign, Bakir Uulu expressed his intention to

Apologize to Arab countries for Askar Akayev’s [Kyrgyzstan’s first president] mistakes. In 1993, during his visit to Israel, when [the Israelis] wanted to make Jerusalem capital, the Kyrgyz president offended the whole world by saying: We would then open embassy [in Jerusalem]. None of the Arab countries have embassies in Kyrgyzstan. If we apologize and bring investment from there, they will give interest-free loans.¹⁸

Bakir Uulu has often criticized Israel for the use of violence against Palestinian civilians. In January 2009, for example, when the UKM protested against the Israeli invasion of Gaza, Bakir Uulu was arrested for burning an Israeli flag.¹⁹

¹⁶ Arslan Mamatov, “Kyrgyzstan: National Protests to Bear an Islamic Stamp”, Eurasianet, December 3, 2008, At <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav120408a.shtml>, accessed September 3, 2015.

¹⁷ Sebastien Peyrouse and Sadykzhan Ibraimov, “Iran’s Central Asia Temptations”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 10, August 17, 2010, At <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/irans-central-asia-temptations>, accessed September 13, 2015.

¹⁸ “Kyrgyzstan Should be Neutral State, Presidential Runner Says”, BBC Monitoring Central Asia quoting Kyrgyz Television First Channel, Bishkek, June 28, 2005,

¹⁹ “Kyrgyzstan: Ex-Ombudsman Bakir Uulu Detained during pro-Palestinian Protests”, January 14, 2009, At <http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=937&print=1>, accessed October 1, 2015.

In recent years, the Kyrgyz MP has focused more on social and cultural issues. In October 2011, the Kyrgyz parliament's cafeteria stopped selling alcohol after Bakir Uulu complained to the parliament speaker because some MPs were smelling alcohol.²⁰ In December 2012, during a meeting with Bishkek students, he put forward a list of "un-Islamic" festivities (e.g. the Women's Day on March 8, the International Workers' Day on May 1) that should be abolished in a predominantly Muslim country like Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, he asked for the cancellation of New Year's celebrations because "this is not an Islamic celebration...perhaps some Muslims mark this event without understanding the meaning of it, [but] New Year's is not our holiday and it is wrong for us to celebrate it".²¹

In March 2013, Bakir Uulu stirred controversy when he suggested changing the day of rest from Sunday to Friday claiming that "85 percent of population of the Kyrgyz Republic profess Islam and implement their Islamic duties in the everyday life".²² In addition, pointing to the shortage of men as a consequence of emigration, Bakir Uulu has advocated the legalization of polygamy, which remains a controversial issue in Kyrgyzstan.²³ He has claimed that the Western values of "sexual

²⁰ "Alcohol Sales in Kyrgyz Parliament Banned", CentralAsiaOnline, October 21, 2011, At http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/newsbriefs/2011/10/21/newsbrief-03, accessed October 1, 2015.

²¹ Farangis Najibullah, "Central Asians Stand By 'Un-Islamic' New Year's Traditions", *RFE/RL*, December 27, 2012, At <http://www.rferl.org/content/central-asians-stand-by-unislamic-new-years-traditions/24810103.html>, accessed October 3, 2015. Also, see "Tursunbai Bakir Uulu: musulmane prazdnjusie novyj god - eto nepolnocennye verujusie", December 14, 2012, At <http://islam-today.ru/article/6129/>, accessed October 3, 2015.

²² "Kyrgyz MPs Offer to Change Day Off from Sunday to Friday", *Trend News Agency*, March 12, 2013 available at <http://en.trend.az/regions/casia/kyrgyzstan/2128473.html>, accessed October 1, 2015.

²³ Bruce Pannier, "Kyrgyzstan: Debate on Legalized Polygamy Continues", *RFE/RL*, March 8, 2007 available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1075173.html>, accessed October 3, 2015.

emancipation and lechery” threaten the Kyrgyz culture.²⁴ More importantly, he has called Kyrgyz women to wear hijab and not the traditional white turban known as *elecheck* which is “less convenient for prayers”.²⁵

Bakir Uulu has claimed to be the first Kyrgyz MP that visited Mecca to perform hajj, although now there are at least 15 MPs who have performed this religious duty.²⁶ Therefore, he has attempted to capitalize on his Islamic credentials, portraying himself as a pioneer and defender of the Muslim faith in Kyrgyzstan. In this way, he can differentiate himself from the old Soviet generation of Kyrgyz politicians who still treat Islam as an “enemy of the state” and can maintain an electoral base consisting of devout Muslims.

Bekbolat Tleukhan

Bekbolat Tleukhan is a prominent representative of the new political Islam in neighbouring Kazakhstan. He was born in 1966 in the city of Atasu in central Kazakhstan. He allegedly participated in the December 1986 events in Almaty as a young university student.²⁷ He graduated from the Kazakh National Technical

²⁴ Asel Kalybekova, “Kyrgyzstan Q & A: Author of ‘Foreign Agents’ Bill Seeks to Thwart ‘Sabotage’”, Eurasianet.Org, October 3, 2013, At <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67580>, accessed September 23, 2015.

²⁵ “Tursunbai Bakir uulu: Islam smotrit na ljubov po-drugomu”, Newspaper *Jany Agim*, February 22, 2013, p. 13

²⁶ Aigul Tokoeva, “Tursunbai Bakir Uulu: Slava Allahu, kollegi stanoviatsia blagovernymi musulmanami”, *Vecherniy Bishkek*, February 26, 2013, At http://www.vb.kg/doc/218066_tyrsynbay_bakir_yyly:_slava_allahy_kollegi_stanoviat_sia_blagovernymi_mysylmanami.html, accessed August 23, 2015.

²⁷ In December 1986, riots broke out in Almaty and other Kazakh cities after Mikhail Gorbachev replaced First Secretary of Kazakhstan’s Communist Party Dinmukhammed Kunayev, an ethnic Kazakh, by Gennady Kolbin - an ethnic Russian from Russia. This decision went against what had previously been the norm in the Soviet Union, namely a native to take the post of the First Secretary and a Slav the post of the Deputy First Secretary. The riots were dispersed by the police and army units as well as groups of Russian workers armed with sticks. For Tleukhan’s alleged participation in the events see “Deputat Bekbolat Tleuhan prosel proverku na

University as metallurgical engineer. Nevertheless, Tleukhan worked as an academic at Kurmangazy Almaty State Conservatory's Department of Folk Singing and became a well-known folk musician in Kazakhstan. In October 2002, Tleukhan was appointed deputy minister of Culture, Information and Social Concord and two years later he joined *Majilis*, namely Kazakhstan's Lower House of Parliament, as an MP.

In the first years of his political career, Tleukhan kept a low profile. As member of the ruling party *Nur Otan*, he supported wholeheartedly the Nazarbayev regime. Following the ousting of Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev by protestors in 2005, which came to be known as the Tulip revolution, Tleukhan called for a state strategy to prevent a similar uprising in Kazakhstan organized by "young traitors".²⁸

In recent years, he has become increasingly vocal about the role of religion in Kazakhstan. In September 2011, during a parliament debate for a draft law on Religious Activities and Religious Institutions, Tleukhan criticized the decision to ban the wearing of hijab in state institutions by asking "why are we setting such strict constraints for our women, why are we forbidding them to wear hijab? This is their right. Let them wear it for Allah's sake!".²⁹ The Kazakh MP, who is a practicing Muslim, warned against the approval of the aforementioned law by the parliament because there is a provision banning prayer at workplace; he asked, "will I be

detektore lzi", *TengriNews*, October 16, 2011, At http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/deputat-bekbolat-tleuhan-proshel-proverku-na-detektore-lji-199283/, accessed August 12, 2015.

²⁸ Antoine Blua, "Kazakhstan/Azerbaijan: Governments Try to Keep Young on their Side", *Eurasianet*, April 10, 2005, At <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/pp041105a.shtml>, accessed September 3, 2015.

²⁹ "Kazakh MP Asked to Ban Kazakh Women From Showing Belly-Buttons", *Tengri News*, September 9, 2011, At <http://en.tengrinews.kz/people/4335/>, accessed September 1, 2015.

violating the law and effectively become a criminal if I pray in my office?”.³⁰ Tleukhan argued, with some justification, that the law violated Kazakhstan’s constitution which protects freedom of religion. The law was probably Nazarbayev regime’s response to increased Islamic militancy. In the fall of 2011, Kazakhstan was rocked by a series of attacks against government buildings and security forces in the cities of Atyrau and Taraz respectively. A previously unknown group calling itself *Jund al-Khilafah* (Soldiers of the Caliphate) claimed responsibility and threatened further attacks if the Kazakh government did not repeal a restrictive law on religion.³¹

As a result of his outspoken views on Islam, Tleukhan has received increased media attention. During an interview, he argued that “Islam is the religion of forefathers. The religion of Islam is needed to fill the spiritual vacuum for the young people. Only in that case young people won’t follow other sects”.³² In addition, Tleukhan has espoused social conservatism. He once criticized an opposition newspaper for publishing a semi-naked picture of Nazarbayev by stating that

Think of the times of Ablai Khan [Kazakh monarch of the 18th century], when a person was buried alive for letting the khan's hat fall on the ground. Now we have the publication of a picture of a naked president. The president is a

³⁰ Farangis Najibullah, “Following Terrorist Attacks, Kazakhstan Hurriedly Tightens Religious Law”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 29, 2011, At http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan_new_religious_law_islam_extremism/24341450.html, accessed September 3, 2015.

³¹ Bill Roggio, “Jund al-khilafah Claims Attack in Kazakhstan”, *The Long War Journal*, November 16, 2011, At http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/11/jund_al_khilafah_cla.php, accessed September 3, 2015.

³² “Bekbolat Tleukhan: Mina zamannin qarqini qatti”, *Neweurasianet.org*, February 16, 2008, At <http://neweurasia.net/kazakhstan/kazakhstan/саясат/бекболат-тілеухан-мына-заманның-қарқ/>, accessed September 13, 2015.

symbol. The symbol should not be scorned... And you must not show the Kazakh president naked.³³

Moreover, he has called for the ban of films with erotic scenes and the removal of advertisements for them from the streets.³⁴ Tleukhan has criticized certain Kazakh-produced soap operas as being “immoral” because they make a mockery of the society.³⁵

In spite of his pro-Islamist rhetoric, Tleukhan has been eager to show his loyalty to President Nazarbayev by making extraordinary statements; once, for example, he stated that “for me, he (i.e. Nazarbayev) is a God-appointed person”.³⁶ He has also compared Nazarbayev to Kemal Ataturk, Turkey’s founding father.³⁷ Yet, Tleukhan was not included in the Nur Otan’s list of candidates for the January 2012 parliamentary elections because during a conversation with Kazakh intellectuals he talked about the prominence of Wahhabism.³⁸ Yet, he has denounced the ISIS as “the enemy no. 1 in Kazakhstan” since the jihadi group has recruited Kazakh children.³⁹ Since 2013, he has been President of the Association of National Sports.

³³ “Kazakhstan: Thin-Skinned Deputy Keeps Railing at Borat”, *Eurasianet.org*, December 8, 2010, At <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62526>, accessed September 12, 2015.

³⁴ Murat Laumulin. 2012. “Religious Situation in Central Asia and Threat of Religious Extremism”, *Central Asia’s Affairs*, 2 (47): 12.

³⁵ Zhasulan Kuzhekov, “Deputat Tleuhan iskljucaet incest i drugie poroki iz imidza nasego obsestva”, *Informacionno-analiticeskii Centr*, September 26, 2010, At <http://www.ia-centr.ru/expert/9015/>, accessed September 12, 2015.

³⁶ “Outrage as Kazakh Leader Snapped in Swimming Trunks”, *Reuters*, September 26, 2007, At <http://www.newswatch.in/archives/newsblog/outrage-as-kazakh-leader-snapped-in-swimming-trunks.html>, accessed September 23, 2015.

³⁷ See “Sirokii rezonans”, *Izvestia Kazakhstan*, December 16, 2009, At <http://www.izvestia.kz/node/2033>, accessed September 8, 2015.

³⁸ See “Deputat Majilis RK. Bekbolat Tyleukhanov podderzivaet wahhabism”, At http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SWO_xGEBOQ, accessed September 8, 2015.

³⁹ Bekbolat Tleukhan, “Kazakka karsy shabuy1”, November 23, 2014, At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWwVty2Xxcw>, accessed September 8, 2015.

Muhiddin Kabiri

Muhiddin Kabiri was born in Faizabad, a small town in central Tajikistan, in 1966. He graduated from the Faculty of Oriental Languages (Arabic Department) at the Tajik National University. In addition, he studied in Yemen's Sana University and Russia's Diplomatic Academy. During 1997-2000, he acted as an advisor to the IRPT chairman Said Abdullo Nuri; in this capacity, he served as an international law expert in the Inter-Tajik Peace Talks. Kabiri became the deputy chairman of the IRPT in 2000 and was elected member of the Tajik parliament in 2005.

During the mid-2000s, the IRPT was divided between young reformists and the old generation of Islamist leaders who fought during the civil war. Despite being a veteran Islamist and member of the old guard, Said Abdullo Nuri surprised everyone and selected Muhiddin Kabiri as the next leader of the IRPT in the summer of 2006.

Although the ideological transformation of the IRPT started after the end of the Tajik civil war, Kabiri has taken credit for moving the party to the centre. His predecessor had built a party that was supported largely by mullahs, peasants, and Gharmi Tajiks. In contrast, Kabiri has expanded the electoral base of the 'new IRPT' to include students, women, urban dwellers, and even non-Muslims. The US ambassador to Tajikistan, Richard Hoagland, described him as a politician who "appears genuinely to be moderate and to understand Western-style democratic politics.... [T]he West should carefully find ways to support Kabiri as a new-generation, moderate Islamic leader".⁴⁰ It should be noted that Kabiri has no religious

⁴⁰ Richard Hoagland, "Moderate Tajik Islamic Leader Walks a Tightrope – Rahmonov Wants to Marginalize him; His Party's Islamist's Wing Distrusts Him", November 28, 2005, At <http://www.wikileaks.ch/cable/2005/11/05DUSHANBE1870.html#>, accessed September 10, 2015.

education and has deemphasized the IRPT's Islamic origins. After his re-election as party chairman in 2011, Kabiri stated that

The motto of our party reads *Trust in Allah, loyalty to the Motherland, service to the people*. The emphasis will change now. Our relationship with Allah is our personal matter. There is no need to continue announcing [its Islamic principles], that is, emphasizing the first part of our motto. We now need to focus our efforts on the second and third parts of the motto.⁴¹

Kabiri's ambitious effort to make the IRPT a more moderate and less Islamic-oriented party has not gone unchallenged. It appears that conservative veteran members explored the possibility of nominating Nuri's elder son, Muhammadjon Nuri, who is an Iranian-trained *alim* [Islamic scholar], as a candidate for party chairman in 2011.⁴² Moreover, prominent members of the party such as Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda and his brother Eshon Nouriddinjon have been known for their pro-Iranian inclinations.⁴³

Although the IRPT received Iranian support during the Tajik civil war and there is still a strong pro-Iranian wing within the party, Kabiri seems to have little interest to develop links further with Shia-majority Iran. Instead, he has increased his

⁴¹Alexander Sodiqov, "Kabiri Reelected as Islamic Revival Party Leader in Tajikistan", *Central Asian-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, October 19, 2011, At <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5646/print>, accessed September 10, 2015.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ In December 2011, for example, both brothers were accused of creating sectarian strife by commemorating the Shia festival of Ashura. See Mark Vinson, "Iranian Soft Power in Tajikistan: Beyond Cultural and Economic Ties", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 9 (52), March 14, 2012, At http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39133&cHash=700f316f09ba2981e2aaec4871a8aef4#.Vlv7KnYrLIU, accessed August 3, 2015.

international contacts by travelling frequently to Western and Sunni-majority countries to make presentations and hold meetings. In April 2012, Kabiri met the Russian ambassador to Tajikistan to discuss about opportunities to expand cultural and spiritual ties between the IRPT and Russian Muslims.⁴⁴

In his speeches, Kabiri has been keen to emphasize the “Tajikness” of the IRPT because the party is still suspected of having a hidden agenda to turn the country into an Iranian-type Islamic republic. Kabiri has not fully endorsed Tajik nationalism; for example, he has not supported the idea of a Greater Tajikistan which would include the Uzbek cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, and the northern parts of Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Instead, he has advocated regional integration by establishing a European Union-like confederation of Central Asian states since they share the Islamic culture.⁴⁶

Kabiri has advocated Muslim rights in Tajikistan since the Rahmonov regime has adopted a coercive policy to stop the growing religiosity of the population. In response to the rising number of Tajik women wearing the hijab, in October 2005, Tajik authorities decided to ban the headscarf in schools and universities. Kabiri and the IRPT have defended women’s right to wear the Islamic veil, claiming that it is a question of human rights.⁴⁷ But the chairman of the IRPT has avoided an open

⁴⁴ Payrav Chorshanbiyev, “Muhiddin Kabiri Meets with US, Russian Ambassadors”, *Asia-Plus*, April 19, 2012, At <http://news.tj/en/news/muhiddin-kabiri-meets-us-russian-ambassadors>, accessed August 3, 2015.

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Muhiddin Kabiri, Exeter, Great Britain, 24 November, 2012

⁴⁶ Personal communication with Muhiddin Kabiri, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, January 31, 2005

⁴⁷ Farangis Najibullah, “Islamic Party Leader in Tajikistan Says He Supports Secular System”, *RFE/RL Features*, September 15, 2009, At http://www.rferl.org/content/Islamic_Party_Leader_In_Tajikistan_Says_He_Supports_Secular_System_/1823086.html, accessed September 5, 2015.

discussion about the controversial issue of polygamy in Tajikistan possibly in order not to antagonize female members and voters.

Kabiri has increasingly presented himself as a modern politician who favours consensual rather than adversarial politics. Indeed, Kabiri has argued that the IRPT does not want “to create an Islamic state or an Islamic republic in Tajikistan. But we want to create an Islamic society. Governments can include technocrats or non-practicing Muslims or others, but our most important goal is the creation of a society that lives with Islamic values”.⁴⁸ In other words, Kabiri has favored a cultural and social Islamization of Tajikistan.

Nevertheless, the IRPT has been the target of a government crackdown since the summer of 2015. On September 30, 2015, Tajikistan’s Supreme Court banned the IRPT as a terrorist group.⁴⁹ Three month earlier Kabiri had been forced into self-exile to avoid prosecution for allegedly breaking the law during a property transaction 16 years ago.⁵⁰ As of this writing, it is not clear what his future of Kabiri holds. Most recently, members of the IRPT have been accused of supporting the mutiny of former Deputy Defense Minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda in September 2015.⁵¹

Comparing the three politicians

In spite of their countries’ secular constitutions, Central Asian leaders have utilized the Muslim faith to gain legitimacy. Following the breakup of the Soviet

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Tajikistan Bans the Islamic Revival Party as Terrorist Group”, ASIA-Plus, September 30, 2015, At <http://www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/tajikistan-bans-islamic-revival-party-terrorist-group>, accessed October 3, 2015.

⁵⁰ David Trilling, “Tajikistan Drives Top Opposition Leader Into Exile”, *Eurasianet*, June 18, 2015, At <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/73931>, accessed August 4, 2015.

⁵¹ Farangis Najibullah, “Death Of A Fugitive: Abduhalim Nazarzoda, Tajik General Blamed For Recent Violence”, Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, September 16, 2015, At <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-general-nazarzoda-deadly-attacks/27233955.html>, accessed November 3, 2015.

Union, the Central Asian republics established separate Muslim boards to manage religious affairs. Thus, Islam has been acknowledged as the majority faith. Simultaneously, Central Asian regimes have infused ethnic or indigenous elements into their state-approved versions of acceptable Islam.⁵² In this context, authorities have aimed at regulating religious activities and restrict the visibility of the Muslim faith. Any public manifestation of Islam that is not sanctioned by the regime, it is often considered a security threat.

At first sight, Bakir Uulu, Tleukhan and Kabiri only defend religious freedoms and values. This stance alone would not have been enough to classify a politician in the West as “Islamist”. Yet in the context of Central Asia, any deviation from the official policy could carry consequences; thus, their preoccupation with Islamic issues can be interpreted as a conscious political decision.

The three politicians have adopted a hybrid Islamism which includes advocacy for a greater public role of Islam. Their vision of Islamic society conflicts with the official doctrine of quasi-separation between state and religion. Indeed, Bakir Uulu, Tleukhan, and Kabiri have favored a “soft Islamization” of the society. Yet, they have avoided a direct confrontation with the ruling elites. Therefore, the three leaders have choose to campaign through the political process and within the constitution.

Their electoral base is mainly devout Muslims who want to support candidates more willing to acknowledge Muslim values such as female modesty. Having said that, these Islamist leaders do not have a religious education and they do not offer any

⁵² In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, the authorities have sponsored an indigenous and traditionalist Islam, which includes certain local peculiarities—such as worship of saints and ancestors—as opposed to the universalist Islam which adheres to a standardized code of rituals and practices. See Aurelie Biard, “The Religious Factor in the Reification of ‘Neo-Ethnic’ Identities in Kyrgyzstan,” *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 3 (2010): 323-335.

novel interpretations of the Muslim scripts. Like many modern politicians, they have used both the old and the new media to communicate their messages.

In spite of many similarities, the three representatives of the new political Islam have different orientations and priorities. Bakir Uulu has used anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric, and has advocated closer relations with Muslim countries. He is a populist politician who best plays the role of an activist in raising awareness about Islamic issues. Tleukhan has avoided criticizing the West, but he has apparently supported the Salafi branch of Islam which has been viewed by many in Kazakhstan as “Arabic” and “extreme”. He is an artist turned into an advocate of Islam in public life without developing a concrete political agenda. Kabiri has cultivated relations with Muslim-majority countries, but he has also been eager to maintain close contacts with Western governments and institutions. He is more a leader than a thinker and he is building a reputation of being pragmatic rather than a rigid ideologue. Their views are summarized in Table 1.

	Public wearing of Hijab	Polygamy	Relations with the West	Relations with Muslim Countries
Bakir Uulu	Positive	Positive	Negative	Positive
Tleukhan	Positive	Unknown	Unknown	Positive
Kabiri	Positive	Unknown	Positive	Positive

Table 1

Their different political behavior stems from their professional background: Bakir Uulu is a political loner who could afford to act independently by establishing ad hoc alliances; Tleukhan is a political child of the Nazarbayev regime but he attempted to become a semi-independent actor; Kabiri comes from the post-civil war generation of Islamist leaders and his political survival depends on the support of the party machinery.

It is difficult to measure the political influence of Islamo-democrats in the three countries under study. To begin with, Bakir Uulu has had a robust career as member of the Kyrgyz parliament, presidential candidate, ombudsman, and ambassador. Despite his pro-Islamist and controversial views, Bakir Uulu has obviously been able to survive politically. It is clear that he has some following among the Kyrgyz electorate, particularly in the southern part of the country.

Before getting expelled from the Nur-Otan's party election list for his views on Islam, Tleukhan served as member of the Kazakh parliament and deputy minister of the government. Besides, he has gained the status of a political celebrity who is reported on and sought after by Kazakhstan's media. His Twitter account has 115,000 followers, which means that he is one of the most followed persons in the Kazakhstan.

Before the government crackdown of 2015, the IRPT was gaining popularity in Tajik society evidenced by the growing number of members; there were 42,000 registered members (including many women) in 2012 and the party had reached out to Tajik migrants working in Russia.⁵³ In the post-civil war period, the IRPT has taken part in every parliamentary election (2000, 2005, 2010), drawing seven to eight percent of votes and gaining two seats in the Lower House of the national parliament (*Majlisi namoyandagon*). Kabiri was an MP for ten years until the March 2015 parliamentary elections when his party failed to pass the 5-percent threshold required to enter the parliament.

⁵³ See "Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan Declares Growing Popularity in spite of Government Pressure", *Interfax*, April 12, 2012, At <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=9255>, accessed September 11, 2015; "Muhiddin Kabiri: Politics and Stability in Tajikistan", Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary, November 26, 2012, At <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/261112summary.pdf>, accessed September 9, 2015.

Explaining the emergence of the Islamo-democrats

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism, many Central Asians Muslims have sought to rediscover their religious roots and live a more Islamic life; as a result, some of them have developed an interest in Islamism as an alternative viewpoint. Despite their efforts, the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir have gained limited popularity among Central Asian Muslims who tend to view them as out of touch with post-Soviet realities.

The failure of radical Islamists has contributed to the emergence of independent actors with an Islam-based political agenda. The representatives of the new political Islam have attempted to fill the political and ideological vacuum by promoting a hybrid Islamism. They have focused largely on symbolic and normative issues (e.g. wearing of hijab). Simultaneously, they have collaborated with the state authorities by publicly condemning radical Islamists.⁵⁴ Therefore, they are not considered to be an “existential threat” against the post-communist ruling elites.

But the emergence of Islamo-democrats is not a purely local phenomenon. Although politically fragmented, the Muslim world still forms a large religious–cultural system that is interconnected and interrelated. Members of the *ummah* constantly borrow and lend ideas, norms, and strategies. Naturally, any major political change in one part of this system would somehow affect the other parts. *It will be claimed that the emergence of Islamo-democrats in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan is partly the result of important political developments taking place outside*

⁵⁴ Bakir Uulu has frequently condemned Islamic militants (See “Kyrgyzstan: National Protests to Bear an Islamic Stamp”); Tleukhan has publicly denied any sympathy to radical Islam (See “Deputat Bekbolat Tleuhan prosel proverku na detektore lzi”), and Kabiri has criticized both “extremist” groups such as the IMU which use violence and “radical” groups such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir which work against an independent and sovereign Tajikistan (See “Tajikistan: Kabiri’s IRPT Takes a Time Out”, Embassy Dushanbe, September 26, 2006, At <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=06DUSHANBE1766>).

Central Asia. The new political Islam of Central Asia is largely modeled after Turkey's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* – hereafter AKP).

The rise of AKP in Turkey has served as an example of convergence between Islam and parliamentary democracy. The party was established in August 2001 by former members of the Islamist Virtue Party, which was banned a month earlier, and other conservative political figures. The AKP won the parliamentary elections of 2002, 2007, 2011 and 2015; as a result, the party has had a large majority of seats in the parliament and the country's top political positions - the presidency, the premiership, and the speakership of the parliament - are held by AKP leaders. It has adhered to an ideology that combines social conservatism with a pro-business agenda.⁵⁵ The AKP government has taken credit for Turkey's booming economy while engaging in culture wars over largely symbolic issues – such as the wearing of veil in universities and the banning of alcohol during the Ramadan.⁵⁶

Besides, the AKP government has sought EU membership and has maintained close ties with the United States. According to Ahmet Kuru, the AKP model could pursue Muslim politics without establishing an Islamic state.⁵⁷ Therefore, the AKP can hardly be classified as a typical Islamist party; it may be more accurate to

⁵⁵ On the AKP see Gamze Avci. 2011. "The Justice and Development Party and the EU: Political Pragmatism in a Changing Environment", *South European Society and Politics* 16: 3: 409-421; William Hale. 2005. "Christian Democracy and the AKP: Parallels and Contrasts", *Turkish Studies* 6:2: 293-310; Hasan Turunc. 2007. "Islamist or Democratic? The AKP's Search for Identity in Turkish Politics", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 15: 1: 79-91.

⁵⁶ Interview with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan: Leader Says Headscarf Ban at Universities 'Unfortunate', *Spiegel Online*, September 20, 2007, At <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/turkish-prime-minister-erdogan-leader-says-headscarf-ban-at-universities-unfortunate-a-506896.html>, accessed September 12, 2015.

⁵⁷ Ahmet Kuru, "Muslim Politics Without an Islamic State: Can Turkey's Justice and Development Party be a Model for Arab Islamists?", Brookings Doha Centre, Policy Briefing, February 2013, p. 3.

describe it as “Islamist-leaning”. In any case, the AKP has attempted to export its own model for governance to other Muslim-majority countries.⁵⁸

The rise of AKP in Turkey has given birth to a sui generis political system, the *Islam democracy*, where political pluralism coexists with Islamic values. The Islam democracy is closely identified with the existing state and does not support the abolition of borders. As opposed to neo-Caliphate groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir that have envisioned the establishment of a universal Islamic state that is not embedded in any particular territory, the Islam democrats tend to emphasize the notion of homeland.

Since it is located on the periphery of the Muslim world, Central Asia is influenced by new political trends perhaps with some delay. Owing to the globalization of information, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Tajiks have become increasingly more aware of political developments in the greater Middle East. Indeed, the Islam democrats of Central Asia stand ready to learn valuable lessons from Turkey. During a speech at the George Washington University in October 2012, Kabiri admitted that

Our party considers all models, the Turkish and Malaysian included. I visited Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia...to study the experience of the new governments and by applying this experience to our national values and those realities that exist in Central Asia and Tajikistan...but closer to us today is the Turkish experience, though, I must confess, I am talking about it very little

⁵⁸ Ömer Taşpınar 2011. “Turkey: An Interested Party.” In Kenneth Pollack (et al), *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, pp. 270-272.

[because] many people in Tajikistan, especially our intellectuals, are very sensitive to ideas of pan-Turkism.⁵⁹

Bakir Uulu has also looked at Turkey as a role model of a country that combines democracy with a larger public role of Islam. During an interview with the author in August 2011, Bakir Uulu argued that Turkish model could serve as a source of inspiration for the development of Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁰ From his point of view, “the Kyrgyz people need to adopt an ideology which is rooted in the Muslim faith because after the fall of communism there is an ideological vacuum”. In his opinion, the rise to power of the AKP in Turkey has demonstrated that it is possible to utilize the “Muslim faith as mobilizing force for the promotion of democratization in authoritarian countries”.⁶¹

Tleukhan has visited Turkey several times as deputy minister and member of the parliament. Yet, it is not known whether he ever had any contacts with AKP and Turkish Islamists. At the minimum, he has supported the idea of pan-Turkic cooperation in the fields of culture and sports.⁶² He is the least open about his political vision for the future of Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

The causality between developments in Turkey and the emergence of Islamo-democrats in Central Asia can be explained by two factors: the successful diffusion of

⁵⁹ Transcript of Mr. Kabiri’s speech and discussion at the Central Asian Program, George Washington University, October 16, 2012, At http://www.centralasiaprogram.org/images/Voices_from_CA_8,_October_2012.pdf, accessed September 4, 2015.

⁶⁰ Personal communication with Tursunbai Bakir Uulu, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, August 2011.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² “The First Open Kokpar Championship of Asia Starts in Astana”, Official Site of Akimat of Astana, September 9, 2013, At <http://astana.gov.kz/en/modules/material/2396>, accessed October 3, 2015.

ideological norms and the importance that governments attach to maintaining a good relationship with Turkey.

First, the transmission of ideas and norms is a constant feature of international politics.⁶³ Due to their religious and ethnic links, Central Asian countries are closer to Turkey than other Muslim countries. This is true even in the case of Tajikistan which is the only Farsi-speaking country in the region. From the pan-Turkism of the Basmachi movement to the secularism of the kemalist regime, Central Asian societies have been exposed for decades to ideas and norms originating from Turkey.

Currently, the most important ideological norm diffused from Turkey to Central Asia is that of *Islamic difference*. It is defined as public manifestation of the Muslim faith such as wearing of hijab, restrictions on the consumption of alcohol, banning of nudity etc. The diffusion of ideological norms from Turkey to Central Asia has been mostly achieved through the mechanisms of *persuasion and influence*, which are facilitated by a variety of channels, such as media, the Internet, tourism, education and religious organizations, and the business community.

To begin with, Turkish satellite channels like *Avaz* have broadcasted in regional languages such as Kazakh and Kyrgyz.⁶⁴ Thus, local viewers are familiar with the religiosity of the Turkish society. Besides, thousands of students from Central Asia have studied at Turkish universities, and citizens of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do not need a visa to enter Turkey.⁶⁵ Also, the norm of Islamic difference

⁶³ See Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane. 1993. *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁶⁴ “New Turkish TV Channel Broadcasts To Balkans, Central Asia, Caucasus”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 23, 2009, At http://www.rferl.org/content/New_Turkish_TV_Channel_Broadcasts_To_Balkans_Central_Asia_Caucasus/1515300.html, accessed September 6, 2015.

⁶⁵ Bruce Pannier, “Turkish-Russian Tensions Put Central Asia In A Tough Spot”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 25, 2015, At

has been diffused through Turkish education, including schools linked to the Gülen movement.⁶⁶ Finally, members of the Turkish business community have contributed to the transmission of the norm through interactions with locals.

While the AKP plays the role of ideological norm promoter, the Islamo-democrats of Central Asia are not passive receivers. There is a process of localization that entails the reinterpretation of the norm and its adjustment to national conditions.⁶⁷ For example, the Islamo-democrats have portrayed the wearing of hijab as a cultural tradition rather than religious obligation. Hence, they have viewed Islam as an indispensable part of their country's culture.

Secondly, the rise of Islamo-democracy in Turkey has created a dilemma for some Central Asian regimes. While crushing hard-line Islamists from the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir can be easily justified, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Tajik authorities cannot afford to appear outright "anti-Islamist". The three countries have joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference and have aspired to improve economic and trade relations with Turkey, which is one of the biggest investors in Central Asia. For example, the Tajik president Emomali Rahmanov stated in 2007 that

We attach great importance to our relations with Turkey, our brother. Our politics have always been based on this view and will continue to be so.

<http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-turkey-tensions-central-asia/27387987.html>, accessed November 26, 2015.

⁶⁶ See Bayram Balci, "What Future For the Fethullah Gülen Movement in Central Asia and the Caucasus?", July 2, 2014, At <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/07/02/what-future-for-fethullah-g%C3%BClen-movement-in-central-asia-and-caucasus>, accessed September 23, 2015; Samantha Brletich, "Tajikistan, Turkey and the Gülen Movement", *The Diplomat*, August 21, 2015, At <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/tajikistan-turkey-and-the-gulen-movement/>, accessed September 23, 2015.

⁶⁷ On localization of norm see Amitav Acharya. 2004. "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism", *International Organization* 58 (Spring): 239-275.

However the current level of relations is not enough or satisfactory...we should accelerate Tajikistan-Turkey relations, particularly in social and economic fields.⁶⁸

Likewise, Kyrgyz politicians have stressed the importance of the Turkish model. Omurbek Tekebayev, Kyrgyzstan's former parliament speaker and deputy prime minister, argued during a visit to Turkey in October 2010 that 'Turkey's parliamentary system proves that a modern democracy can be formed in the Turkic and the Islamic worlds'.⁶⁹ Likewise, Kazakhstan's president Nazarbayev has paid great attention to relations with Turkey; during a visit to Turkey in October 2012, he stated that 'We have particular respect for Turkey which was the first country to recognize our independence. Today the Turkish Republic is one of the closest strategic partners of our country'.⁷⁰

In other words, Turkey is viewed by the three countries as strategic ally. But a more Islamic Turkey means that Central Asian regimes would have a difficulty to sustain their confrontational policy vis-à-vis radical Islamists. The existence of alternative pro-Islamist voices like Bakir Uulu, Tleukhan and Kabiri could protect regimes from criticism, while in reality rulers still control the role of Islam in public life. The declining state repression has created political space for newcomers to put

⁶⁸ Enes Cansever, "Rahmanov: Turkey's EU Membership Benefits Tajikistan as well", *Today's Zaman*, September 12, 2007, At http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=121867, accessed September 1, 2015.

⁶⁹ "Kyrgyz Politician Says Turkey Model for Region", *Anatolia News Agency*, October 22, 2010, At <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/kyrgyz-politician-says-turkey-model-for-region-2010-08-22>, accessed September 1, 2015.

⁷⁰ "President Nazarbayev Visits Turkey", Statement by Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 12, 2012, At <http://www.mfa.gov.kz/en/article/8530>, accessed September 2, 2015.

forward a political agenda that is Islam-based. However, the recent banning of the IRPT may eventually question the Tajik regime's commitment to maintaining good relations with Turkey.

Conclusion

Political Islam has long been viewed by Central Asian leaders as a major threat to regional stability. Although jihadi and clandestine groups have made inroads, they are still marginal. Nevertheless, there is a new variant of political Islam. As opposed to the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir which seek to establish an Islamic state, the new Islamists of Central Asia seek a more public role for the Muslim faith without confronting state authorities. In effect, they have favoured a partial and soft Islamization of their respective societies. Their target audience is those devout Muslims who support a version of Islamism that emphasizes societal changes.

The new generation of Islamists in the region does not favour a radical political change and seek to modify the system from within. The influence of Turkey on the new political Islam of Central Asia is substantial for two reasons. First, the norm of Islamic difference has been diffused from Turkey to Central Asian countries through different channels, ranging from media to education. Second, Central Asian regimes have tolerated the Islamo-democrats because they do not wish to antagonize a more Islamic Turkey which remains a strategic ally. Bakir Uulu, Tleukhan and Kabiri are the new face of political Islam in Central Asia.

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