

# LEGITIMACY AND ISLAMIC SYMBOLS IN CONTEMPORARY TAJIKISTAN

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## **ABSTRACT**

Carissa Mary Landes: Legitimacy and Islamic Symbols in Contemporary Tajikistan  
(Under the direction of Eren Tasar)

This paper examines the use of Islamic symbols by the Tajik government and president Emomali Rahmon, and the development of a form of “Tajik” Islam as a tool to gain political legitimacy. Utilizing Rahmon’s series of speeches on Abu Hanifa (669-767), the founder of one of the main schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, as well as press coverage from Rahmon’s recent pilgrimage to Mecca, this thesis analyzes how the president is attempting to present himself as an important Muslim leader. It reviews three major factors that inform the attitude of the Rahmon government toward Islam: Soviet legacy, the international security context, and the Tajik Civil War. It concludes that despite the attempts of the Tajik government to aggressively police religious institutions, spiritual leaders, and certain public expressions of the Muslim faith, the state’s ability to implement its version of Islam is limited.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
IRPT	Islamic Revivalist Party of Tajikistan
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
RFERL	Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
UTO	United Tajik Opposition

## **INTRODUCTION**

Leader of the Nation, and likely soon to be president for life, Emomali Rahmon is the star of a growing cult of personality in Tajikistan. His face looks down from government buildings, schools, universities, from billboards on roads, even from ski resorts and new hotel investment projects. When the president made an October visit to Panjakent, a small regional city in Tajikistan, roads were suddenly paved, facades repainted, and new propaganda posters hung. Schoolchildren and university students took a month off from classes to produce an elaborate cultural performance to honor their dear president. With the political field increasingly narrowed and opposition in the country nearly nonexistent, Tajik politics are structured almost entirely around this one man and his family.

Despite the omnipresence of its Leader of the Nation, Tajikistan is a curiously weak state. The Tajik government is unable to keep everyday corruption in check or prevent the defection of a key security official to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and it recently faced an armed challenge to its rule by a deputy defense minister. Considering the presence of the failed state of Afghanistan next-door and international security concerns about the spread of ISIS, Tajikistan can seem like a state on the verge of instability. Rahmon represents himself as critical to the security and economic growth of his nation, and this is the primary basis of his claim to legitimacy. Two decades in power has increasingly diminished Rahmon's ability to be seen as a democratically elected leader. The president has turned to other means of gathering support, by developing his religious credentials.

The government of Tajikistan has long had a complicated relationship with Islam. For more than ten years following its independence from the Soviet Union, the Tajik state pursued a policy of aggressive secularism. Then, in the late 2000s the government began to include Islamic references and symbols in the national narrative. In 2009 the government established Hanafi Islam as the official religion of Tajikistan and simultaneously enacted a series of policies restricting freedom of worship. In recent years, the government has consolidated control over formal religious institutions and sought to limit the visibility of certain Islamic symbols, such as beards and particular styles of hijab. The Tajik regime has also sidelined political opposition, banning the previously legal Islamic Revivalist Party of Tajikistan under the guise of extremism. By cracking down on the practice of non state sanctioned Islam and promoting a specific school of the religion, government officials have developed a particular brand of Tajik national Islam, which acts as the basis for a cultural and national identity. At the same time, Rahmon also began to represent himself as an important Muslim leader. By making religious references in speeches and publicly performing Muslim ceremonies, Rahmon is attempting to present himself as a pious ruler who is an appropriate leader for an increasingly devout constituency.

In this paper, I argue that the Rahmon regime has incorporated Islamic references and symbols into the national narrative and developed a form of Islam that is specifically Tajik in order to gain political legitimacy. It is important for the Tajik government to maintain legitimacy, as it takes steps to increasingly restrict the civil, religious, and political rights of citizens in the country. I will use Rahmon's series of speeches on Abu Hanifa (699-767), the founder of one of the main schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, as well as press coverage



from Rahmon's pilgrimage to Mecca in 2016 to explore how these references and imagery have been incorporated into his presidency and government.<sup>1</sup>

Abu Hanifa, or Imam A'zam, as Rahmon refers to him in his speeches, is an important religious figure that gave his name to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Hanafi Islam is widely influential across the Middle East and Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> It emphasizes the importance of belief and "practical devotion" over strict ritual practice, stresses agreement in the community, and tolerates some differences of opinion.<sup>3</sup> The government perceives Hanafi Islam as the "traditional" form of Islam in Tajikistan, as opposed to "imported" and "foreign" sects of Islam like Salafism. The Tajik government likely chose Abu Hanifa as the star figure for its propaganda campaign because of his status as one of the most well known Islamic historical figures and his role as founder of "traditional" Tajik Islam.

The main protagonist of this thesis is Emomali Rahmon, President of Tajikistan since 1994. While the Tajik government cannot be reduced to its president, the continuity of Rahmon's position since 1997 and the nature of his personalistic authoritarian rule provide some justification for the heavy focus on the president. This thesis will rely on Rahmon's speeches and policies as primary sources to examine the unique relationship of the Tajik government with Islam.

My sources come mostly from the Tajik state and the official Khovar National Information Agency of Tajikistan website. I also rely on news articles from international media organizations, mainly Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (RFERL), to provide information on

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Iranica*, "Abu Hanifa," accessed March 27, 2016, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abu-hanifa-noman-b>.

<sup>2</sup> T. Jeremy Gunn, "Shaping an Islamic Identity: Religion, Islamism and the State in Central Asia," *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2003): 396.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Tajik government policies and events. Each of these sources has its own bias and political agenda; the Khovar Agency presents Tajikistan and its president in the best light possible, whereas RFERL, a news organization funded by U.S. Congress, tends to view Central Asian governments with a critical eye. None of my sources can speak to the personal intentions or beliefs of Tajik officials or Rahmon himself. However, the official Khovar Agency sources can demonstrate how the Tajik state seeks to present itself, and it is this issue of representation that is central to my project.

There are a few main factors that inform the attitude of the Tajik government toward the Muslim faith. These are: Soviet legacy, the Tajik Civil War, and the international security context after 9/11. The Soviet state viewed Islam as a potential ideological threat to be contained, which it repressed and regulated. Tajikistan's post independence government largely inherited these Soviet attitudes toward Islam. The Tajik Civil War, a bloody regional conflict in the 1990s, was partially provoked by competing Islamist and neo-Soviet interests. The legacy of this war has made the Tajik government particularly aware of the potential power of political Islam among the country's population. After 9/11, radical Islamism became a major security concern for the United States. The Tajik government has been able to leverage its aggressive policies against non-state sanctioned Islam to gain the support of countries such as Russia and the United States. This thesis will address each of these three factors, in order to better contextualize the more recent use of Islamic symbology in the contemporary Tajik national narrative.

Central Asian governments like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan resist easy classification by scholars because they exhibit both democratic and authoritarian characteristics. Larry Diamond coined the term "hybrid regime" to describe the unique nature of such states. These governments are "deliberately *pseudodemocratic*," and use the existence of

features, such as multiparty elections, to disguise the domination of the political field by a single party or politician.<sup>4</sup> Tajik statehood has also been described contradictorily as simultaneously weak and strong. As John Heathershaw opines, “state strength conceals another reality of state weakness.”<sup>5</sup> For instance, in Tajikistan the state is simultaneously strong, “omnipresent” and “omniscient”, and curiously weak, sometimes seemingly absent and unable to control basic activities like the petty daily corruption perpetrated by police.<sup>6</sup> Heathershaw argues that the concept of politics as performance is integral to understanding Central Asian governments. He describes the state as a myriad and disjointed collection of performances by individuals, which together constitute the state’s authority and legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> This thesis takes the idea of the state as a set of performances as a beginning point for analysis.

Max Weber developed one of the fundamental discussions of legitimacy, explaining that obedience to social order is motivated by the acceptance of the legitimacy of the source of power.<sup>8</sup> He created a three-part taxonomy to describe different manifestations of authority, differentiating between traditional, legal, and charismatic authorities.<sup>9</sup> The last type underpins the idea of “cult of personality,” in which legitimacy depends on a single heroic figure. The concept of personality cults has been deployed to explain the reign of figures such as Josef Stalin and Kim Jong Il. Modern day personality cults tend to emerge in “closed societies,” utilize mass media to direct messages at the entire population, and use “symbolism and language that is

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Jay Diamond, “Thinking About Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 23-24.

<sup>5</sup> John Heathershaw, “The Global Performance State,” in *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics*, ed. Reeves, Rasanayagam, and Bayer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology*, trans. H.P. Secher (New York: 1962), 71-72.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

potentially legible for everyone.”<sup>10</sup> Since the late 2000s, the Tajik regime has attempted to use certain language and Islamic symbols for Rahmon’s personality cult that party elites assume are “legible” and relatable to the population.

This thesis is based in part on the concept of legitimacy and the role of symbols in helping create and preserve it. Seymour Martin Lipset describes legitimacy as “the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for society.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, leaders must attempt to convey to the population that the institutions they govern are relevant, or that they somehow reflect the morals of the governed. In her study on legitimization frameworks in Central Asia, Anna Matveeva frames legitimacy as the “interplay” between job performance and symbology.<sup>12</sup> In Central Asia, leaders attempt to gain support for their government by presenting it as “acceptable or inevitable.”<sup>13</sup> She writes, “Leaders employ symbolic means to link their own interest in maintaining power with convincing the citizens that this power is in their best interests and that it serves the realization of a larger social purpose.”<sup>14</sup> The Islamic references and symbols, which have been deployed by the Rahmon regime, represent just what Matveeva describes, an attempt to convince citizens that their government serves a higher cause.

Though at times they may seem like pure spectacle or only empty words, the language and imagery contained in Rahmon’s speeches, policies, and media stunts, are powerful. As Lisa

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Leese, “The Cult of Personality and Symbolic Politics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, ed. Stephen Smith (Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, NY, Doubleday and Company, 1960), 77.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Matveeva, “Legitimising Central Asian Authoritarianism: Political Manipulation and Symbolic Power,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1096.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1097.

Wedeen argues in her study of the Assad personality cult, *Ambiguities of Domination*, “official rhetoric and images operate as forms of power in their own right, helping to enforce obedience and sustain the conditions under which regimes rule.”<sup>15</sup> The symbols deployed by government serve the aim of legitimization, convincing citizens of the state’s higher purpose, and also further the goal of dominance, helping to ensure conformity and “obedience” to the state.

In this paper, I argue that the Rahmon government has deployed Islamic symbols in official rhetoric in order to gain political legitimacy. First I will provide background information on the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, the Tajik Civil War, and the international security context since 9/11, in order to better understand the state’s unique relationship with Islam. These factors will help one to better understand why the official promotion of Tajik Islam represents a significant departure from previous policies and rhetoric. Then this paper will examine Rahmon’s speeches, policies, and press stunts, to understand how and why Islamic references and imagery have been evoked. Along the way, this work will utilize the theoretical concepts and approaches advanced by Wedeen, Matveeva, and others to provide an in-depth, contemporary study on a country that is becoming increasingly authoritarian by the year.

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<sup>15</sup> Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 4.

## CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND

### Tajikistan in the Soviet Period

As a former Soviet Socialist Republic, Tajikistan has inherited Communist institutions and attitudes. This Soviet legacy has deeply influenced how politics in post-independence Tajikistan are performed. Tajik politicians, in particular Rahmon, have used Soviet policies on nationality and Islam as a starting framework for contemporary national narratives. In order to appreciate the Rahmon regime's use of Islamic symbolism in official rhetoric, a brief historical review of the Soviet legacy in Tajikistan is necessary.

Tajik statehood emerged in the twentieth century as a result of Soviet nationality policies and border delineation. Soviet bureaucrats considered the principle of self-determination and the development of national consciousness to be an important step toward modernization and socialism, especially in culturally “backward” Central Asia.<sup>16</sup> As part of the efforts to promote self-determination, in 1924, the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was formed as a “subregion” of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>17</sup> After a campaign for Tajik independence from the Uzbek SSR and complaints from Tajiks about the “Uzbekization” of schools and political life, the Tajik ASSR became the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>18</sup> Through Soviet

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<sup>16</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 174.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175.

border determination and the promotion of the Tajik ethno-political identity, the Tajik state was realized as its own political unit.<sup>19</sup>

The Tajik nationality emerged partially through Soviet intervention. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the populations of Central Asia often did not define themselves in broadly national terms like Uzbek or Tajik. Rather, local people learned to define themselves in Soviet terms, through a process of “double assimilation.”<sup>20</sup> According to Francine Hirsch, through the Soviet use of “cultural technologies of rule,” such as census taking, map making, and the development of museum exhibitions, diverse local populations were assimilated into nationality categories, while at the same time these categories were assimilated into Soviet society.<sup>21</sup> Early Soviet policy focused on the promotion of national languages and elites, through such policies as *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), which called for the training and promotion of national citizens into leadership roles in their respective nations.<sup>22</sup> Through *korenizatsiia*, in order to occupy certain important roles, Soviet citizens had to integrate themselves into the system and claim a nationality. As a result of Soviet policies nationality became an integral and “primordial” component of one’s personal identity.<sup>23</sup> National labels, such as Tajik and Uzbek, took on increased importance in the twentieth century through the process of assimilation of local peoples into Soviet government.

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<sup>19</sup> Kirill Nourzhanov and Christian Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History* (Australian National University E Press: 2013), 43.

<sup>20</sup> Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 10-12.

<sup>23</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 95.

The Soviet nationality project in Central Asia was not entirely successful. In Tajikistan, regional identities remained very important, and at times, in the pursuit of an agenda the Soviet government was forced to “accommodate local strongmen and traditional patterns of social organization, religious belief, identities and loyalties.”<sup>24</sup> The Soviets were sometimes compelled to concede parts of their agenda in Tajikistan, due to the enduring importance of tradition, religion, and regionalism. Not only did these various dynamics create challenges for Soviet rule in Tajikistan, but in the post-independence period they also made it particularly difficult for the new government to forge a salient national identity. Because Soviet nationality policies in Central Asia were not completely effective, and the Tajik identity remained very fragmented, the Rahmon government was compelled to find a national narrative that better resonated with the population. This is one factor that has led the government to incorporate Islamic symbols into official rhetoric.

The way in which the Rahmon regime invokes Islam in Tajik nationalism reflects a Soviet influenced mindset. It follows that the government’s use of Islamic references cannot be properly appreciated without an understanding of Soviet policies toward Islam. Soviets perceived Islam as a threat to the political system. According to Marx, religion is “epiphenomenal,” a secondary affect that disguises other potentially dangerous interests, and upholds a class-based society.<sup>25</sup> In the early twentieth century, the Soviets in Central Asia attempted to purge political institutions of religious influence, initiating a *hujum*, or assault on veiling, and attacking other “backward” traditions, such as the payment of bride wealth.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the government closed

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<sup>24</sup> Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 2-3.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Lemon, “Tajikistan Takes on the God Squad,” *Radio Free Liberty Radio Europe*, January 26, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-islamism-politics-extremism/26818031.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 75.



mosques, religious schools, and shari'a courts, and developed spiritual directorates to regulate Muslim communities.<sup>27</sup> Religion was relegated to the private sphere of the individual and almost entirely removed from public discourse.<sup>28</sup> Public discussions could not invoke Islam and its ethical values, and the Soviet government promoted a discourse with more universal, nonreligious morals.<sup>29</sup> The perception of Islam as a threat to government and the emphasis on de-Islamized public discourse are two important attitudes, which have continued to influence the Tajik government well into the post-Soviet period.

Adeeb Khalid makes the argument that during the Soviet period, Islam was “nationalized,” and came to be seen as synonymous with tradition.<sup>30</sup> Using sources from Central Asian intelligentsia, Khalid asserts that Soviet elites incorporated Islam into national heritage, in the process “rethinking” Islam’s relationship to nationality.<sup>31</sup> John Heathershaw notes that during the Soviet period it was about “attaching religious identity to national identity—so religious identity drops secondary to national identity... To be Tajik is to be Muslim”.<sup>32</sup> Through Soviet intervention, Islam, for some urban elites in Central Asia, came to be seen as the source of a cultural identity, “devoid of spiritual meaning.”<sup>33</sup> As Heathershaw describes, what it meant to be Muslim came to be intricately bound with what it meant to be Tajik, even despite the extent of

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<sup>27</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, “The Secularization of Islam and the USSR’s Muslim Areas,” in *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*. (Portland: Taylor and Francis, 1995), 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 83-83.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Pannier, “State, Religion, And Radicalism In Central Asia,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, November 24, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/central-asia-islam/26707668.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Izzet Ahmet Bozbey, “Treading on Thin Ice: Islam and Nation-building in Central Asia”, *Orta Asya ve Kafkasya Arastirmalari*, 6, no. 12 (2011), 164.

one's religious convictions. Soviets promoted the concept of Islam more as a source of cultural identity and tradition and less as a system of spiritual beliefs. This perspective would later inform the post-Soviet state's policies, when the government sought to present a sort of cultural Islam, stripped of spiritual significance, as the basis for Tajik nationality.

The post independence Tajik government certainly inherited the Soviet state's problems and to a large extent, its attitudes toward Islam and nationality. After the fall of the USSR, the Rahmon led government took a view similar to that held by many Soviet Central Asian intellectuals, regarding Islam as a potential political tool and the basis of national identity. Like the Soviets, the new government was also wary of the combination of Islam and politics, and largely relegated Islamic discourse to the private sphere. When the Tajik government finally began to incorporate Islam into its national narrative, it still did so in true Soviet style. When the state promoted Hanafi Islam, one of the main schools of Sunni jurisprudence and the most popular form of Islam in Central Asia, to its official status, it strove to minimize the spiritual aspects of the religion and instead propagate a more universal discourse, which emphasized the connection between Islam and Tajik nationality. Tajikistan's attitudes toward Islam have been significantly affected by the Soviet perspective on religion and the history of the Soviet state's efforts to contain the influence of Islam.

### **Emomali Rahmon**

The central figure in formulating Tajikistan's religious policy since the end of the civil war is Emomali Rahmonov (b. 1952). To understand his views on Islam today one needs grounding in his Soviet and Communist background. Born in Kulob (now Khatlon) province, in the south of Tajikistan, Rahmonov made a spectacular rise to the chairmanship of the Tajik

Supreme Soviet.<sup>34</sup> He initially worked as an electrician in an oil factory, and then served in the Pacific Navy Military Force.<sup>35</sup> After returning to Tajikistan, he joined the Communist Party, graduated from university, and eventually became director of a state farm in 1988. Four years later Rahmonov was elected as chairman of a regional council, and finally, in 1992 he became chairman of the Supreme Soviet.<sup>36</sup> He was elected president of Tajikistan in 1994, and after changes in the constitution were enacted, he was reelected in September 1999.<sup>37</sup> Rahmonov, undoubtedly a product of the Soviet system, has masterfully leveraged regional networks to his own advantage.

Rahmonov's rule shares many characteristics with the leadership in other post Soviet Central Asian countries. Like his contemporaries in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, Rahmonov refashioned himself as a staunch nationalist, who studiously avoided any mention to the Soviet period. Rahmonov dropped the Russian ending –ov from his surname, in an effort to sound more Tajik.<sup>38</sup> Like Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev and Uzbekistan's Karimov, Rahmon also nurtured a cult of personality while conducting elections to maintain a façade of democratic leadership. In 2003, Rahmon championed an amendment to the constitution, which allowed him to run for two more consecutive seven-year terms after the term of his presidency ended in

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<sup>34</sup> Iraj Bashiri, *Prominent Tajik Figures of the Twentieth Century*, (Dushanbe: 2002), 266, <http://www.angelfire.com/rnb/bashiri/TajikFigures/TajikFigures.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> "Emomali Rahmon," *President of the Republic of Tajikistan*, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.prezident.tj/en/taxonomy/term/5/21>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Bashiri, *Prominent Tajik Figures of the Twentieth Century*, 267.

<sup>38</sup> "Prezident Tadzhiqistana otrezal ot svoye familii russkoe okanchanie," *Lenta.ru*, March 21, 2007, <http://lenta.ru/news/2007/03/21/name>.

2006.<sup>39</sup> In 2015, Rahmon was granted the title “Leader of the Nation”, which gives him a special permanent place in the government as well as lifelong protection from prosecution.<sup>40</sup> There is no sign that the personalistic regime Rahmon has forged will come to an end soon, especially considering additional proposals for constitutional amendments, which would allow Rahmon to be reelected an unlimited number of times.<sup>41</sup> Rahmon’s presidency in Tajikistan reflects broader trends in the governments of Central Asia.

Rahmon has helmed a corrupt, authoritarian state for more than two decades. The government that Rahmon has built is largely patrimonial, with government posts staffed by his relatives and associates.<sup>42</sup> The country is ranked 136 out of 174 countries on Transparency International’s 2015 “Corruption Perceptions Index.”<sup>43</sup> In its 2016 “Freedom in the World” report, Freedom House labeled the country as “Not Free.”<sup>44</sup> Despite the dysfunction, corruption, and lack of freedom found in Tajikistan, Rahmon has retained a good grip on power, partially because of how he has established himself as a “guarantor of stability” to citizens and the international community.<sup>45</sup> Rahmon represents himself as the only viable candidate for the presidency, and as the one man preventing a modern, stable state from devolving into another

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<sup>39</sup> Liz Fuller, “Another President for Life Maybe,” *Radio Free Liberty Radio Europe*, November 11, 2008, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Another\\_President\\_For\\_Life\\_Maybe/1347990.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Another_President_For_Life_Maybe/1347990.html).

<sup>40</sup> “Tajik President Receives ‘Leader’ Title, Lifelong Immunity,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, December 25, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-rahmon-leader-title-immunity/27449649.html>.

<sup>41</sup> “Tajik Parliament Adopts Amendments to Create Presidential Dynasty,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, January 22, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-presidential-dynasty-constitutional-amendments/27503530.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Matveeva, “Legitimising Central Asian Authoritarianism,” 1115.

<sup>43</sup> “Corruption Perceptions Index 2015,” *Transparency International*, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2015#results-table>.

<sup>44</sup> “Freedom in the World,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>.

<sup>45</sup> Matveeva, “Legitimising Central Asian Authoritarianism,” 1113.

Afghanistan. Rahmon's presidency gains significant legitimacy from his claim about providing stability, despite the failures of his regime to control corruption and uphold basic rights.

Rahmon emerged out of a Communist system to become president of the newly independent Tajikistan. He was able to secure his political position over the course of the Tajik Civil War, partly because of how he used his neo-Communist, secular political views to leverage assistance from Russia. In this way, secular rhetoric became an important tool for the Rahmon regime. More recently, the state has made efforts to incorporate Islamic symbols into the ideology and represent Rahmon as an important Muslim leader. Both types of rhetoric are designed to further Rahmon's personal power. In order to better understand the evolution of the position of the Rahmon government towards Islam, I will briefly explain the circumstances of the Tajik Civil War.

### **Post Independence and the Tajik Civil War**

The end of the Soviet period heralded a new era fraught with economic and social problems. When the Soviet Union fell, Tajikistan was dependent on significant financial and infrastructural support from the Union. Regionalism was rampant in Tajik politics. The role of Islam in society and in government became a subject of public contention. Each of these factors contributed to Tajikistan's embroilment in a bloody civil war in the 1990s. It was in these circumstances that Rahmon made his meteoric rise from kolkhoz leader to president. The problems that defined the early post-Soviet era did not disappear after the Tajik Civil War, but rather, continue to shape contemporary Tajik politics. In order to understand the Rahmon government and its use of Islam as a rhetorical tool, it is necessary to briefly address the post-

independence period. More specifically, this section will discuss Tajikistan's transition to self-government, the Tajik Civil War, and Russia's intervention in the war.

Tajikistan was in a poor position to gain independence in the early 1990s because it relied heavily on economic support from the Soviet Union. Many local elites thought that the continuation of the Soviet Union in Central Asia was in their best interest. The Central Asian Soviet Socialist republics in general, and the Tajik SSR in particular, were initially reluctant to accept post-Soviet independence. In a 1991 referendum, Central Asians voted almost unanimously to preserve the Soviet Union with a renegotiated treaty.<sup>46</sup> The Soviet Union supported the region, especially Tajikistan, with food and financial subsidies.<sup>47</sup> In 1991, Tajikistan received an estimated forty-six percent of its total revenue from the budget of the Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup> The substantial amount of state support that Tajikistan relied upon ensured that the transition to independence would be fraught with poverty and economic problems. After one final effort to preserve the Union with the attempt putsch against Gorbachev in 1991, Central Asian Communist Party leaders capitalized on nationalist sentiment and proclaimed the independence of their republics.<sup>49</sup> Tajikistan gained independence in November 1991, and Rahmon Nabiev, was elected to hold the newly established office of president.<sup>50</sup> In November 1992, Nabiev resigned, the Supreme Soviet abolished the office of the president and elected

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<sup>46</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 128-129.

<sup>47</sup> Dov Lynch, "The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process," *Civil Wars* 4, no. 4 (2001): 54.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 129.

<sup>50</sup> Rahmon Nabiev was previously the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan from 1982-1986. See: Iraj Bashiri, *Prominent Tajik Figures of the Twentieth Century*.

Rahmon as chairman.<sup>51</sup> The economic difficulties faced by Tajikistan after the fall of the Soviet Union ensured the country would endure a rocky transition to independence.

Tajikistan's floundering economy and fractured society set the stage for a conflict, which began in 1992. Several factors contributed to the start of the Tajik Civil War, including an overall inadequate sense of national identity, increased political participation without the proper mechanism for expression, the breakdown of institutions, and the end of Soviet economic subsidies.<sup>52</sup> When the Soviet Union dissolved, strong regional identities and networks divided Tajikistan. The poor infrastructure connecting the different regions of Tajikistan exacerbated the localism present in Tajik politics.<sup>53</sup> During the Soviet period, political power had become concentrated in the North by elites from Leninobod (now Khujand), and was later solidified through a pact with Kulobis from the South of Tajikistan.<sup>54</sup> Initially, the Tajik Civil War was sparked by President Rahmon Nabiev's attempts to oust a Pamiri minister.<sup>55</sup> La'li Badakhshan, a mainly Pamiri political party, led public demonstrations and was joined by other opposition parties.<sup>56</sup> The government responded by organizing competing public protests with Kulobis and the conflict escalated from there, with the southern parts of Tajikistan experiencing the most fighting in 1992.<sup>57</sup> Economic pressure, weak institutions, and a fractured national identity, when combined with mass political mobilization and rampant regionalism, resulted in a civil war.

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<sup>51</sup> Nabiev's short term in office was plagued by economic crisis and instability, and Nabiev failed to establish a strong presidency. See: Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 327-328.

<sup>52</sup> Lynch, "The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process," 50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 1: Map of Tajikistan. Source: United Nations.**

The civil war was a complex conflict, in which participants were mobilized by different factors such as language, ethnicity, region, religion, ideological views, and family ties.<sup>58</sup> The conflict was less a “battle of ideologies,” and more of a power struggle, with underrepresented regions and minorities fighting for increased recognition and inclusion in government.<sup>59</sup> The regionalist aspect of the conflict becomes more apparent when one examines the different membership of the opposition parties. The Islamic Revivalist Party, the Democratic Party, La’li

<sup>58</sup> Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Lynch, “The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process,” 54.



Badakhshan and the Rastokhez movement formed the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) in the civil war.<sup>60</sup> The Democratic Party, with a membership made up mostly of intelligentsia from Gharm and the Pamirs, championed the creation of a democratic society and the dismantlement of the Soviet Union.<sup>61</sup> Rastokhez, a nationalist movement of intellectuals mainly located in Dushanbe, coalesced around support for *perestroika*, or the restructuring of the Soviet political and economic system in the late 1980s.<sup>62</sup> La'li Badakhshan was a Pamiri party that called for the Gorno-Badakhshan region to receive increased independence as an autonomous republic.<sup>63</sup> Finally, the Islamic Revivalist Party of Tajikistan, which advocated expanding the role of Islam in Tajik government, had a primarily Gharimi membership.<sup>64</sup> The conflict set groups from around Dushanbe, Gharm, and the Gorno Badakhshan region against the northern Leninobod elites who had previously dominated Tajik government.<sup>65</sup> Nourzhanov and Bleuer describe the opposition as an alliance of “regions underrepresented in the ruling elite who used democratic, nationalist, and Islamic slogans” to advance their cause and generate support.<sup>67</sup> While elites used different ideologies to mobilize populations on their behalf, the regionalist dynamic nonetheless remains key to understanding the civil war.

Regional mobilization was perhaps the most important element of the conflict, but on the international stage, the Tajik Civil War has been most often interpreted simplistically as a

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<sup>60</sup> Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 221.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 211, 214.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>65</sup> Lynch, “The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process,” 54.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-221.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

struggle between an Islamist headed opposition and a neo-Communist force. The presence of the IRPT in the opposition led to the widespread characterization of the opposition as Islamist. Despite the presence of political parties with different ideologies in the UTO, the international community focused on the IRPT, perceiving the civil war as secular vs. religious in nature. This attitude prompted Russia to intervene on behalf of government forces, and made secularism a salient issue for the Tajik government.

The Islamic Revivalist Party of Tajikistan played an important role in the Tajik Civil War, so I will briefly describe its history here. The party actually began as an all-USSR organization on June 9, 1990 in southern Russia, partially as a result of Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika ("openness" and "restructuring").<sup>68</sup> The party was established to protect and represent the interests of Soviet Muslims and "to create by constitutional means conditions for Soviet Muslims to live according to the principles of the Quran."<sup>69</sup> The IRP of Tajikistan splintered from the all-Union party after the group encouraged Tajik citizens to vote for the acting president Rahmon Nabiev, former secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, in the new presidential elections following the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>70</sup> The IRPT chose not to support the Communist bureaucrat and instead backed a different candidate for the election alongside other pro-democracy parties.<sup>71</sup> Thus, in 1991 the IRPT became an independent national party, establishing itself as against the Communist status quo in post-Soviet government.

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<sup>68</sup> Emmanuel Karagiannis, "The challenge of radical Islam in Tajikistan: Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami," *Nationalities Papers* 34 (2006), 2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Since its inception as a national party, the IRPT acted in opposition to the perceived continuation of Soviet state authority. When Rahmon was elected as chairman of the Supreme Soviet in 1992, the government banned all opposition parties.<sup>72</sup> As in the other Central Asian republics, little change in political structure accompanied the newfound independence of Tajikistan. In reaction to the ban, the Democratic Party, the Rastokhez movement, the Pamiri Lali Badakhshan party, and the IRPT established the United Tajik Opposition and commenced attacking the Tajik government.<sup>73</sup> To some extent, the IRPT came to define the UTO, especially in the eyes of the international community.

Russia was perhaps the most important external actor in the Tajik Civil War.<sup>74</sup> In late 1992 the Russian government attempted to bolster the Tajik Soviet power structures, and supported the Rahmon regime.<sup>75</sup> This decision was motivated by the existence of an Islamist opposition in the war, as well as by a desire to keep Russia's clients in power. Russia's attitude toward the issue of political Islamic movements in Central Asia was influenced by a Soviet legacy, which saw Tajikistan as within Russia's traditional sphere of influence. In 1993, well after Tajikistan declared its independence, Russian president Boris Yeltsin signed an order designed to resolve the Tajik conflict by establishing peace talks and coordinating with Central Asian countries to ensure the security of the boundary between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.<sup>76</sup> The decree also increased the number of Russian troops stationed on what Yeltsin deemed to be the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Mohiaddin Mesbahi, "Tajikistan, Iran, and the international politics of the Islamic Factor," *Central Asian Survey* 16:2 (1997), 146.

<sup>75</sup> Lynch, "The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process," 55.

<sup>76</sup> Viktor Litovkin, "The President Takes Steps to Defend the Borders, Especially the Tajik-Afghan Border," *The Current Digest of the Russian Press* 45, no. 30, August 25, 1993, 9-10.

“Russian Federation’s borders” (actually Tajikistan’s borders).<sup>77</sup> The civil war was seen as a threat to Russia’s stability and interest in the region. Even beyond that, the language in this directive reveals how, for Yeltsin and even the Russian presidents following him, the borders of the newly founded Russian Federation extended as far south as the Tajik-Afghan border.

The Russian government was concerned by the existence of an Islamist opposition in the Tajik Civil War. However, it also seems likely that Moscow was motivated to intervene in the Tajik Civil War so as to maintain its influence in Central Asia and install a client government friendly to Russia. The prevalent attitude in the Russian government at the time drew on Western views of “Islam as a dangerous geocultural threat, with serious potential for political challenge to Russia’s interest.”<sup>78</sup> The hostile attitude toward Islam combined with Russian intelligence reports that Iran was providing military training support for the opposition affected the decision of the Russian government to intercede in the conflict.<sup>79</sup> Iran’s intervention in the war challenged Moscow’s dominance in Central Asia, and to some extent provoked Russia into getting involved in the conflict. In 1992, Russia played an important role in shifting the balance of power during the civil war.<sup>80</sup> By 1993 Russia was backing Tajik government forces and a young Rahmon against the UTO.<sup>81</sup> Rahmon’s stance against a radical religious regime helped him to gain support from Russia.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, in August 1994, Rahmon even received a medal from Russian president Boris Yeltsin “for his cooperation in protecting the interests of Tajikistan, Russia, and

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Mesbahi, “Tajikistan, Iran, and the international politics of the Islamic Factor,” 147.

<sup>79</sup> Muriel Atkin, “Iran, Russia and Tajikistan’s Civil War,” in *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions Since 1800* (Florence, KY: 2012), 366-367.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 334-5.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 335.

the CIS countries.”<sup>83</sup> Not only did Russia provide security forces to support the Rahmon regime, but also Rahmon himself was actually rewarded a medal for protecting Russia’s interests. This established an important precedent; the Rahmon government solidified its power by propagating secularism and liberal democracy in official rhetoric. According to the assessment of Russian policymakers, a potential Islamist threat had to be contained and Russian dominance in Central Asia preserved, so Russia intervened in the war.

The Tajik Civil War ended in 1997 as the result of a United Nations brokered peace agreement between the UTO and the Tajik government.<sup>84</sup> On June 27, 1997, Said Abdullo Nuri, leader of the Islamic Revivalist Party, and Rahmon approved the accord, which provided for a secular government and outlined power sharing between the two sides.<sup>85</sup> Among other initiatives, this agreement dedicated thirty percent of government posts to people from the UTO. Secularism was an issue at the heart of the peace deal that ended the Tajik Civil War. The opposition opposed the inclusion of the term “secular state” used in the Tajik constitution, perceiving the term to be hostile toward religion.<sup>86</sup> For the government forces, the founding of a secular state assured that Tajikistan would not become a religious regime.<sup>87</sup> Eventually, the two sides struck a compromise; in exchange for the establishment of a secular democracy, the government would formally recognize religious parties.<sup>88</sup> As a result of the General Agreement, the Islamic Revivalist Party of Tajikistan became the only legally recognized Islamic political party in post-

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<sup>83</sup> “Rakhmonov, Minister Receive Medals From Yeltsin,” *Dushanbe Radio Tajikistan Network, National Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, August 26, 1994.

<sup>84</sup> Nourzahnov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 335.

<sup>85</sup> Lynch, “The Tajik Civil War and Peace Process”, 61.

<sup>86</sup> Hakim Zainiddinov, “The Changing Relationship of the Secularized State to Religion in Tajikistan,” *Journal of Church and State*, 55:3 (2013), 461.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 462.

Soviet Central Asia and was established as one of the main opposition parties in the Tajik government.

During the civil war, Rahmon consolidated his power in part by establishing himself in opposition to the threat of radical Islam, which he exaggerated for political effect. The IRPT, which formed a significant part of the UTO, propagated moderate Islamist views.<sup>89</sup> The realities of the long, ongoing civil war in Afghanistan complicate the issue of radicalism in Tajikistan, but the Tajik government's response to the danger of extremism has nonetheless been outsized. In general, Central Asian governments have exaggerated the danger posed by "radical" Islamic groups in order to justify restrictions on religious practice and other civil liberties.<sup>90</sup> Rahmon has been extremely liberal with his usage of the term "radical." As president, since the Tajik Civil War, he has consistently used the canard of Islamic extremism to gain local and international support. Despite Rahmon's rhetorical turn toward Islam, he still draws upon this perceived threat to justify his repression of religious freedom and systematic exclusion of the IRPT. Since the time of the civil war, Rahmon has aptly manipulated policies of secularism and demonized any form of political Islam, in order to gather support and justify his rule.

### **Islam and Secularism in Post-Soviet Tajikistan**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the secular status of the Tajik government has been a point of considerable contention. The secular-religious divide was one element that contributed to the Tajik Civil War. The Peace Agreement reached after the civil war established the country as a secular democracy, but incorporated a provision allowing for the inclusion of an Islamic

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<sup>89</sup> Nourzhanov and Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, 259.

<sup>90</sup> "International Freedom of Religion Report for 2014," U.S. Department of State, accessed March 27, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>.

political party. At the end of the Tajik Civil War, Rahmon's regime was faced with the tasks of consolidating the government and containing a significant Islamist opposition.<sup>91</sup> In an effort to secure political control, and to sideline the IRPT, Rahmon stressed the importance of secularism to Tajik stability in his speeches, and deemphasized Islam in the national narrative. Only in the late 2000s did Rahmon begin to incorporate Islam into state rhetoric. This section will briefly describe previous iterations of secular national ideologies that the Tajik government promoted. This will help to highlight how the adoption of Islamic symbols and rhetoric represents a significant change from previous policy.

The postbellum Tajik government employed an aggressively secular stance on religion. Rahmon's earlier speeches, as collected in *Tajiks in the Reflection of History* represent this viewpoint. In the book, Rahmon rarely mentions Islam by name, effectively minimizing the Islamist movement's importance, and instead painting the future of Tajikistan as a secular liberal democracy.<sup>92</sup> While Rahmon expressed support for secularism and democracy, his political opinions were most likely designed to garner support from abroad and at home. Erica Marat maintains that the goal of Rahmon's initial national ideology was to stop the Islamist opposition from creating a competing narrative.<sup>93</sup> By attempting to relegate Islam to the private sphere, as the Soviets tried to do during their period of rule, Rahmon precluded the Islamist opposition from developing a coherent political ideology. For the first ten years after the Tajik Civil War, the Tajik state narrative consciously avoided mention of Islam. Only later, after Rahmon's government had gained more control over the state and edged out many of the remaining UTO

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<sup>91</sup> Erica Marat, "Imagined Past, Uncertain Future: The Creation of National Identities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 55:1 (2008), 23.

<sup>92</sup> Emomali Rahmonov, *Tajiks in the Reflection of History* (1997).

<sup>93</sup> Marat, "Imagined Past, Uncertain Future," 13.

members from their positions in government, did Rahmon begin to include Islam in the national narrative.

The official narratives of Tajikistan between 1997 and 2008 were rooted in ancient civilizations, and relied on alternate symbols of nationhood that were more secular in nature. After the civil war, the state initially depicted Tajiks as great ancient scholars, highlighting Persian literary and intellectual figures, such as Abu Abdullah Rudaki (858-940) and Abu Ali Sina (980-1037).<sup>94</sup> However, these symbols were soon abandoned in favor of other “less Muslim and less Iranian speaking” figures.<sup>95</sup> Later iterations of national identity emphasized alternately the ethnogenesis of Tajiks in the Samanid state, the Tajik people’s history of Zoroastrianism, and the accomplishments of the Aryan civilization.<sup>96</sup> While Aryanism in Western culture today is associated with the German Aryan myth and fascism, the term in Tajikistan refers to an ancient Aryan culture. Tajiks positioned themselves as the direct descendants of the Aryan civilization. The Aryan culture was portrayed as the “cradle of world civilization,” in opposition to the “barbaric” Turkic peoples.<sup>97</sup> Each of the broader themes of Aryanism, Zoroastrianism, and the Samanid state served to de-emphasize Islam and its role in Tajik culture. By promoting the universal principles of Aryan civilization and Zoroastrianism, the government was able to create an alternative framework of beliefs, which might compete with Islam.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> “Cooperation Declaration Signed,” *Dushanbe Radio Dushanbe Network, Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, December 2, 1991.

<sup>95</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The Return of the Aryan Myth: Tajikistan in Search of a Secularized National Ideology,” *Nationalities Papers*, 35, no. 1 (2007): 53.

<sup>96</sup> Marat, “Imagined Past, Uncertain Future,” 20-21.

<sup>97</sup> Laruelle, “The Return of the Aryan Myth,” 61.

<sup>98</sup> Marat, “Imagined Past, Uncertain Future,” 21.



## **The International Security Context**

The Tajik government has simultaneously promoted its form of Islam, while severely restricting the free practice of religion and of Islamic discourse in the country. Part of the reason that the state has been able to successfully employ such tactics is because of an international context, in which secular stability is prized and political Islam is treated with deep suspicion. This section will elucidate the international state of affairs that affects Tajikistan, more specifically Western and Russian fears of “radical” Islam, the wars in Afghanistan, the United State’s security position after 9/11, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Tajikistan’s policies toward Islam are significantly influenced by the international security context. The Tajik state has been able to implement increasingly restrictive policies toward religion in part because the international community (mainly Russia and the United States) views political Islam to be a potential threat to the security of the region. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the idea of political Islam as dangerous for the regional security of Central Asia gained momentum. Western Europe, the United States and Russia became especially concerned about “the Islamic factor” when an Islamist led opposition emerged in the Tajik Civil War. The religious-secular dynamics of the civil war led Russia to intervene on behalf of government forces, and also resulted in broader support for a secular government. The circumstances of Afghanistan in the 1990s also informed the international context, creating valid fears that Tajikistan might fall into a similar instable situation. Although this paper focuses on Tajikistan’s religious rhetoric, a short explanation of the conflict in Afghanistan will be helpful in understanding why the Rahmon regime has been so wary of incorporating Islam into its politics.

The enduring strife in Afghanistan casts a long shadow over neighboring Tajikistan's future. Afghanistan was embroiled in war with the Soviets for a decade, beginning in 1979.<sup>99</sup> The removal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989 left the country's economy severely damaged.<sup>100</sup> In 1992, the Communist-supported regime finally collapsed, and the *mujahidin* groups failed to establish a functioning government. At the same time, newly independent Tajikistan faced similar economic and factional issues, and was also cast headlong into a civil war. In Afghanistan, fractionalized militant groups fought for power, and many commanders became local warlords.<sup>101</sup> The Taliban emerged against this chaotic background around 1994, and soon attracted Pakistan's financial backing.<sup>102</sup> In areas under Taliban control, a combination of shari'a and Pashtun tribal law was enacted.<sup>103</sup> Beginning in 1992, Tajik opposition fighters found refuge in northern Afghanistan during the Tajik Civil War, using the region as a base, from which to launch insurgent operations in Tajikistan.<sup>104</sup> Tajikistan and Afghanistan share linguistic and ethnic ties, as well as a long, porous border. Due to these facts, many worry about Afghanistan's potentially destabilizing influence, and therefore consider Tajikistan to be "the most vulnerable state" in post Soviet Central Asia.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Christian Bleuer and Said Reza Kazemi, "Between Co-operation and Insulation," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 2014, 8, [https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/20140608-Bleuer\\_Kazemi-Central\\_Asia.pdf](https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/20140608-Bleuer_Kazemi-Central_Asia.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> Peter Marsden, *Afghanistan: Aid, Armies and Empires* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 76-77.

<sup>101</sup> "Backgrounder on Afghanistan: History of the War," *Human Rights Watch*, October 2001, <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/asia/afghan-bck1023.htm#The%20Third%20Phase>.

<sup>102</sup> Backgrounder on Afghanistan," *Human Rights Watch*.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Bleuer and Kazemi, "Between Co-operation and Insulation," 8.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 2.

With the attacks on September 11, 2001, fears of Islamic extremism became an important security concern for the United States. The strategic importance of Tajikistan during the U.S. war in Afghanistan, as well as the increased fear of radical Islam, helped the Rahmon to consolidate power and suppress potential Islamist opposition. The prospect of war in Afghanistan heightened the strategic importance for the Central Asian region, as the U.S. sought to develop the Northern Distribution Network, in order to provide supplies to NATO forces through various routes through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Aid allocations to the countries surrounding Afghanistan drastically increased. In Tajikistan in particular, in 2001, the amount of U.S. budgeted assistance to Tajikistan was only seventy-six million, but in 2002 the sum of U.S. budgeted assistance totaled one hundred and thirty-six million.<sup>106</sup> Having obtained the support of the U.S., the Rahmon regime grew bolder in its persecution of religion, using the threat of radical Islam to justify its harsh restrictions on religious freedom.<sup>107</sup> For instance, after 9/11 the Tajik government required the heads of mosques and religious schools to take state administered “proficiency tests” in Tajik secular law and to swear obedience to the current regime.<sup>108</sup> The government also began closing mosques in areas that were deemed to have too many.<sup>109</sup> While the U.S. held out Tajikistan as a positive example of how to include Islam in governance, the Tajik government systematically pushed out opposition party members through intimidation, and the manipulation of candidate and party registration laws.<sup>110</sup> By 2005, the Rahmon regime had

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<sup>106</sup> Jim Nichol, “Tajikistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests”, *Congressional Research Service*, September 25, 2013, 21.

<sup>107</sup> Matthew Crosston, “Compromising coalitions and duplicitous diplomacy: US support for Tajikistan after 9/11 and its security implications,” *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 2 (2008), 160.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 162.

neutralized the United Tajik Opposition in general and the Islamic Revivalist Party in particular.<sup>111</sup> In 2007, the government began drafting the law “On Freedom of Conscience and Association,” which would implement the harshest restrictions on religion yet, requiring all faith-based institutions to re-register and making religious literature subject to state censorship, among other constraints.<sup>112</sup> The 9/11 attacks resulted in greater U.S. support for the Rahmon regime. In its efforts to promote stability and secularism in the region, the U.S. became more tolerant of authoritarian and repressive tendencies in the Tajik government.

Since 2014, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Daesh, or the Islamic State, has driven security discourse in the West and in the Middle East. ISIS is a Sunni militant terrorist group fighting in Syria and Iraq, which declared a new caliphate in the area with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph.<sup>113</sup> The organization propagates an ideology attractive to a wide international audience, including some Tajiks. Some supporters seek relief from a drastic socioeconomic situation, while others with devout religious ideals want to “join what they view as a legitimate resistance against these oppressive regimes.”<sup>114</sup> Tajik authorities estimated in January 2016 that as many as 1000 Tajik citizens have joined the foreign group.<sup>115</sup> Though the Tajik government may be exaggerating the number, there seems to be a broader consensus that several hundred Tajiks are fighting in Iraq and Syria. In June of 2015 a high level military official, Tajik Colonel Gulmorod Halimov, even

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>113</sup> Dale Sprusansky, “Understanding ISIS: Frequently Asked Questions,” *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 33, no. 7 (2014), 19.

<sup>114</sup> Bruce Pannier, “The Lure of Islamic State for Central Asians,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, February 7, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-lure-of-islamic-state/26835279.html>.

<sup>115</sup> “Authorities Say Up To 1,000 Tajiks Joined IS in Syria, Iraq,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, January 25, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-double-estimate-of-islamic-state-members/27509293.html>.

defected to ISIS.<sup>116</sup> Since June 2015, I have personally witnessed the country run rampant with rumors about fighters leaving to Syria, or about citizens hanging the black flag of the Islamic State at the city gates of Dushanbe. These events serve Rahmon's needs, providing further justification for political crackdowns and restrictions on civil liberties. The ISIS factor only exacerbates fears of radical Islam in the post 9/11 international security climate. Western European countries, the U.S., and Russia are further compelled to back corrupt authoritarian regimes in order to prevent ISIS from gaining a foothold in the region. Rahmon and his government are well aware of these dynamics and use them to their advantage.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER TWO: SYMBOLIC POLITICS

### Symbolic Politics

Lisa Wedeen's study on Hafez al-Assad's cult of personality in Syria explores how rhetoric and symbols can translate into political power, and how the politics of "as if", when citizens engage in public displays of power "as if" they supported the regime, are important in enforcing obedience to the state.<sup>117</sup> In Tajikistan, "as if" politics are manifested through large-scale public holidays like Constitution Day, Unity Day, Independence Day, Flag Day, Army Day, and others. During these days schoolchildren, university students, teachers, and state employees are required to attend and celebrate the Tajik nation by wearing the national costume and performing cultural dances. Such performative politics are also enacted through the constant celebration of the President's appearance. Cultural celebrations of events like the "Year of the Aryan Civilization" represent another aspect of "as if" politics, in which the population is required to mobilize in honor of a certain historical commemoration, in order to demonstrate their allegiance to the current regime. In the 2009, the government mobilized citizens with the theme, the "Year of Imam A'zam," using the historical Islamic figure also known as Abu Hanifa to highlight the importance of Islam to Tajik culture and emphasize an understanding of the faith within a suitably patriotic framework.

In the introduction to *Ambiguities of Domination*, Wedeen describes the importance of "culturally resonant symbols," or signs that resonate in an emotionally positive way with the

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<sup>117</sup> Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 6.

public.<sup>118</sup> Through the use of such a device, governments can gain legitimacy, by appearing to be in-tune with its population. This ties in with Lipset's conceptualization of legitimacy as the ability of the state "to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for society."<sup>119</sup> According to Wedeen, the effective political deployment of symbols can help a government preserve an aura of appropriateness. Symbolic politics are especially important for authoritarian governments like Tajikistan's, because the Tajik state cannot rely on its supposedly democratic system for legitimacy.

According to Wedeen, the state attempts to control symbols in order to crowd out conflicting, non-state sanctioned alternatives.<sup>120</sup> In Syria, Wedeen notes that the Assad regime focused on utilizing those symbols "that would otherwise be subject to competing interpretations."<sup>121</sup> This is a strategy of controlling the narrative, so to speak, which is similarly reflected in the recent rhetoric of the Tajik government. The Tajik state developed a sort of Tajik Islam in order to establish a dominant narrative that excludes competing Islamist political interests, such as the Islamic Revivalist Party, the Hizb ut-Tahrir, and others. By laying claim to a certain type of Islam, the state is able to represent other interpretations of the religion as "extremist" and "anti patriotic." This also opens the doors for increasing legal regulation of Islamist political parties.

Regimes can deploy symbols and national narratives to help consolidate power. Erica Marat contends that the creation of national ideologies has allowed elites in Central Asia to strengthen themselves against political opponents through public mobilization, to gain economic

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>119</sup> Lipset, *Political Man*, 77.

<sup>120</sup> Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 10.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

power, and to obtain successful election results.<sup>122</sup> Like Wedeen, Marat is convinced of the power of culturally relevant symbols to garner political support and legitimacy. She suggests that Rahmon used large-scale national cultural events to effectively boost support for his candidacy for the 2006 presidential elections.<sup>123</sup> Marat's study, published in 2008, fails to account for the new turn toward Islam in Tajikistan's official ideology. Nonetheless, her work remains applicable to this thesis. The extensive propaganda efforts of the state, particularly the official declaration of 2009 as the year of Imam A'zam (otherwise known as Abu Hanifa, founder of the Sunni Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence), represent an effort to gain political support from the Tajik population, similar to what Marat describes in her article.

Central Asian governments, including Tajikistan, face unique challenges to state building, partly due to the tension between Soviet legacy and Islamic culture. Anna Matveeva writes, "The struggle for legitimacy in Central Asia involves a palpable tension between symbols of secular and religious modernity, on the one hand, and a competition with Sovietism on the other."<sup>124</sup> Matveeva describes how it is awkward for the states to create an ideology that differentiates itself from both Communism and Islam. This is the reason that in general, Central Asian governments, and Tajikistan in particular, have focused on secular narratives, rooted in ancient grand histories. However, due to the difficulties of state building that Matveeva describes, Tajikistan's leader, Rahmon, has begun to take seriously the potential power of Islamic symbols in official rhetoric.

Following the work of Wedeen and Marat, the use of emotionally significant symbols in national ideology contributes to political legitimacy. Similar to what the Assad regime did in

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>124</sup> Matveeva, "Legitimising Central Asian Authoritarianism," 1102.



Syria, the Tajik state is focused on appropriating Islamic figures and imagery, which are subject to competing claims by potential political oppositionists, such as the Islamic Revivalist Party, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and ISIS. In an effort to take control of the Islamic narrative, subordinate Islamist opposition to the state, and gain legitimacy, the Tajik government has incorporated Islamic references into its narrative. Confronted with ample evidence of this strategy, I will focus on the designation of 2009 as the year of Imam A'zam and Rahmon's related speeches and the imagery of Rahmon's pilgrimage to Mecca in 2016. The next two sections of this thesis will address these events.

### **Rahmon's Pilgrimage**

The most recent example of the Tajik state's appropriation of Islamic imagery is the visit of Rahmon, his wife Azizamo Rahmonova, and several of his children to Mecca. To be clear, the Rahmon family attended the *umrah*, or the small hajj, an Islamic mission to Mecca that can be performed at any time of the year, not the hajj, which can only be undertaken in the last month of the Islamic calendar. When Rahmon attended the *umrah* in January 2016, the media in Tajikistan was inundated with photographs of him wearing the *Ihram* clothing, or the traditional two white towel-like sheets worn for the religious expedition (see figures 1 and 2).<sup>125</sup> During Rahmon's mission, there was a day or two when social media networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, which had been consistently blocked for several months, were suddenly accessible in Tajikistan. One could speculate that the sites were unblocked to allow the photographic evidence of Rahmon's pilgrimage to freely circulate social media. The many images of Rahmon in *Ihram*

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<sup>125</sup> "V Seti vilozhenno video Khadj-i Umrah Emomali Rakhmona," *Radio Ozodi*, January 5, 2016, <http://rus.ozodi.org/content/article/27468018.html>.

dress, completing the hajj serve as “culturally resonant symbols.”<sup>126</sup> What could be better proof of the president’s devotion to Islam than a video of him following one of the five pillars of Islam? These images provide an important reminder to Tajiks of Rahmon’s projected piety and qualifications as an Islamic leader.



**Figure 2: Rahmon prays near the Kaaba.**

**Source: Radio Ozodi**



**Figure 3: Rahmon (above) and his wife Azizamo Rahmonova (below) exit the Kaaba. Source: Radio Ozodi**

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<sup>126</sup> Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 9.

After Rahmon's trip, the Tajik Khovar News Agency created a press release, painting the president as an exemplary and important Muslim leader. Considering that the Tajik government produced this article, it is a good example of how the state is attempting to portray its president. The article describes in detail the prayers and actions that Rahmon's entourage performed. The news report also retells how the King of Saudi Arabia permitted Rahmon to enter the Grand Kaaba, regarded as the most sacred Muslim space on earth, for the second time in his life. It states, "This suggests a decent place and authority of the Leader of the Nation, the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon in the Islamic world, which [sic] included twice in the list of 500 most influential Muslims."<sup>127</sup> The press release does not allow the reader to draw her own conclusions, instead literally spelling out the implications of Rahmon's *umrah*. It goes on to detail the actions the president has taken to deserve such an honor, which include the translation of the Quran into Tajik, the official of celebration of Imam A'zam, and his participation in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.<sup>128</sup> The official news release explicitly presents the president of the country as an influential and devout Muslim.

The efforts to drape the Tajik state in Islamic symbols are not limited to Rahmon, but also extend to his wife. After Rahmon and his family completed the small hajj, it was proposed that Azizamo Rahmonova be named "Leader of Islamic Women" in Tajikistan.<sup>129</sup> This represents a recent turn of events for the first lady of Tajikistan, who was previously relegated to the shadows, rather than be granted the mantle of public leadership. One of Azizamo

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<sup>127</sup> "Saudi Arabia opens Kaaba door for Leader of the Tajik Nation Emomali Rahmon," *Khovar National Information Agency of Tajikistan*, last modified January 5, 2016, <http://www.prezident.tj/en/node/10554>.

<sup>128</sup> "Saudi Arabia opens Kaaba door."

<sup>129</sup> "Azizamo Rahmonovu predlozhili ob'yavit 'liderom zhenshin,'" *Radio Ozodi*, January 19, 2016, <http://rus.ozodi.org/content/article/27496631.html>.

Rahmonova's only significant public appearances was when she accompanied her husband on an official diplomatic mission to Malaysia. In Malaysia, she wore a modest hijab, a fairly controversial sartorial choice considering the persecution normal Tajik women and girls face when wearing certain types of hijab in government offices, universities, schools, and even in public. Azizamo Rahmonova's official visits to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia demonstrate recent attempts to rebrand the first lady as a public role model for Tajik Muslim women.

The timing of Rahmon's pilgrimage suggests an effort to appear like an appropriate leader for an increasingly religious country, at a time when Rahmon's democratic credentials have never been so inadequate. In the year 2015, the Tajik government banned the Islamic Revivalist Party, calling it a "terrorist" group, and granted Rahmon the title of "Leader of the Nation."<sup>130</sup> This broke the power sharing peace agreement signed in 1997, which ended the Tajik Civil War. Rahmon's new title, and the constitutional amendments being considered to allow Rahmon to run for president an unlimited number of times, both poke further holes in the argument that Tajikistan is democracy. However, if Rahmon has somewhat abandoned efforts to present Tajikistan as a democracy, he has redoubled his efforts to present himself as a suitably devout Islamic leader.

Rahmon's visit to Saudi Arabia demonstrates how the rhetoric of the regime contradicts its policies. Khovar's official news report of the president's visit mentions that the Tajik government was cooperating with the Saudi government to improve travel conditions and even increase the number of citizens making the hajj.<sup>131</sup> The report states that before only 5000 Tajiks attended the hajj each year, but "at the initiative of the leadership and the government" this

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<sup>130</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Witch Hunt in Tajikistan," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, November 9, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/witch-hunt-in-tajikistan/27353915.html>.

<sup>131</sup> "Saudi Arabia opens Kaaba door."

number reached more than 6000.<sup>132</sup> At the same time, Tajik authorities have actively made it increasingly difficult for citizens to make the pilgrimage. In 2015 the government banned citizens younger than 35 from making the hajj.<sup>133</sup> At the same time the government represented itself as respectful of the efforts of citizens to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, it undermined these goals by enacting unreasonable restrictions on those wishing to make the journey.

### **Rahmon and the Year of Imam A'zam**

During the year of Imam A'zam, in 2009, Rahmon used the religious legacy of Abu Hanifa to explore the topic of Islam in modern Tajik society and to tie the figure to the Tajik state. Imam A'zam, otherwise known as Abu Hanifa (699-767), was the founder of the Sunni Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence, the most popular form of Islam in Central Asia. That Abu Hanifa is thought to originate from eastern Iran likely only boosts his appeal as a historical figure for the nationalist Tajik government.<sup>134</sup> However, Tajik propaganda does not focus on Abu Hanifa as Persian, but represents him as a moderate Islamic figure and as the founder of “traditional” Islam in Tajikistan. By emphasizing Abu Hanifa and Hanafi Islam the Tajik authorities have created an explicit contrast between “‘good’ nationalized and traditional Islam” and more politicized international Islamic movements like Salafism, which is banned in Tajikistan.<sup>135</sup> This section will further discuss how Rahmon uses the imam as a rhetorical device

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> “Tajikistan Bans Hajj Pilgrimage For Citizens Younger Than 35,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified January 31, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikisyanm-bans-hajj-pilgirmage-for-citizens-younger-than-35/26955080.html>.

<sup>134</sup> *Encyclopedia Iranica*, “Abu Hanifa.”

in his speeches in order to promote Tajik Islam and a universal set of values, and garner support for his government.

In Rahmon's speeches about Imam A'zam, the president associates respect for Abu Hanifa with respect for the state, and emphasizes the importance of a stable society in Islam. In "Imam A'zam and the Modern World," Rahmon states that he takes the presence of his audience as "recognition of a historic personality of the Islamic world on one hand and as support of the initiatives of Tajikistan on the other."<sup>136</sup> Here Rahmon presents support for Islamic tradition alongside support for the Tajik state. In a different address, "The Great Imam and the Dialogue of Civilizations," he declares, "Islam considers societal stability and security of each Muslim nation as a high national value."<sup>137</sup> Using the example of Abu Hanifa to reconcile the government with Islam, Rahmon emphasizes the importance of political stability and national security. The president also calls for religious sermons to draw attention to "issues of national culture, mality [nation], patriotism, [and] propagation of national and Islamic values."<sup>138</sup> Rahmon is not subtle when he calls for sermons to tie Islam to the Tajik nation. In Rahmon's speeches about Abu Hanifa, Islamic culture is closely connected with the Tajik state; support for the former means support for the latter.

Throughout his lectures on Abu Hanifa, Rahmon paints competing Islamic movements as unconstitutional and anti-Tajik. In "The Great Imam and the Dialogue of Civilizations," Rahmon blames the Islamist opposition (likely the IRPT) for the Tajik Civil War, describing the Islamist

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<sup>135</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse, "Islam in Central Asia: National Specificities and Postsoviet Globalisation," *Religion, State & Society* 45, no. 3 (2007): 249.

<sup>136</sup> Emomali Rahmon, "Imam A'zam and the Modern World," *Khovar National News Agency of Tajikistan*, accessed February 14, 2015.

<sup>137</sup> Emomali Rahmon, "The Great Imam and the Dialogue of Civilizations," *Khovar National News Agency of Tajikistan*, accessed December 12, 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Rahmon, "The Great Imam and the Dialogue of Civilizations."

forces as a “radical” group that espoused “religious-disguised anti-national principles.”<sup>139</sup> First, this statement reveals Rahmon’s Soviet education— here he considers religion to be merely an insidious cloak for other interests. Second, despite the fact that the opposition was officially incorporated into the government, Rahmon discredits their ideology as “anti national.” At other points in his speech, Rahmon speaks about the construction of thousands of mosques as an example of freedom of religion in Tajikistan. Rahmon emphasizes that those mosques should not be considered “outside the framework of national values,” but rather should properly represent the Tajik nation by “refraining from any fanaticism and by their respect for national values and the national state.”<sup>140</sup> For Rahmon the only correct form of Islam operates within *his* state framework, and any institutions that fall outside of this framework are disrespectful and anti Tajik. I should note that the emphasis placed on Sunni Hanafi Islam by the Tajik government excludes most of the population of the Gorno-Badakhshan region from this nation-building project. While more than 90% of Tajikistan’s population is Muslim, about 4% are Ismaili Shia, most of whom live in Gorno-Badakhshan.<sup>141</sup> Considering the Tajik government’s general suspicion of foreign funded Islamic groups (everything from schools to universities and hospitals in the Pamirs have been heavily subsidized by the Aga Khan foundation) the Tajik government might also regard Ismaili Shia Islam as a competing “anti-national” ideology.<sup>142</sup> By representing contending Islamic ideologies as “anti national,” Rahmon is attempting to deny them legitimacy, and establish a dominant political narrative.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> “Tajikistan: Annual Report 2015,” United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, accessed March 28, 2016, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tajikistan%202015.pdf>.

<sup>142</sup> Joshua Kucera, “The Aga Khan’s Tightrope Walk in Tajikistan,” *Aljazeera*, August 31, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/08/2013828121815583542.html>.

It is important to point out the Islamic movements that Rahmon's rhetoric targets are not monolithic. Hakim Zainiddinov differentiates between "traditional" and "political" Islam in Tajikistan.<sup>143</sup> The Tajik state understands "traditional" Islam as an ideology that the country has inherited from previous generations.<sup>144</sup> So-called "political" Islam, meanwhile, is generally considered to be potentially dangerous, subversive, and supported by insidious foreign interests. "Political" Islam in Tajikistan can be loosely divided into two main categories.<sup>145</sup> The first is the Islamic Revivalist Party of Tajikistan, a party that supported working within the framework of a secular state, which was officially registered as a political party, but is now banned.<sup>146</sup> The second group is extremely diverse, and includes different Islamist movements, such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir, which depart from the state sanctioned Hanafi school of Islam and may operate underground.<sup>147</sup> The Tajik government is generally highly suspicious of "political" Islam and considers these organizations to be sources of religious tension, linked to terrorist organizations.<sup>148</sup> Rahmon's recent rhetoric draws from "traditional" Islam, a strategic term promoted by the Soviets, which he implicitly contrasts with the concept of "political" Islam.

For Rahmon, Tajik Islamic nationalism is necessary to ensure the stability and longevity of his personal regime. In a speech to the Majlis in 2013, Rahmon describes the measures that have been enacted since around 2008 as an effort "aimed at development of Islamic culture in the

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<sup>143</sup> Zainiddinov, "The Changing Relationship of the Secularized State," 467.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 467-469.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 469.



society.”<sup>149</sup> Of course, before 2008 there already was a robust Islamic culture in Tajikistan, but only recently has the state begun to recognize it officially. The president has turned to Islam as a source of moral values, which can support his regime, proclaiming, “[the] historical mission of the Islam religion is the unity and stability of society.”<sup>150</sup> He also clearly acknowledges the use of Islamic symbols and the celebration of religious events as a tool for nation building and for the development of “national consciousness.”<sup>151</sup> Rahmon obviously recognizes the increasing importance of Islam in society in his country and has taken the necessary steps to ensure that he is viewed as an appropriate Muslim leader.

Although the Rahmon regime uses Islamic symbols in state rhetoric, the representation of Islam is selective, with the regime focused on a Tajik form of the religion in the Hanafi tradition in contrast to other political “anti nationalist” versions. Rahmon points to Abu Hanifa’s doctrine as a unifying ideology for Muslims, claiming that the Hanafi School of Islam was able to resolve the issue of “separation” in the Islamic world and “consolidated the most radical groups through tolerance, compromise, patience and strong arguments.”<sup>152</sup> Although the president asserts that “radical” Islam can be curbed through “patience” and “tolerance,” he has also taken significant steps to actively police the expression of Islamic symbols and control sermons and the publication of religious materials. The following section will describe these efforts.

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<sup>149</sup> Emomali Rahmon, “Speech by the President at the Meeting with the Representatives of Communities of the Country,” *Khovar National Information Agency of Tajikistan*, accessed March 2, 2015.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Emomali Rahmon, “Imam A’zam and the Modern World.”

## Enforcement of Tajik Islam

The Tajik government has sought to establish control over the symbols and rhetoric of Islam and to dominate the religious field. This is partly to ensure that competing political parties, namely the Islamic Revivalist Party, cannot lay solitary claim to Islamism in order to gain widespread popularity. It is also partly to prevent other illegal, radical Islamist groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and ISIS, from earning support. However, the Tajik state has not limited its efforts to propaganda; it also relies on the strict enforcement of laws to ensure compliance with state sanctioned Islam. This section will describe the main techniques Rahmon utilizes to ensure adherence to state sanctioned Islam, in particular the 2009 law on religion, and the recent ban of the IRPT.

In 2009, the lower parliamentary house of Tajikistan, the Majlisi Namoyandagon, approved a bill, “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations,” which simultaneously established a state religion and severely restricted freedom of worship.<sup>153</sup> The bill recognized the Hanafi school of Islam as the official religion. Among the restrictive measures enacted, the bill required religious organizations in the country to re-register with the government.<sup>154</sup> It also mandated that government be involved in the appointment of clergy, limited religious gatherings to official religious buildings, and regulated the number of mosques based on an area’s population.<sup>155</sup> In addition, state religious officials must approve Islamic materials, such as books or videos, before they are released to the public.<sup>156</sup> As a result of this law religion in Tajikistan is

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<sup>153</sup> Tim Epkenhans, “Defining normative Islam: some remarks on contemporary thought in Tajikistan,” *Central Asian Survey*, 30 (2011), 81.

<sup>154</sup> Dilshod Achilov and Renat Shaykhutdinov, “State Regulation of Religion and Radicalism in the Post-Communist Muslim Republics,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 60, no. 5 (2013), 20.

<sup>155</sup> Peter Roudik, “Tajikistan: New Law on Religious Organizations,” *Library of Congress*. April 3, 2009.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

subordinated to state control. A church or mosque cannot be formed without the permission of the government, and the appointment of religious teachers is under the control of the government. Through this law the Tajik government has the power to dictate where and how one can practice religion.

After the 2009 law, the Tajik government established significant control over the mosques of the country. Through the Council of Ulama and the State Committee on Religious Affairs, the government gained power over who is appointed as an imam. These measures and institutions are drawn from Soviet techniques of religious control. However, the Tajik government has gone further to restrict the spread of Islamic ideas. As of 2011, Friday sermons given at mosques are limited to a list of pre-approved topics.<sup>157</sup> This ensures that a homogenous form of Tajik Islam is propagated and that the state is portrayed in a favorable light.<sup>158</sup> This control also serves to censor potential political speech in mosques. In this way, official rhetoric, which supports the state, is disseminated across the country on a weekly basis. Through these mechanisms, the Rahmon regime is able to dictate the use of patriotic and nationalist themes in sermons to shore up political support for the regime.

The ban of the Islamic Revivalist Party of Tajikistan in 2015 is an example of the Tajik government's attempt to dominate Islamic discourse entirely and enforce adherence to state-sanctioned Islam. The government proscribed the IRPT after an attempted coup in September by Tajik deputy defense minister, Abduhalim Nazarzoda. Though the former minister was a member of the IRPT in the 1990s, there seems to be little evidence that the IRPT backed the coup as the government claimed.<sup>159</sup> More likely is that the government found a way to make the

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<sup>157</sup> Zainiddinov, "The Changing Relationship of the Secularized State," 465.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

best of a bad situation and conveniently scapegoated one of the main opposition parties. Since September 2015 over 200 party members have been arrested and accused of being “Islamic terrorists.”<sup>160</sup> The prohibition of the party came after a decade long effort by the Tajik government to exclude the group from power. By banning the party, the government was able to gain control over the discourse of political Islam and eliminate important opposition.

The Tajik state rigorously polices the public visibility of religion. Edward Lemon discusses the unique state of secularism in Tajikistan as a form of “assertive secularism,” in which “certain forms of religion and non-religion are prioritized while others are suppressed.”<sup>161</sup> Some expressions, such as the government-led celebrations of Abu Hanifa, are allowed, while others, such as certain styles of hijab for women, are censored. Police conduct raids on primary schools to ensure that girls are wearing the more casual national style of hijab, as opposed to a more conservative hijab with two scarves. The government has also embarked on a massive campaign to regulate beard length. I have seen a sign that was written as a guideline for beard length, which specified what types of facial hair are allowed (for instance, police mustaches), and what is expressly forbidden (anything longer than fist length). In the Khatlon region, the regional police chief claimed that the police closed 162 hijab-selling shops and convinced over a thousand women to stop wearing the headscarf.<sup>162</sup> Meanwhile, 12,818 men with excessively long beards were “brought to order”.<sup>163</sup> Symbols that represent what is perceived as a “foreign” type

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<sup>159</sup> Farangia Najibullah, “Death of a Fugitive: Abduhalimm Nazarzoda, Tajik General Blamed For Recent Violence,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, September 16, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-general-nazarzoda-deadly-attacks/27233955.html>.

<sup>160</sup> Pannier, “Witch Hunt in Tajikistan.”

<sup>161</sup> Lemon, “Tajikistan Takes on the God Squad.”

<sup>162</sup> Bruce Pannier, “The Beard-Busters and Scarf-Snatchers of Khatlon,” *Radio Free Liberty Radio Europe*, January 19, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-tajikistan-khatlon-police-beards-hijabs/27497194.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

of conservative Islam, such as certain hijab styles and longer beard lengths, are rigorously policed. Through the active censorship of select Islamic symbols, the Tajik regime helps to enforce Rahmon's vision of national Islam.

Rahmon utilizes Islamic rhetoric to promote a positive Tajik Islamic cultural identity, and also uses laws to help ensure that citizens follow the state sanctioned form of Islam, as opposed to an "anti nationalist" version. Adeeb Khalid writes, "Although Islam is celebrated as part of national heritage, it must also conform to the state's vision of national heritage."<sup>164</sup> Islam is simultaneously celebrated and rigorously regulated. Soviet-era structures, such as committees for religious affairs, help to institutionalize state power over religious organizations and authorities in contemporary Central Asia through official oversight of clergy and published religious materials.<sup>165</sup> Police enforce official and unofficial rules to minimize the visibility of some symbols of Islamic piety, such as certain headscarf designs and beard styles. The Tajik government has also restricted political Islamic discourse by banning the Islamic Revivalist Party. Through legislation and the enforcement of restrictive religious laws, to some extent the state is able to limit Islamic expression to the state-sanctioned brand.

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<sup>164</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 132.

<sup>165</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse, "The Partnership between Islam and Orthodox Christianity in Central Asia," *Religion, State and Society*, 36, 4 (2008): 395.

## **CONCLUSION**

Tajikistan's policies toward Islam have been influenced by three major factors: Soviet attitudes toward Islam and religion, the Tajik Civil War, and the international security context. The Communist legacy has had a lasting influence on Tajikistan. The Tajik regime views Islam with suspicion and utilizes Soviet era techniques, such as repressive laws and state religious committees, to subordinate the Muslim faith to state control. The Tajik Civil War highlighted the existence of a significant Islamist opposition in the country, which Rahmon invoked as a security threat in order to gain Russia's backing and the presidency. The international context, more specifically the Islamophobic post 9/11 atmosphere, combined with concerns over spillover from Afghanistan and the developing ISIS crisis, has made Islamic extremism a powerful pretense for imposing repressive laws. The combination of these factors put the Tajik government in a position to use the perceived threat of "radical" Islam to leverage international and local support.

Before 2008, the Tajik government promoted emphatically secular national narratives, in an effort to sideline Islamic opposition and consolidate power. After that year, the regime began to incorporate Islamic references into the national ideology. In 2009, a law established Hanafi Islam as the official religion of Tajikistan. The government declared that same year to be the Year of Imam A'zam, or Abu Hanifa, and Rahmon made a series of speeches thematically centered on the religious figure. Islam was no longer anathema in state discourse, but was increasingly incorporated into it. In January 2016, Rahmon undertook a highly staged and publicized trip to Mecca with his family. Rahmon's pilgrimage presented a powerful image,

designed to convey his authority as an important Muslim leader. Each of these events and initiatives represents a new effort on the part of the government to relate to the Tajik population through Islam. By using emotionally resonant symbols, the regime strives to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the Tajik population.

Tajikistan is departing further from its post-civil war legacy, which created a unique balance between an opposition led by an Islamist political party and a neo-Soviet government. Rahmon's appointment as "Leader of the Nation", along with recent proposals for constitutional amendments that would allow him to run for president an unlimited number of terms, demonstrate that Tajikistan is on a progressively authoritarian path. However, as much as Rahmon's cult of personality may be gaining strength, Tajikistan remains a weak state.

Despite its efforts, the state's ability to implement "Tajik" Islam is limited. For instance, the law may require imams to be approved by the state-appointed Board of Ulama, but it cannot prevent some of the population from accepting the religious authority of those lacking state-certification. Likewise, it cannot entirely suppress the dissemination of different religious materials or knowledge, particularly in the age of the Internet. It is probable that in the future the Tajik state will continue to restrict public expressions of Islam, such as certain hijab and beard styles, and place limitations on mosque attendance and registration. However, these actions are only likely to stir up feelings of antipathy for the government, rather than actually prevent citizens from practicing Islam beyond the bounds of the state-sanctioned version. Though portraits of the president may hang on the walls of every government building, classroom, or private business, the state cannot entirely control how its citizens practice their faiths.

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