The Transformation of Tajikistan's Religious Field: From Religious Pluralism to Authoritarian Inertia

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Abstract

The recent transformation of Tajikistan's political system has significantly altered the social and political context in which the country's lay Muslims and religious elites negotiate Islam and Islamic normativity. The quasi-governmental Islamic Center (*Markazi Islomi*) has taken on a more dominant role, becoming the sole official (state-approved) Islamic institution in Tajikistan defining Islamic normativity. In this work, we explore the rationale behind the Tajik state's pursuit of this political trajectory, conduct a de- tailed examination of the religious edicts (*fatwas*) issued by the Islamic Center, and identify its conservative trends. Our research suggests that the Islamic Center offers the Tajik government a way to achieve its much-desired monopoly over the religious field. Furthermore, we argue that the Islamic Center's conservative interpretation of Islam, with its emphasis on political conformity, social patriarchy, and limited mystical experience, is far more "legible" and administratively manageable for the authoritarian regime than the previous religious pluralism.

Keywords

Tajikistan – Islam – state – legibility – legitimation – Islamic Center – *ulamo* – Salafism

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Introduction

In the middle of *Zardoluzor*,[1] a typical small village in the suburbs of Khujand, is a bustling local mosque. Its imposing structure—with a large gilded dome and high minaret—appears somewhat out of place among the modest houses that surround it. The mosque appeared in the early 2000s, but it has only recently achieved its current level of grandeur thanks to local residents, who funded an expansion and state-of-the-art amenities. Diagonally across from the mosque, there is a large, late Soviet-era structure that looks derelict and abandoned, with broken glass on the windows, bare metal frames for benches, and patchy old paint on the walls. This is the building that houses the local school. The dis- sonance between the two images can hardly be reconciled. When asked about it, a local resident gave a dismissive reply: "A mosque is a house of God, a place for prayer, so people should improve it; the school should be improved by the state (*masjid—khonai khudo, joi ibodat—mardum onro boyad obod kunand, maktabro boyad davlat obod kunad*)." But one is left with the lingering paradox that nowhere in that village was the state more present than in the mosque— with its centrally appointed *imam-khatib* (leader of prayers) on a state salary, dressed in a state-approved uniform, reading a sermon out of the book of sanctioned *khutbas* (Friday sermons), and CCTV surveillance—and nowhere was the state more absent than in that derelict secondary school. The political processes that have led to the emergence of this paradox will be illuminated in the following pages.

Islam, the Media, and the Religious Field in Post-Conflict Tajikistan

In the context of the complex societal and political transformations defined by authoritarian consolidation, post-Soviet decolonization, Islamic revival, and nationalist renaissance, Tajik religious scholars (*ulamo*), Islamist activists, secular politicians, and intellectuals have fiercely debated the role of Islam in Tajik society: its public moral-ethical dimensions, ritual normativity, and religious authority. This debate has not taken place in isolation from global trajectories such as the "war against terror," discourses on Central Asian regime (in-) stability, social and economic (dis-)integration instigated by the rise of China

1 This vignette comes from the field research of one of the authors, conducted in the summer of 2017. The name of the village has been changed to protect the research site and its resi- dents. "*Zardoluzor*" was chosen in reference to the abundance of apricot trees in and around the village.

and labor migration to Russia, and increasingly transnational perspectives on Islam highlighted by the rise (and fall) of post-Islamist movements.

Significantly, the debate over the role of Islam in post-Civil War Tajikistan was facilitated by a tremendous revolution in modes of communication. Cheaply produced and easily distributable information in various media for- mats, followed by a surge in the use of the internet and social media, captured the religious sphere in Tajikistan and profoundly impacted the societal and political debate on religion, as well as the religious field itself. While the authoritarian government initially struggled to adapt to the new technology, independent *ulamo*, lay religious intellectuals, and Islamist activists realized its potential and created public resonance that changed the nature of the religious debate and the religious field in Tajikistan. As a result, Islam in its many variations regained a relevant, dynamic, and public place in Tajikistan's society as a source of identity and moral-ethical orientation. However, as the social ambiguities created by the diffuse power centers that emerged from this process grew, it became imperative for the government to introduce a mechanism of control to (re-)establish its legal, institutional, and moral authority in that vibrant context.

In this paper, we observe that the religious field and concomitantly the de- bate over the role of religion in Tajik society has experienced two formative periods since the post-conflict rehabilitation. After the Civil War there was an intense period of intellectual religious plurality, domestic détente, and globalization that (in its most pronounced form) commenced in the early 2000s and lasted until 2010.2 Since then, the regime of President Rahmon has (re-)gained control over the religious field in a process of authoritarian monopolization. However, the regime has not returned to its belligerently secular identity politics, instead integrating a sanitized and deeply conservative interpretation of an allegedly authentic Tajik Islam into its politics. The objective of this paper is therefore to explore the immediate political rationale for President Rahmon's government's pursuit of this political trajectory and its implications for the contemporary political landscape in Tajikistan. We also present an empirical basis for the argument that the new state narrative on Islam engendered by the conservative ideological underpinnings of Tajikistan's Islamic Center pro- motes religious and political conformity, reproduces male-dominated social imaginaries, and panders to popular mystical-spiritual demands within the

2 We consider the first five years after the General Peace Accord of 1997 to be the period of post-conflict rehabilitation, which includes the National Reconciliation Commission and the implementation of elections in 1999/2000. This period ended with Tajikistan's stronger integration into global and regional trajectories after 2001.

Tajik society. In the sections that follow, we outline the two periods, present a state-centered model that captures the cooptation and institutionalization of the Islamic Center, and offer a detailed study of the conservative trends within the Center's vision of Islam.

Religious Field: From Plurality and Domestic Détente to State-Sanctioned Tajik Islam

Starting in the early 2000s, the religious field in Tajikistan began to develop into a vibrant and heterogeneous space, with a notable plurality of voices and intellectually diverse perspectives. This was certainly an unintended outcome from the standpoint of the government, which made several notable attempts to exert influence over different aspects of the Islamic habitus of its Muslim population.3 Nevertheless, these years were a time of relative political and societal plurality given the nation's neighborhood and Soviet and immediate post-Soviet history. On the one hand, the government's desire to integrate into the global system, supported by the conditions for political pluralism outlined in the Peace Agreement of 1997 and civil society promoting projects that were attached to donor funds in the first years of post-civil war reconstruction, meant that it had to at least pay lip-service to the global democratic discourse and transition paradigm.4 On the other hand, primarily due to insufficient institutional capacity and the imperative of immediate regime survival, the government of Tajikistan had to give in to a form of domestic détente, giving urban civil society and media some breathing room. Similarly, as the country's self-professed Muslim population became increasingly observant of religious dogmas and rites, the post-conflict discourse shifted to address the role of reli- gious mores and values in everyday life.5

3 See, for instance, T. Epkenhans, "Islam, Religious Elites, and the State in Post-Civil War Tajikistan," in P. Jones (ed.), *Islam, Society, and Politics in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017), 173–198; E. Lemon and H. Thibault, "Counter Extremism: Power and Authoritarian Governance in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 37, no. 1 (2018): 137–159; H. Thibault, *Transforming Tajikistan: State-Building and Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018); and A. Rahnamo, *Islam va amniyati milli dar Tojikistan* (Dushanbe: Irfon, 2011).

4 J. Heathershaw, "The Global Performance State," in M. Reeves, J. Rasanayagam, and J. Beyer (eds.), *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 29–54.

5 See M. Stephan, "Education, Youth and Islam: The Growing Popularity of Private Religious Lessons in Dushanbe, Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 29, no. 4 (2010): 469–483.

In this brief period, we witnessed a proliferation of various forms of Islamic media and literature. Independent publishing houses produced texts ranging from highly popular instruction booklets on basic Islamic practices to more specialized literature on ethics and morals, all of which were easily available throughout the country and were sold in abundance in front of the major mosques, especially on Fridays. This period also featured the rise in popularity of religious audio recordings—the so-called *amri ma'ruf* ("commanding right")—which could be heard blaring from the speakers of local *marshrutkas* (ubiquitous passenger vans) and taxis. In the latter years of the decade, there was also a marked rise in the use of the diverse Tajik "Islamic" internet, and a relative plurality of views on religious affairs were openly discussed in the Tajik media. One of the outcomes of these developments was a highly heterogeneous religious field that could cater to diverse societal needs. In this context, the urban middle class could comfortably turn to their favorite versatile *pirs* (religious authorities related to the mystical Sufi tradition in Islam) and visit *mazars* (shrines) on the edges of urban Tajikistan, while more conservative rural folks (especially labor migrants) found avenues for remaining connected to their preferred religious specialists. Herein lies a major point of contention: that a highly diverse market of ideas connected to a locally embedded "authentic" Islam, where each spiritual seeker can find a satisfying—and potentially individually tailored—solution to their everyday problems or moral scruples, can pose a set of challenges to a consolidating regime.6

From an administrative point of view, the diversification of the religious field spells a major problem because such interactions become highly unsystematic and unpredictable. Thus, as the government of Tajikistan continued its process of authoritarian consolidation and expansion of regulatory capacity, one could also observe more scrupulous attention being paid to strengthening the official Islamic institutions, as well as structures that were more aligned with the government's political objectives. The Islamic Center (*Markazi Islomi*) and the State Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) have become the most important institutional actors defining and regulating religious and cultural normativity in Tajikistan. The Islamic Center's predecessor was the Soviet-era *qoziyot*, a local branch of the sadum (Spiritual Administration of the Muslims

6 See, for instance, M. Stephan-Emmrich and A. Mirzoev, "The Manufacturing of Islamic Lifestyles in Tajikistan through the Prism of Dushanbe's Bazaars," *Central Asian Survey*, 35, no. 2 (2016): 157–177; and S. Nozimova and Tim Epkenhans, "Negotiating Islam in Emerging Public Spheres in Contemporary Tajikistan," *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*, 67, no. 3 (2013): 965–990.

of Central Asia and Kazakhstan) in Tashkent.7 In the later Soviet period and during the tumultuous time of independence, the then-Chairman of the *qoziyot*, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, transformed the nature of the institution, becoming an independent but contentious actor in the political mobilization that contributed to the polarization of Tajik society on the eve of the Civil War.8

Following the post-conflict rehabilitation, systematic efforts were made to prop up the Islamic Center and different iterations of the CRA by expanding their administrative and regulatory mandates. Since 2007, the government has consolidated its influence over religious institutions by passing new legislation regulating customs and traditions, including religious ones, and by imposing strict regulatory control over the *ulamo* and all functioning mosques across the country. Importantly, the authoritarian regime has realigned its official identity politics, abandoning the previous belligerent secularism revolving around the "Aryan" origins of the Tajiks and their early statehood under the Somonid dynasty (10th century) and integrating a sanitized Islamic narrative. The lavish celebration of 2009 as the "Year of Imomi Azam" (i.e. Abu Hanifa, the 8th-century founder of the Hanafi law school in Sunni Islam) and special recognition of Hanafi Islam in the law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations adopted the same year,9 served as a caesura in the official identity politics of Tajikistan.10

In 2010, following the death of Sheykh Amonullo(h) Ne'matzoda, the government orchestrated the appointment of Saidmukarram Abdulqodirzoda, a former official in the President's Executive Office and the CRA, as the new Chairman of the Islamic Center's Council of Ulamo.11 Under his leadership, the

7 For the religious institutions in Soviet Central Asia, see E. Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

8 See T. Epkenhans, *Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016), 203–215.

9 The preamble of the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations recognizes the "special role of the Hanafi school" in the "development of the national culture and spiritual life of the people of Tajikistan." No other religion or religious school is given the same recognition. See "Zakon Respubliki Tadzhikistan o svobode sovesti i religioznykh ob'edeneniyakh" (from January 2, 2018, edition, No. 1497), http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=197 (accessed October 30, 2018).

10 For official identity politics in Tajikistan before 2009, see H. Blakkisrud and S. Nozimova, "History Writing and Nation Building in Post-Independence Tajikistan," *Nationalities Papers*, 38 (2010): 173–189; and M.Laruelle, "The Return of the Aryan Myth: Tajikistan In Search of a Secularized National Ideology," *Nationalities Papers*, 35 (2007): 51–70. For identity politics after 2009, see Epkenhans, "Islam, Religious Elites," 190–196.

11 Although the Chairman of the Islamic Center's Council of Ulamo is elected by the members of the Council, specialists agree that the Chairman is approved by government officials. See "Darguzashti Amonulloh Ne'matzoda," *BBC*, September 7, 2010,

Islamic Center evolved into a rigid hierarchical institution that directly intervened into the organization of religious affairs in Tajikistan and facilitated the authoritarian consolidation of Rahmon's regime.12 In concert with the administrative restrictions of the cra, the Islamic Center marginalized independent religious scholars (such as the Turajon family, Hoji Mirzo, and Ismoil Pirmuhammadzoda) and imposed its own version of Hanafi Sunni normativity as the "true" and "authentic" Tajik Islam.

As part of the expansion of the regulatory capacity of the state, the regime has deliberately restricted the public sphere and stifled voices that were deemed dissenting, including those from within the elite (such as Suhrob Sharipov and Ibrohim Usmonov). Complex measures have been introduced to regulate the publication and sales of Islamic literature and audio/video recordings, manipulate mosque categorizations, provide for the attestation of imams, and streamline the appointment of imams to local mosques. For all intents and purposes, these measures constituted a deliberate attempt to standardize and "nationalize" religious practice throughout the country: each Friday mosque- goer now listens to the same *khutba*, delivered by *imam-khatibs* who are even dressed in identical uniforms. All evidence points to an attempt to instill be- longing to a shared imagined community in the form of a Tajik *umma*. Notably, this standardization and turn to a highly conservative interpretation of Islamic tradition follows a path already trodden by other majority-Muslim countries, including Turkey (with the *Diyanet*), Egypt (with the Ministry of *Awqaf*), and Indonesia (with the Ministry of Religious Affairs).

Intriguingly, this version of Hanafi Sunni Islam is starkly different from and highly critical of more traditional practices. These differences have intensified with recent restrictions that regulate customs guiding festivities and funerals,13 customs that survived seventy years under the staunchly atheist Soviet regime. If the Tajik government and indeed the Islamic Center itself had not vociferously denounced Salafism as an alien distortion of Islamic tradition, the naïve observer would probably label the Islamic Center's interpretation of Islam as genuinely "Salafi." Here, we follow the conceptualization of "Salafism" as a heterogenous current within Islam whose adherents claim to strictly repro- duce the Islamic society as it was under the Prophet Muhammad and his early

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http://www.bbc.co.uk/tajik/news/2010/09/100907_sq_mm_nematzadeh.shtml (accessed October 30, 2018).

12 See Lemon and Thibault, "Counter Extremism."

13 See M. Yusufi and S. Yatim, "Azodori—na nola, na fighon. Ehsosoti ghamdor ham tanzim meshavad," *Radioi Ozodi*, September 21, 2017, https://www.ozodi.org/a/new-controversy- over-funeral-procedures-in-tajikistan-/28746842.html (accessed October 30, 2018).

successors.14 Wiktorowicz' categorization of contemporary Salafists as either Quietists, Politicos, and Jihadis, later refined by Wagemakers, is most relevant to this discussion.15 In this conceptual framework, the Islamic Center might best be described as "Quietist," as it focuses on advising the Muslim community and its ruler on the "correct" understanding of Islamic tradition and religious practice. As Wagemakers points out, these Salafi Quietists are not apolitical at all, since they often support the political status quo (or authoritarian inertia), as has been observed in several majority-Muslim countries in recent years.16 While characterizing Tajikistan's Islamic Center as potentially "Quietist-Salafi," we highlight its ulterior intention of further depoliticizing Tajik society, stripping the allure from movements that see Islam as a mobilizing factor and as a result legitimizing and facilitating Rahmon's authoritarian grip on the country. Ultimately, from the state's perspective, the turn toward a more rigid Islamic tradition was a deliberate effort to reduce ambiguity and complexity and make the religious field, including the interactions happening there, more standardized and more amenable to interventions and manipulations. In this context, we argue, a narrow and conservative interpretation of Islamic tradition is far more systematic and administratively manageable than a tradition that—at least to some extent—embraces personalization and plurality.17 Furthermore, the narrow conservative tradition facilitates authoritarian political and social inertia in Tajikistan, since it legitimizes male-dominated hierarchies, as well as a political patriarchy centered on one person—President Rahmon.

Finally, it should be noted that changes in global political trajectories and the overall discursive shift from democracy promotion to security concerns following the 9/11 terrorist attacks provided the necessary rationale and vocabulary to justify the state's increasingly restrictive efforts to regulate the religious field. While governance in vital social spheres, such as education and health, remains utterly poor, the Tajik regime has demonstrated an impressive

14 See P. Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007) and B. Rougier (ed.), *Qu'est-ce que le salafisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

15 Q. Wiktoriwicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29 (2006), 207–240; J. Wagemakers, "Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorising and Defining the Branches of Salafism," in F. Cavatorta and F. Merone (eds.), *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People's Power* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017), 7–24.

16 Wagemakers, "Revisiting," 16.

17 Alternative interpretations of the Islamic tradition were often more inclusive with regards to regional heritage (instead of an exclusive "national" one), more tolerant to- ward other law schools and branches of Islam (such as Shi'a Muslims and mystical— Sufi—practices), and more flexible with concepts of Islamic normativity (in relation to gender and the transformation of the social sphere).

learning curve in authoritarian legitimation strategies as well as "virtual politics," described by Andrew Wilson as the manipulation of political processes and institutions in the post-Soviet space in order to fake democracy.18 We consider this development to be authoritarian inertia: since 1997, Tajikistan's ruling elite has pursued a strategy of continuous attrition against civil society and the political opposition without major violent disruptions at the center.19 Importantly, the Tajik government expanded its coercive and regulatory capacities in relevant social spheres such as Islam, at least in part, by coopting and institutionalizing the ideological and administrative structures that regulate everyday life and religious practice, and provide easy access to (re-)produce social consensus and conformity supportive of the political status quo and potential avenues for mobilization.

The State of Research and Theoretical Considerations

Over the last decade, there has been a salient intellectual shift in the way that policy experts and scholars assess the performance, capabilities, and indeed the constitutive elements of statehood and regime (in-)stability in the Central Asian region in general, and Tajikistan in particular. In 2009, International Crisis Group produced its "Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure" report, based empirically on a whole host of instances that were considered indicative of imminent state failure.20 The report ominously concluded that:

> [t]he Rakhmon regime could, theoretically speaking, collapse at any moment. This is because the institutional structures which usually support any political regime are missing in the case of Tajikistan. The only reason

18 See A. Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) and John Heathershaw, "Tajikistan's Virtual Politics of Peace," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61 (2009): 1315–1336.

19 Arguably, the violence in the Gharm Valley (2010), Khorog (2012), and finally during the operations against Hoji Halim Nazarzoda in 2015 contests the idea of authoritarian inertia, which refers to a rather quiescent process of authoritarian consolidation. However, we argue that these violent conflicts were contained at the (already marginalized) periphery of Tajikistan and among parts of the population (Pamiris and Gharmis) with little leverage in the center (Dushanbe). See J. Heathershaw and P. Mullojonov, "Rebels without a Cause? Authoritarian Conflict Management in Tajikistan, 2008–2015," in M. Laruelle (ed.), *Tajikistan on the Move* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018), 33–62.

20 The exact definition of state failure or what constitutes a state is not provided in the report.

> it has not foundered so far is that it has not been hit by a crisis or catastrophe of sufficient magnitude.21

However, such accounts of impending state failure were soon recognized as "failure of analysis" based on conceptually faulty premises and methodological fallacies.22 This warrants a closer look into the definitive aspects of the functions of the state and the political objectives that it tries to achieve. Indeed, Heathershaw and Herzig argue that the survival of the Tajik state, in the face of this perceived weakness and high odds of state failure, merits a thorough examination, prompting them to suggest that alternative sources of statehood be investigated.23

Conceptually, a modern state finds itself in an interesting predicament. As Scott writes, its "[o]fficials … are, of necessity at least one step—and often several steps—removed from the society they are charged with governing."24 Yet the commonly held expectation (both its own and that of the society that it governs and is embedded in) is that the state has the tools to effectively implement its policies and affect the life of even the remotest resident, hopefully for the better. To achieve this, Scott argues, the state has to rely on a system of "techniques devised to enhance the legibility of a society to its rulers," usually with the goals of "appropriation, control, and manipulation."25 Consequently, a society that remains illegible and "opaque" to the state retains a certain level of political autonomy and is "insulated from some forms of finely tuned state interventions."26 Thus, overcoming societal opaqueness by reducing ambiguities in the nature of social relationships and hierarchies is not merely an ephemeral *raison d'etre* for the state, but an essential measure of its success. Furthermore, Migdal proposes that inherent to "state leaders' voracious appetite for widespread and pervasive rule changes" is the ultimate goal of (re-) establishing a political and ideological monopoly over defining "how social life should be ordered and what the rules of the game should be."27 The degree to

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21 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure* (Bishkek and Brussels, 2009), 19.

22 J. Heathershaw, "Tajikistan Amidst Globalization: State Failure or State Transformation?" *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 1 (2011): 147–168.

23 J. Heathershaw and E. Herzig, "Introduction: The Sources of Statehood in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 1 (2011): 5–19.

24 J.C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 76.

25 Ibid., 77

26 Ibid., 77.

27 J. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 20–33.

which a state is capable of exercising social control can determine its ability to mobilize the populace. In Migdal's account, the varying levels of social control are measured using three indicators: compliance ("gaining conformance to its demands by the population"), participation (state leaders seek to "gain strength by organizing the population for specialized tasks in the institutional components of the state organization"), and legitimation ("acceptance, even approbation, of the state's rules of the game, its social control, as true and right").28 And one scenario in which we can expect the emergence of a strong state,29 especially in societies which have "experienced direct, outside hegemonic rule, is the channeling of resources to indigenous organizations capable of extending social control throughout the society."30

In the context of post-Soviet Tajikistan, the vestiges of the vast state ma- chine designed to supplant traditional society and local solidarities during the decades of Soviet rule remain eerily weak.31 However, instead of pursuing social control by attempting to reanimate the local remnants of Soviet state- building processes, the contemporary political regime in Tajikistan has chosen to repurpose and regulate nascent horizontal networks that converged around the religious structures. The rationale for this process is explained by Migdal's model presented above. For the state, the undeniable allure of such an approach is that the costs associated with appropriating and institutionalizing such structures are often minimal.

Similarly, in the less tangible but no less consequential cyber domains we have witnessed considerable activism in the the Tajik state's regulatory efforts to (re-)affirm its dominance and root out potentially contentious sources of alternative discourse. Elsewhere, we analyzed the Tajik Islamic Internet, which we identified as an emerging public sphere. We discussed the particulars of the audience and argued that due to increased stifling of the Islamic discourse in the "traditional" public sphere, it was to be expected that actors producing alternative discourses would seek new avenues to challenge the master narratives, avenues that some have found in the denationalized cyber landscapes. In particular, we contended that this public sphere has seen alternative

28 Ibid., 32–33.

29 According to Migdal, states vary in their capacity to carry out societal reforms coveted by state leaders. Such "capabilities include the capacities to *penetrate* the society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways." Consequently, strong states are those that demonstrate high levels of these capabilities. See Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, 4–5.

30 Ibid., 173.

31 O. Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

discourses laying the groundwork to challenge the coercive discursive capacity of the state, namely by (re-)producing alternative disciplinary discourses and moral codes.[32]

As we expected, discursive contestation in this new public sphere was imminent. We can now observe that alternative discourse has been challenged—indeed, completely overtaken—by state-affiliated producers of Islamic discourse within the same cyber landscape. The rationale for trying to monopolize this medium is twofold. On the one hand, the Islamic Center and governmental religious institutions, having sidelined the most prominent media, now have to cater to the undiminished demand for the expertise of Tajik (language here is an essential aspect) religious specialists online. On the other hand, the goal of extending the experience of the standardized and conformist Tajik *umma* and eliminating opaqueness in cyber-enclaves is being pursued by reducing alternative normativity.

Relating this discussion to the concepts discussed above, we can map out a conceptual model in which the Tajik government tries to make the society more legible by reducing the ambiguity/complexity of the social context using the tools and mechanisms of religious institutions. Not only do the locally maintained and funded mosques provide regular and easy access to society, but the discourse produced by the Islamic Center also alters subjectivities and social hierarchies and relationships in the form of narrowly defined Tajik Islam. A particularly ingenious aspect of using the Islamic Center (as an institution) as a tool for extending social control has been the fact that the local facilities, which were eventually co-opted, sprung up without deliberate effort by the state—and, at times, in spite of the largely absent state—during the years of post-Civil War transformations. In a similar vein, there was a major regulation of online religious content, as the popular online *fatwa* sources (for instance the IRPT's Islamic Academy, the Turajon brothers' website, and Hoji Mirzo's online services) were pressured to shut down. As a result, Islamic Center was proclaimed the only legitimate *fatwa*-issuing authority in the country, including on the Internet.

From the government's perspective, there were a number of reasons to implement and promote this process of "normalization" or "standardization." First and foremost is the issue of regime legitimation and continuity. The current ruling elite, in particular Rahmon's extended family, considers the process of power consolidation to be complete, epitomized by the unilateral termination of the formal and informal conventions of the General Peace Accord. In 2015, the government eliminated the last political opposition by banning the IRPT,

32 See Nozimova and Epkenhans, "Negotiating Islam."

official co-signatory of the Accord on behalf of the United Tajik Opposition.33 By stifling dissident political voices and replacing the vibrant religious field with a narrowly defined, conservative, and loyal (to the regime) Islamic narrative, the government is able not only to marginalize alternative political narratives on legitimate statehood, but also to establish ideological underpinnings for such a transformational move. With time, the state's strategy reduces the complexity of the contentious religious field and increases its legibility and conformity, rendering the society more amenable to control and manipulation and resulting in the much-coveted legitimation.

The paradox of this political trajectory is uncanny: while such an interpretation of Islam is promoted as cultural/ethnic—that is, outside the realm of political manipulation—it has nevertheless become the cornerstone of the government's current Tajik identity politics. Moreover, as the Tajik government has adopted a narrowly defined concept of Sunni Hanafi Islam as an exclusive marker of cultural authenticity, political submission, religious tolerance, and unique "Tajikness" as well as "Tajik Islam," the Islamic Center's denunciation of alternative interpretations of the Islamic tradition as "cosmopolitan" or "alien" in the political sphere has become ever more discernable. In the following section, through an analysis of official material issued by the Islamic Center, we will discuss central paradigms of the government reconstruction of Hanafi Sunni normativity as part of the Tajik state's political legitimation strategy.

The Islamic Center Online

The Islamic Center's website came online in 2014, using the domain name muftiyat.tj. In 2016 it moved to shuroiulamo.tj.34 The website is developed and informative: it contains short biographies of the nine members of Council of Ulamo (the steering board of the Islamic Center), a small collection of religious literature in Tajik (mainly on the subject of Hanafi Sunni Islam) available for download, and the physical addresses of some of the mosques in and around

33 T. Epkenhans, "The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan: Episodes of Islamic Activism, Post-Conflict Accommodation, and Political Marginalization," *Central Asian Affairs*, 2 (2016): 321–346.

34 During Soviet times, the institution was called the *qoziyot* (after the Arabic/Tajik term *qozi,* meaning "judge"), however *muftiyot* (after the Arabic term *mufti*, meaning "legal scholar") was also widely used to describe it. The Rahmon administration initially dis- mantled the institution in 1996 and renamed it *High Council of Ulamo.* Apparently, the change in the domain name is part of the formalization and institutionalization of the Islamic Center.

Dushanbe. However, the two central functions that the website performs are:
1) continually proving the Islamic Center to be the key ally of the regime; and
2) as the sole self-appointed legitimate issuer of legal religious opinions in the country, issuing online *fatwas*.35

In a relatively up-to-date news section where the Islamic Center publish- es developments pertinent to the Council's decision-making or its members' international engagements, one can also find open letters penned by *imam- khatibs* from mosques across the country reacting to different political events that have an "Islamic" connotation, such as the detention and extradition of Qiyomiddin Ghozi and the IRPT's meeting on the sidelines of the OSCE/ODIHR conference in Warsaw.36 Longer and more elaborate pieces delving deeper into the role of Islam in political processes, with a central leitmotif of condemnation of any political organizations that have Islam as their unifying principle, can be found in the "Articles" subsection. Notably, the vitriol against the IRPT, with incessant attempts to equate it to any and all religious groups that the Islamic Center condemns (from Salafists to ISIS and Shi'as), appears to have been most prevalent in recent months.

The op-eds published in the "Articles" section, frequently attributed to *imam-khatibs* of the major Friday mosques, often address the issue of radicalization and terrorism, and are generously integrated with extensive citations of Rahmon's speeches and passages from the Qur'an and other Islamic sources. Whenever the President gives a speech on the threat of religious extremism, the Center will typically publish a new op-ed that addresses the issues raised

35 Officially, the Islamic Center does not call its legal advice *fatwa* but "Question and Answer" (*savolu javob*), since the term "fatwa" makes a contentious reference to Islamist de- bates in the 1980s. The Islamic Center's policy, however, is not consistent, since a "Fatwa Directorate" operates the question-and-answer section.

36 The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is based in Warsaw. Since the IRPT was banned in 2015, its exiled members have used the annual ODIHR meeting to call delegates' attention to the human rights situation in Tajikistan. The Islamic Center denounced the IRPT's campaign along the same lines as the govern- ment did. See F. Vohidov, "Nahzatiyon: Dar zabon nomi khudo dar qalb shaytongari," *Markazi Islomii Jumhurii Tojikiston*, December 12, 2017, http://shuroiulamo.tj/tj/news/ ids/290 (accessed February 9, 2018). Ghozi , then dubbed "General of the People," was a popular Islamist/IRPT activist in the political confrontation of 1992. After the peace ac- cord, he rarely appeared in public but maintained an online platform offering religious advice. One of the few Islamist activists left from the civil war, the Tajik government eventually managed to extradite him from Russia and sentenced him to 25 years in prison for treason (spying for Iran), inciting nationalist hatred, and undermining the constitutional order (see "Eshoni Qiyomiddin ba 25 soli zindon mahkum shud," *Akbor.com*, May 31, 2018, http://akhbor.com/-p6254-120.htm [accessed September 17, 2018]).

by the president and offers a perspective backed by Islamic sources on the importance of the threats and the necessity of the proposed measures. One such piece included a quote from Rahmon's speech in which the president stated, "The historic mission of religion is unity and stability of community, not making divisions (*tafriqaandozi*) within the Muslim *umma.*"37 The author of the op-ed added, "If today so-called Islamic movements, parties or groups find a foothold in Tajikistan, the fate of Syria and Iraq shall descend upon us."38 On other occasions, the statements indicate that the Islamic Center is trying to re- main relevant within the official public sphere and portray itself as a vital ally of the regime. For example, an official remark by the Center's chairman made during a conference on youth and radicalization states that:

> although the name of our Islamic Center has not been inscribed in the [Year of Youth decree of the president], the officials of our institution have a vested interest in the sensitive issue of teaching and training (*taʿlimu tarbiya*) youth and teens and instilling humanity, humility and patriotism and respect for national and religious values in their minds…39

Arguably the most significant section of the website and a major source for our analysis is the section of questions and answers. In many ways, it is not all that different from any online *fatwa* outlet, but it is significant because it is currently the only official online *fatwa* resource available in Tajik as it is spoken and written in Tajikistan. The IRPT had an online *fatwa* section that opened in 2010 and operated until 2013, when the Ministry of Justice demanded that they stop

37 This quote is taken from President Rahmon's speech on the eve of *Eid al-Fitr* in 2013. See "Sukhanroni dar muloqot bo namoyandagoni ahli jomeai mamlkat," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, July 4, 2013, http://www.president.tj/node/4666 (last accessed October 30, 2018). In the speech, the President not only celebrates the integration of Islamic culture and the government's role in recognizing its special status among the country's population, but also warns of the disastrous consequences of using Islam for political purposes. Two years later, following the parliamentary elections in 2015, excerpts from this speech also appeared in the *khutbas* calling for the government to ban the IRPT (Epkenhans, "The Islamic Revival," 339–341).

38 See "Islomi voqei (mazhabi Hanafi) va khatari voridsozii jarayon, raviya, mazhabhoi begonai dini ba davlatdorii milli," *Markazi Islomii Jumhurii Tojikiston*, April 27, 2016, http://shuroiulamo.tj/ru/articles/ids/152 (accessed October 30, 2018).

39 "Omili akhloqu ma'naviyat dar rushdi javonon," *Markazi Islomii Jumhurii Tojikiston*, May 8, 2017, http://shuroiulamo.tj/tj/articles/ids/207 (accessed October 30, 2018).

issuing religious opinions; the Turajon brothers' online *fatwa* outlet went offline when the website was taken down in 2015. While some religious scholars moved to social media that offer closed groups (such as the popular Telegram or Odnoklassniki), the diversity of the open-access Islamic internet in Tajikistan as such ceased to exist. Since then, the Islamic Center has established a monopoly over issuing public fatwas in Tajikistan (both online and in person). Based on our reading of the religious advice, we underline the Islamic Center's interventionism and its turn to a narrow, "legible" version of the Hanafi tradition characterized by an emphasis on religious conformity, patriarchy, and limited mystical experience.

Sources

To send a question to the Islamic Center, an individual can fill out an electronic form, which requires the name, email address, and phone number of the inquirer in addition to the text of the question. Importantly, the entire section is carefully edited: only the questions that get responses are published and since there is no reliable information on the selection process, we have to assume that only questions the Islamic Center deems suitable are published. There is even the possibility that the Center itself submits questions on topics it wants to discuss.40 Likewise, the visitor counter below each question and answer may be manipulated. However, we can say that if initially about thirty new answers were published in a course of a month, nowadays the Center publishes an aver- age of 60 new *fatwas* each month—and at times close to 100. Between 2016 and August 2018, the Islamic Center issued approximately 1,900 fatwas.

Questions are divided into four sections, for a total of eight subsections: theology (*aqida*), ritual practice (ablution, prayer, alms-giving, fasting, and pil- grimage), family issues (*khonavoda*), and Islamic jurisprudence (*masoili fiqhi)*. As is to be expected, most of the questions deal with everyday ritual normativity: performing prayers and ablutions, financial matters such as giving alms, and fasting-related procedures. Usually, the *fatwa* consists of the question addressed to the Islamic Center (see Figure 1), the answer by the Center's

40 Until the late 2000s, researchers had some—albeit limited—access to the Islamic Center and its subordinate institutions, such as the Islamic University. Representatives of the Center readily answered questions and provided additional material (on curricular development at the university, for instance). In our experience, this has changed dramatically with the appointment of Abdulqodirzoda, since which time it has become increasingly difficult for independent researchers to access the Center.

representative, the date when the fatwa was published, the number of views, and buttons to share the content on social media outlets, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Odnoklassniki.41 Among the questions that are outside the realm of everyday religious practices, the overwhelming majority have to do with familial relationships. Notably, questions from men (there is no way of verifying the gender of the person asking the question, but the stated names appear to be attributable to men) often express regret over saying the final words of divorce (*taloq*) and seek to clarify whether their penance can provide the basis for continuing (or renewing) their religious marriages.

Analysis of the questions suggests that this website may have a different audience than the audience who previously engaged with the Turajon brothers' *fatwa* outlet, in that the questions do not overwhelmingly relate to labor migration. This implies that the Islamic Center sees its website as mostly serving the needs of the national (territorial-based) *umma*, thus echoing the regime's muted response to the societal impact of labor migration as such.

Reading the earlier *fatwas*, we observed more references to the Islamic literature: Arabic-language citations of the Qur'an, followed by a translation of those verses and a detailed interpretation in Tajik. The *fatwas* that have been published more recently rarely cite Islamic sources directly, but may render a judgement and enclose a reference to the page in a summa book of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), if they reference the Islamic literature at all. In general, the Islamic Center offers a very short reading list on the Islamic legal tradition. Among the few references are, for instance, the 17th-century *Fatowoi olamgiri*, which was commissioned by the Moghul Shah Aurangzeb (1618–1707). Aurangzeb initiated the normative turn to a state-sponsored Sunni Islam in the later Moghul Empire that ended the Hindu-Islamic synthesis at the Moghul court. The *Fatowoi olamgiri* became one of the most important reference texts for British colonial regulation in South Asia, imposing normative categories of religious classification that eventually facilitated the colonial (and even post- colonial) administration of religion and religious communities in South Asia.42 Since many representatives of the Islamic Center studied at the International Islamic University in Islamabad in the 1990s and 2000s (including Abdulqodirzoda himself), the Islamic Center adopted the South Asian teaching material.

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41 We have registered all 1,900 *fatwas* since 2016 on a monthly basis. Approximately 75% of the fatwas deal with ritual practice and are less relevant to our analysis. Instead, our in-depth analysis focuses on the sections of theology, family affairs, and Islamic jurisprudence. Copies of the fatwas have been archived by the authors.

42 See S.A. Kluge, "Framed, Blamed and Renamed: The Recasting of Islamic Jurisprudence in Colonial South Asia," *Modern Asia Studies*, 35, no. 2 (2001): 257–313.

Figure 1 Screenshot of question no. 1915 from "Zebo" on August 17, 2018
Source: "Savolu javob," *Markazi Islomii Jumhurii Tojikiston*, 2014–2017, http://shuroiulamo.tj/tj/faq (accessed September 30, 2018).

Next to the *Fatowoi olamgiri*, the Islamic Center refers frequently to the 14th-century legal handbook *Mukhtasar al-viqaya fi masa'il ah-hidaya*, composed by the Hanafi jurist Ubaydullah b. Masʿud b. Taj ash-Shariya (d. 1346), and the 19th-century Hanafi jurisprudence textbook *Radd al-mukhtar*, by the eminent Damascene scholar Muhammad Amin Ibn Abidin (1783–1836), which is still considered one of the most authoritative legal textbooks of the Hanafi law school. In general, these textbooks are rather inconspicuous, reflecting the idea of Hanafi-Sunni normativity.43

In the following section, we focus on three distinct topics: 1) the concept of normative Hanafi Sunni Islam and the Center's agitation against Shiism; 2)

43 See H. Gerber, *Islamic Law and Culture, 1600–1840* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). For Ibn Abidin's argumentation, see J.E. Tucker, "Muftīs and Matrimony: Islamic Law and Gender in Ottoman Syria and Palestine," *Islamic Law and Society*, 1, no. 3 (1994): 265–300.

gender and family affairs; and 3) the spiritual domain. For each, we present a selection of relevant questions and answers. To the extent possible, we compare the Islamic Center's contemporary interpretation of Islamic tradition with interpretations promoted by religious scholars during the period of domestic détente. However, we need to emphasize that we have little to no information on public reception of the Islamic Center's fatwas and other publications—and, as we have noted above, this particular online context is vulnerable to manipulation, fabrication, and sanitization. Independent systematic qualitative empirical research on religious thought and practice—including the perceptions of lay Muslims—has become almost impossible in today's Tajikistan due to political restrictions. Thus, we have virtually no reliable information on the central issue of how and to what extent Tajikistan's Muslims respect and follow the Islamic Center's *fatwas*. However, several of the more contentious *fatwas* issued by the Islamic Center have been discussed in the Tajik media.44 In this paper, our analysis focuses on the government's official strategies and imaginaries about the role of Islam in Tajik society. We donot claim any determinism or automatism.

Normative Hanafi Sunni Islam and Anti-Shi'a Agitation

An analysis of the *fatwas* published on the website demonstrates that the Islamic Center promotes very conservative views. In particular, it takes a very narrow interpretation of the Islamic tradition appropriate for the *umma* in Tajikistan, which the Islamic Center calls Hanafi Islam. Any form of agency in deciding one's preferred school is strongly discouraged and even considered a conscious act of disseminating discord (*fitnaangezi*). In question (Q.) 286, "Abdullo," from Vahdat,45 asks why representatives of the Islamic Center always stress their allegiance to the Hanafi law school. The Islamic Center explicates:

> In the Hanafi law school, all practices (*amal*) are based on the sayings of God and His Prophet(s). Another valuable benefit of the allegiance to it [the Hanafi law school] is related to the fact that the fundamental principles of national unity, as well as peace and stability of the

44 For example, see A. Ashurov, "Reaktsiya na spornuyu fetvu Soveta ulemov Tadzhikistana," *Radio Ozodi*, September 29, 2014, https://rus.ozodi.org/a/26610917.html.

45 In the following section, all question (Q.) numbers refer to the Islamic Center's homepage Question & Answer section: "Savolu javob" [Questions and Answers], *Markazi Islomii Jumhurii Tojikiston*, 2014–2017, http://shuroiulamo.tj/tj/faq (accessed September 30, 2018).

> society, are reflected in it. Today, every reasonable person knows that the Islamic world has been dragged into a place of war and bloodshed due to the disputes between the law schools. Thus, who could be silent and neutral about this sad situation? In modern times, everybody and every society needs tranquility and peace like water and air. Therefore, the one- law-school unity (*yakkamzhabi*) is considered a fundamental and important issue for unity and tranquility.

Similarly, in Q. 1566, "Mullo" asks whether one can act on the basis of the *fatwas* issued outside of one's law school (*ghayri muqallidin*), to which the Islamic Center responds:

> The Muslim person's belief (*aqida*) in his/her *mazhab* should be final, not supposed (*boyad qatʿi boshad, na gumoni*). Especially the followers of the Hanafi law school under the current conditions must refrain from using the *fatwas* of the different schools, since acting upon such *fatwas* will result in conflict and dispersion (*ikhtilof va parokandagi*).

The Islamic Center's position on Shi'a Islam is remarkably uncompromising, even in light of the recent rapprochement between the Tajik government and Saudi Arabia (the most outspoken critic of Shi'a Iran), with the Center declaring Shi'a Muslims to be non-believers (*kafir*). For instance, in Q. 342, "Shahodat" asks:

> I kindly ask you to provide an exhaustive answer to my question. It has been a year since I married. My husband is Shi'a (*az ahli Shiʿa*) and I am Sunni (*az ahli Sunnat*). My husband wants me to follow his *mazhab*. I am asking you to show me the right path so that I am not misguided in my life.

The response from the Islamic Center states that because of their beliefs, which are *kafir* in nature and opposite to the Sunni *mazhab*, marriage to followers of Shi'a Islam is strictly forbidden (*qatʿiyan manʿ*). Quoting an interpretation from *Radd al-mukhtar*, the Center writes:

> There is no doubt in calling *kafir* a person who accuses saint Aisha [one of Muhammad's wives and antagonist of Ali, the cousin and son- in-law of Muhammad and venerated as the first Imam of the Shiites] of adultery or denies Abubakr [the first caliph] being a rightful *imam*,

> or gives Ali the status of God, or insinuates that Gabriel [the Angel of Revelation] made a mistake in bringing the prophecy to Muhammad instead of Ali.

In this quotation, the Islamic Center reproduces tropes of conservative Sunni anti-Shi'a agitation, referring to conflicting narratives on early Islamic history and alleged beliefs and religious practices in Shi'a Islam.46 Remarkably, both the question and the answer contain an inherently problematic ambiguity in the definition of the Shi'a communities to which this opinion can be applied: the *fatwa* refers in general terms to Shi'a Islam, without distinguishing between Twelver Shi'ism (predominant, for instance, in Iran) and smaller groups considered Shi'a, such as the considerable Ismaili Muslim population (often referred to as Pamiris) in Tajikistan, who predominantly reside in the Gorno- Badakhshan Autonomous Province. This intentional ambiguity increases the perception—prevalent among Tajikistan's Sunni majority—that the Ismailis are neither veritable Muslims nor Tajiks, reminding the attentive observer of the time of political polarization prior to the Civil War.47 Turajonzoda, as well as various independent religious scholars, has, however, repeatedly confirmed that the Ismailis are indeed Muslims.48 The hostility toward Shi'a Muslims (both the domestic Ismaili community and the "Iranian" Shi'as) demonstrated in the Islamic Center's explanation corresponds with the regime's exclusion of the Pamiris from the Tajik nation-building project49 and increasing repression of the Ismaili community at home (demonstrated by the brutal crack- down on protests in 2012, for example) and growing diplomatic tensions with the Islamic Republic of Iran (including Tajikistan's rapprochement with Iran's antagonist, Saudi Arabia) abroad. Furthermore, the intolerance toward alter- native law schools or branches of Islam clearly indicates the Islamic Center's ultra-conservative orientation, which one might, as we suggested earlier, go so far as to identify as Salafi. The extent to which this discourse on Hanafi Tajik Islam is marginalizing the population that does not adhere to this law school is not fully known. However, in one of his speeches President Rahmon asserts that "more than 60%" of Muslims in the country are followers of the Hanafi

46 The most serious allegation of the agitation is the insinuation that Shiites venerate Ali as a god, thus violating the central dogma of *tauhid*, the "oneness of God" (and therefore the ontological dissociation from humanity).

47 See Epkenhans, *Origins*, 161–162.

48 See Hoji A. Turanjonzoda, *Miyoni obu otash…* (Dushanbe, 1998), 51.

49 Blakkisrud and Nozimova, "History Writing."

law school,50 indicating that considerable segments of the population are excluded from the national discourse, which emphasizes the sole legitimacy of this law school (*yakkamazhabi*).

Gender and Family Affairs

One of the central topics of the questions, outside of ritual normativity, is gender issues and family affairs. Similar to its position on the appropriate Islamic tradition for the population, the Islamic Center takes a staunchly conservative view of women's roles and rights in the family, an interpretation that is largely in accord with the traditional, patriarchal narratives prevalent in Tajik society. Interestingly, if in the previous instance the Center's conservative position is for the most part in line with the government's implicit and explicit discourse, on matters involving gender roles the Center appears to put forward a position that is more conservative than the official state discourse.

For example, an anonymous man (Q. 337) expresses frustration over his wife's refusal to engage in conjugal relations *(shabkhonadori)* and asks whether this matter can be the basis for a divorce, as it has caused him "nine years of suffering." The Islamic Center, referring to *Mukhtasar-ul viqoya*, states:

> A husband has a right to bed his wife whenever he desires, except for situations barred by Shari'a (menstruation and post-partum), even by using force (*ba tavri majburi*). Inappropriate words and complaints of the wife on this matter will not cause barriers to the marriage.

Moreover, on the matter of female circumcision, the Islamic Center offers an opinion that is highly uncommon for the traditional setting of Tajikistan. The Islamic Center's fatwa (Q. 569 from "Sayid," August 2016) states:

> According to the directives of the prophet, circumcision is required (*sunnat*) for males and desired (*mustahab*) for females, as the Prophet ordered: "Circumcision is required for men (*sunnat*) and is desirable (*makrumat*) to women."

50 See "Sukhanroni dar muloqot bo namoyandagoni ahli jomeai mamlkat," *Khadamoti matbuoti Prezidenti Tojikiston*, July 4, 2013, http://www.president.tj/node/4666 (accessed October 30, 2018).

Notably, the Islamic Center does not provide the source for the quote that is used. Explaining the absence of the practice among Muslims in Tajikistan, however, the Islamic Center notes that

> in countries with a hot climate, the heat causes surges in female libido (*shahvat*), therefore there is a greater demand for female circumcision in those countries to reduce female desire. In countries with a moderate climate, such a shortcoming does not exist, therefore there is no demand for the practice among our people.

Remarkably, however, the majority of contemporary Sunni (and Shi'a) scholars decidedly reject the notion that female circumcision is rooted in Islamic tradition. Thus, the Islamic Center is transgressing mainstream Hanafi-Sunni normativity in this case.51 These opinions do not necessarily violate the country's domestic legislation, but they do contradict Tajikistan's international human rights commitments. Tajikistan is a party to a number of international agreements in which domestic violence—defined, among other actions, by spousal/ marital rape and female genital mutilation—is a crime to be prevented and prosecuted.52 In general, the Islamic Center is suspiciously silent on matters of domestic violence and unconventional sexuality. Judging from the rampant nature of domestic violence in Tajik society53 and the *fatwas* of the Turajon brothers, questions dealing with domestic violence arise quite often. Thus, the fact that the Center does not actively engage with this matter, despite common "code words" suggesting violence (i.e. saying divorce "in a state of anger

51 The term *makrumat* (Arabic *makruma* = "noble deed") appears in Sunni legal discussion on the *rationes legis* (rationality of the argument) as desirable (but not required or necessary). Apparently, the Islamic Center refers here to a *hadith* which had been considered unreliable as early as the 14th century by the eminent scholar Ḥāfiz ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Zayn ad-Dīn al-ʿIrāqī (d. 1404) but somehow remained popular among some scholars. In general, see A.A. Rouzi, "Facts and Controversies on Female Genital Mutilation and Islam," *European Journal of Contraceptive Reproduction & Health Care*, 18, no. 1 (2013): 10–14; and M. Munir, "Dissecting the Claims of Legitimization for the Ritual of Female Circumcision or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)," *International Review of Law*, no. 6 (2014): 1–11.

52 Marital rape is not criminalized in the domestic Criminal Code—see footnote 91 in the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) report "Domestic Violence in Tajikistan: Time to Right the Wrongs" (March 2017), http://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ENG-Domestic-violence-in-Taj-March-2017.pdf (accessed October 30, 2018).

53 IPHR, *Domestic Violence*, 21–23.

and rage"), is indicative of its general willingness to condone social patterns of behavior that subdue women.

In a similar vein, the responses to a number of questions demonstrate that the Center takes very conservative standpoints in which the familial rights of women are highly marginalized. For example, "Malvina" (Q. 1541) poses the following question to the Islamic Center:

> A man, in an intoxicated condition, tells his wife three times "divorce" via mobile phone. Do they remain married to their partners, could they continue their life?

The Islamic Center's evasive reply indicates the limits of the gender trajectories in Tajikistan's religious field at a time of authoritarian inertia. During the earlier period of domestic détente, independent as well as "official" religious authorities considered the use of mobile phones inappropriate in the case of divorce (see below). Likewise, intoxication would have been criticized as irreconcilable with religious legal affairs, which could, at least implicitly, have strengthened the woman's position in a divorce case. Now, however, the Islamic Center admonishes the "dear sister" that (Islamic) divorce (*taloq*) is the privilege (lit.: *mol* = belongings or property) of men and therefore it is the man who said the words of divorce—and not the woman to whom those words were addressed—who should address the Fatwa Directory and explain the is-sue to receive a clear answer.

In general, when it comes to questions surrounding divorce, the Islamic Center tries to offer a generic response that lacks clarity or any indication that it is truly addressing the question being asked. For the most part, these questions receive the standard answer: "Because the matter of divorce (*taloq*) is complex and needs greater interpretation, it would be better if you came to the Fatwa Directory (*Rayosati fatvo*)." It should be noted, however, that the website does not provide the addresses of the directories where requests can be made. The Islamic Center has an opaque structure; its bylaws detailing the number and hierarchy of the fatwa directories—or indeed the chain of command with- in the system of imams—are not public and cannot presently be discerned. Yet the conservative leanings of the Center can be observed in the few questions that do receive some form of direct response. For example, "Muzaffar" (Q. 1499) writes that a man

> in anger told his wife "three times divorce to you"… If he wants to have a pure (*halol*) marriage to his spouse, what needs to be done? I have heard that the woman needs to remarry and get a divorce from another man to

be able to remarry her first husband. Does the woman need to bed theman that she marries [temporarily]?

The Islamic Center's response does not provide any reference to any Islamic sources, yet it seems to be unambiguous when it states that saying the words of divorce (*taloq*) three times makes the divorce final. Moreover, the response confirms that a woman who hears the final divorce words three times needs to marry and have conjugal relations (*munosibati mahramona*) with another man in order to become pure (*halol*) and remarry her first husband. However, the Center urges the inquirer to address the Fatwa Directory in person, as "the issue of divorce has many secrets, considerations and requires greater details." Anecdotally, a similar decision has been issued in an in-person consultation with a local mufti in Sughd province: the woman involved reported that her husband was infuriated by the response given by the mufti and did not act ac-cording to it.

On a number of themes that emerge in the questions and answers having to do with family affairs and gender issues, we observe that the Islamic Center's positions do not align with the provisions of national legislation. For example, the Islamic Center treats polygamy as a current state of affairs (Q. 585 or Q. 629); the *fatwas* do not mention that the practice is criminalized under the country's Criminal Code, which bans polygamous unions.54 Indeed, the Committee on Religious Affairs mandates that only *imam-khatibs* can conduct a *nikoh* (religious marriage), and only if an official marriage certificate is provided prior to the religious ceremony, which should, in theory, preclude religious polygamy.55 Moreover, the controversial issue of "SMS divorces"—initially publicly denounced by then-Chairman of the Committee on Religious Affairs Kholiqov56—poses no controversy for the Islamic Center. In response to "Gavhar's" question (Q. 1122) as to whether her marriage has been annulled by a text message that says, "I am done with you (*javobatro dodam*)," the Center

54 Article 170 of Tajikistan's Criminal Code, which defines "bigamy or polygamy" as "co-living with two or more women with the conduct of common household," stipulates monetary penalties, correctional labor, or imprisonment up to five years. See "Ugolovnyi kodeks Respubliki Tadzhikistan" (from October 6, 2010 edition, No. 422), Ch. 20, St. 170, http://base.mmk.tj/view_sanadhoview.php?showdetail=&sanadID=23 (accessed October 30, 2018).

55 See "Zaklyuchat' nikokh v Tadzhikistane mogut tol'ko imam-khatiby," *asia-Plus*, January 10, 2017, https://news.tj/news/tajikistan/society/20170110/zaklyuchat-nikoh-v-tadzhiki- stane-mogut-tolko-imam-hatibi (accessed October 30, 2018).

56 See M. Khasanova, "V Tadzhikistane budut otmeneny razvody po sms," *ASIA-Plus*, April 12, 2011,https://news.tj/ru/news/v-tadzhikistane-budut-otmeneny-razvody-po-sms(accessed October 30, 2018).

confirms the adequacy of the practice, notably without any reference to the Islamic literature:

> Dear sister, if your husband did indeed write the message himself, you need to ask if he had the intent of divorce (*niyati taloq*). If he sent the SMS with the intent of divorce, then indeed you have been divorced.

Similarly, on the issue of appropriate Islamic dress, which has been at the epicenter of the regime's conception of Tajik Islam,[57] the Islamic Center is trying to reconcile two contradictory narratives. For example, the Islamic Center gives an unequivocally positive response to Q. 678 from "Sherafgan," which asks whether *satr* and *hijab* are religiously obligatory (*farz*):

> Dear brother, all the Muslims of the world know that *hijab* is one of the religious obligations given by God to followers. There are many proofs of this in the Qur'an … "O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and wives of the believers to cover their heads with cloaks (*chodar*). It is more appropriate so that they are recognized and not abused. And God is forgiving and merciful" (Sura Ahzob, oyat 59 [Qur'an 33:59]). It is not necessary for *hijab* or *satr* to be black or tightly fitting (*chaspida ba badan*), as we observe nowadays in our society. Instead, we should follow our thousand- year-old ancestors, as they wore traditional clothes that were loose and with appropriate colors and embodied chastity and purity.

On the face of it, this response seems to fit the Tajik government's belligerent position on the "alienness" of certain forms of Islamic dress and sole appropriateness of Tajik national dress and head coverings for women in Tajikistan.[58] However, a closer reading indicates the purposeful ambiguity of the reference to "thousand-year-old ancestors." Remarkably, while there are very few pictures of women on the website of the Islamic Center, in those images purporting to show women (often as cartoon graphics or silhouettes), women appear to be wearing exactly the type of hijabs that have been forcefully or by persuasion taken off the heads of women in Tajikistan in recent years (see Figure 2).

In general, the responses given in the question-and-answer section of the Islamic Center's website not only indicate conservative stances, especially in family affairs, but also in many ways do not acknowledge the authority of secular (civil) laws on these matters. As discussed, there are no references to

57 S. Nozimova, "Hijab in the Changing Tajik Society," *Central Asian Affairs*, 3, no. 2 (2016): 95–116.

58 Ibid.

Figure 2 Thumbnail and illustration for an article on parenting
Source: M. Shonasurdinov, "Zaminahoi tarbiyai durusti farzand," *Markazi Islomii Jumhurii Tojikiston*, January 10, 2018, http://shuroiulamo.tj/tj/articles/ids/329 (accessed October 30, 2018).

the restrictions on imams performing religious marriage ceremonies in the absence of the civil registration of the marriage document or the provisions detailing divorce settlements and inheritance that are outlined in domestic legislation. This moral disciplinary discourse appears to be far more conservative than the secular discourse, serving as a control mechanism for the part of the population that wishes to see a more male-dominated, more conservative interpretation of religion in their everyday lives without having to turn to other, non-state religious specialists.

The Spiritual Domain: No Sufism Left, But Vivid Dreams and Magic among Believers

Discussion of the important mystical traditions of Islam is suspiciously ab- sent from the discussions on the Islamic Center's webpage. The rich mystical tradition and the significant local prestige of Sufi family lineages in Tajikistan is completely missing from the institution's records, for three reasons. First, the main rivals of Abdulqodirzoda and his accomplices in the Islamic Center are predominantly representatives of the eminent mystical lineages in Tajikistan, such as the Turajon brothers (Qaderiyya) in Vahdat or Ismoil Pirmuhammadzoda (Naqshbandiyya) in Hisor. Second, the Sufi brotherhoods usually follow a broader and less conformist Islamic tradition than the Islamic Center promotes. Finally, Sufi brotherhoods used to establish exclusive soli- darity networks (parallel or even outside the state) with strong inter-personal

loyalties, in particular between the *sheikh* (or *murshid*) and his students (*murids*). This phenomenon, as demonstrated by the persecution of Sheykh Temur, is viewed by the current political regime in Tajikistan as highly undesirable.59 However, there is an important exception with regard to the curbing of the mystical-spiritual domain: the Islamic Center actively engages in oneiromancy, or dream interpretation. Among the 1,900 questions and answers that we have reviewed, one can find frequent questions inquiring about the particular meaning of dreams and what they foretell (*ta'bir*). For instance, "Ibrohim" (Q. 1035) relates the story of a 10 to 14-year-old boy who talks to God while asleep and asks for the meaning of this. The Islamic Center replies that this is a blessed and merciful augury foretelling that the boy will recite and learn the Qur'an by heart in the future. Similarly, "Jahongir" (Q. 1564) asks:

> If a woman sees an egg in her sleep, what kind of foretelling (*ta'bire*) does this dream have? Answer: […] Dear brother, seeing an egg while sleeping has a pleasant significance (*hosiyati nek*), especially for women since it is a sign for the birth of a girl.

In another instance, an apparently terrified "Ibrohim" (Q. 1542) reports that he saw a grave and mausoleum (*mazor va qabr*) in his dream and asks the Islamic Center about the meaning of this. The Islamic Center assures him that seeing a grave or a wedding in a dream foretells becoming the owner of a house.

At first glance, one might expect conservative Muslims to denounce oneiromancy as an un-Islamic or heretical practice. On the contrary, many scripturalists (e.g. Salafis and even jihadists) refer to dream interpretation and dream incubation (Arabic: *istakhara*) as prominent and important religious practices firmly rooted in early Islamic tradition.60 In general, dream interpretation is an established field in Islamic sciences, dating back to the revelation, the prophetic biography (*sira*), and the prophet's companions, such as Abu Bakr. While dream interpretation usually has a spiritual-mystical dimension in

59 See B. Gatling, *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018) and Gatling in this issue.

60 On Salafi and jihadi oneiromancy, see I.R. Edgar, "The 'True Dream' in Contemporary Islamic/Jihadist Dreamwork: A Case Study of the Dreams of Taliban Leader Mullah Omar," *Contemporary South Asia* 15, no. 3 (2006): 263–272; and I.R. Edgar and G. de Looijer, "The Islamic Dream Tradition and Jihadi Militancy," in T. Hegghammer (ed.), *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 128–150. For the larger tradition of oneiromancy in Islamic societies, see I.R. Edgar, *The Dream in Islam: From Qur'anic Tradition to Jihadist Inspiration* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016) and E. Sirriyeh, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Islam: A History of Muslim Dreaming and Foreknowing* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

Islamic sciences, Tajikistan's Islamic Center considers dream interpretation part of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). This rather unusual categorization follows the inherent logic of the Islamic Center to exclude traditions not consistent with their narrow idea of Islamic normativity—which, in general, also excludes Sufism, the mystical tradition in Islam. At the same time, however, there seems to be substantial demand for spirituality and the "enchanted modern" among lay Muslims in Tajikistan.61 Questions related to dream interpretation are among the most popular on the website, with up to 700 "views." In order to satisfy this demand, the Islamic Center has included dream interpretation in its spiritual services and has simultaneously imposed the tight disciplinary corset of *fiqh* to reduce ambiguity and increase legibility.

Related to dream interpretation is the issue of magic (Taj.: *sehr*, Arabic: *siḥr*), particularly witchcraft or black magic (*sehru jodu*). As in the case of oneiromancy, magic in its various forms has been discussed and scrutinized extensively in Islamic sciences. In the prophetic tradition, sorcery and witchcraft is unambiguously considered one of the greatest sins of mankind, while forms of "white magic" (such as oneiromancy) are tolerated as long as they cause no harm to others.62 Among the 1,900 questions, there are several questions related to witchcraft or black magic, presented predominantly through a gendered lens, i.e. women as potential witches who use their witchcraft against men. These entries are among the most popular, with up to 900 "views." A good example comes from "Parviz" (Q. 617), who apparently feels threatened by independent women. He addresses the Center with the following question:

> Domullo, please provide some information on the following issue. I personally observed that some women who are divorced from their husbands are using witchcraft (*sehru jodu mekunand*). When they are told that they should not practice this, they say that it is right if done to improve life.

The Islamic Center reassures the inquirer:

> Dear brother, witchcraft is forbidden (*harom*), and a Muslim should resolutely abstain from this practice (*kor*), because life will not improve through this hideous practice (*kori zisht*).

61 See L. Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) and M.E. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007).

62 See, as an introduction, T. Fahd, "Siḥr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/sihr-sim_7023 (accessed September 2, 2018).

Accordingly, "black magic" is presented as a real and imminent threat to the Muslim community. Apparently, the Center also accepts the idea that witchcraft emanates from women, thus nourishing particular social imaginaries within Tajikistan's patriarchal society. In one of the most popular questions, with 894 views, "Madina" (Q. 1063) writes:

> Peace upon you, domullo. You answer the question of the people and hereby you open the door of hope (*umed*). I ask God that he gives you a long life and health. In order to prevent the ruin of our family, I consulted a fortune teller (*folbin*) several times. She told me, "Come every month, I will bring you closer together with your husband" (*turo bo shavharat garmi mekunam*). I did this twice, and now I don't know if God will ever forgive me or not. Respected domullo, is my action right? Some say that if it brings a woman closer to her husband, it is not a sin (*gunoh nest*).

The Islamic Center answers:

> Dear sister, the deed you have done asks for repentance (*tavba*) and forgiveness by God (*istighfor*). You should seriously regret the deed you have done and ask God for instruction. For instance, solve [the issue] of love, affection and loyalty to your husband on the prayer rug (*sajjoda*)—pray, and at the end of the prayer ask the benevolent Lord (*Parvardigor*) for the solution to your material and spiritual problems. Furthermore, to receive love and affection from your husband, you must approach your husband with an open heart and face and be sincere in life, and if God wills, you will receive the love you wish, and you will achieve your ambitions.

It should be noted that women in Tajikistan are excluded from participating in religious institutions. The Islamic Center has banned women from attending mosque and there is not even a cosmetic representation of women in the Center's structures. Yet female religious specialists, such as *bibi-otun*, *bibi- mullo,* and *bibi-khalifa*, who practice the ritual aspects of the female Muslim experience (including the popular *mushkil-kusho*, the extraction of problems, and *mavlud*, the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), remain outside the purview of the official administrative structures or the Islamic Center. What the Islamic Center identifies as "black magic" is most likely a reference to another phenomenon that is often seen as highly gendered—visiting

a *bakhshi* (shaman).63 However, the Center is also highly wary of the practices of the abovementioned female religious specialists, stating that there is a serious need to evaluate them against the norms of the Shari'a (Q. 1296). Female religious specialists have developed and cultivated extensive informal networks and ties outside the Islamic Center's control. At least in theory, the Center's online activity addresses practices widely considered "female" in Tajikistan and which are in high demand among lay religious Muslims. In order to regain interpretive authority and legibility, the Islamic Center also intervenes in the discussion of oneiromancy and ("black") magic. But the Center's attempt to regulate the female Islamic habitus thus far appears to be feeble.

Conclusion

In political contexts where long-term secular authoritarian leaders face challenges that are, at least in part, comprised of Islamic messages, one can observe either co-optation of those forces or their exclusion from the political and social life of the country. The success of the latter option depends greatly on the availability of state-affiliated religious institutions that can cater to the conservative Islamic base while at same time emphasizing the illegitimacy of political interpretations of the Islamic tradition. In the case of Tajikistan, as we have demonstrated in this paper, the Islamic Center facilitates (and legitimizes) the regime's authoritarian repression, marginalizing any actor in the religious field that might be politically viable in providing opposing discourses. In particular, the Islamic Center offers a very narrow normative and conservative interpretation of Islamic practice that certainly pleases the social imaginaries of the dominant male elite and lay religious audience in Tajikistan. The predominant unfamiliarity of the lay Muslim audience with Islamic scholar- ship and jurisprudence even allows the Center to achieve their implicit goals without any significant effort to connect their guidance to the long-established history of Central Asian Islamic thought. This is made possible by the fact that this narrow normativity of what Islam means in the Tajik society is continuously touted as the unique basis of (official) Tajik identity, i.e. societaltranquility and political stability.

63 On *bakhshis*, see S. Roche, "Twenty-Five Somoni for a Good Future: How Young Women in Tajikistan Shape Their Futures and Secure Their Present," *Central Asian Affairs*, 2 (2015): 71–94.

With the successful restructuring of the Islamic Center as the central religious institution and the enforcement of the Center's conservative, Salafi-leaning doctrines, the Tajik government has demonstrated its enhanced capacity and desire to formulate a consistent legitimation narrative. This narrative thoroughly integrates Islam into official identity politics. Thus, the regime has gone far beyond previous legitimation strategies, which usually had little everyday relevance to Tajik society (such as being "Aryan" or a descendant of the Somonids). The Islamic version of "authentic" Tajikness, as sanctioned by the government and put into practice by the Islamic Center, spells a multitude of provisions affecting everyday social relationships and practices, gender relations, and social imaginaries.64 The state has become more interventionist and able to broaden the basis of its legitimacy, although its performance in providing health care, education, and basic social welfare has remained utterly weak.

We have argued in this paper that the state's main objective in integrating this narrow disciplinary discourse into the national identity narrative is to make the society more "legible" by weeding out alternative interpretations of Islam that may allow for societal opaqueness. Thus, the official conservative interpretation of Islam offered by the Islamic Center occupies the discursive space of "traditional" religious specialists and (dissident) Islamist activists. Importantly, in the second period—which we identified as one of authoritarian monopolization—the Islamic Center has not only "colonized" the dis- cursive space within the traditional public sphere but also, for the most part, hijacked the new media strategies that were being employed by independent religious specialists and scholars. Yet while they have imitated the external features of the presence in the new public sphere (the web design of the Islamic Center's site greatly resembles that of the Turajon brothers' site, which was suspended in 2015), internally the disciplinary discourse has become much more rigid. Notably, the conservatism we have observed on the particular is- sues that we have analyzed in this paper is rarely scrutinized by laypeople in Tajikistan. While the carefully filtered messages of the Islamic Center are sup- plied in abundance to the public sphere, an individual analysis of the *fatwas* presented in this work unveils the exceedingly conservative nature of the Islam that is being integrated into the state's national discourse.

All these efforts indicate that the state's ultimate goal is to preserve and legitimate the status quo. The imposition of a hegemonic narrative apparently reassures Rahmon, making him feel like the "leader of the nation" presiding

64 On social imaginaries, see C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

over the Tajik Hanafi *umma*. But while this discourse emphasizes the relevance of "identities" (including Muslim) in the political legitimation process as such (despite alleged "normalization" and de-politicization), this does not exclude the possibility of a paradoxical outcome, as the categories involved (Islam) often defy easy integration into the processes of legibility and social mobilization.